

Chapter 22: The Human Shield Dissensus

“-. Sarutobi Hiruzen, Third Hokage of the Village Hidden in the Leaves .-“

He was going to die here.

“Earth Release: Rock Bullet Barrage!”

“Wood Release: Impaling Spear Tree.”

He was going to die alone in the dark, as ninja should.

“Wood Release: Sea of Trees Erosion.”

“Wind Release: Razor Scythe Storm Reaping!”

He was going to die a failure, as ninja shouldn't.

“Fire Release: Phoenix Fire!”

A safe path was cut through his barrage of projectiles by a tree that nearly impaled him, a swarm of giant wooden snakes retaliated with such speed that only wind release could overcome the area of effect quickly enough, and now his wide-area fire bombardment was blocked by a technique that took no hand seals to cast. A tree just sprouted between the masked man and the danger, the same as Danzo had done but faster.

“Finally,” The masked man grunted as his kunai found Hiruzen's back. Despite that he'd deliberately landed in the middle of the ongoing conflagration in hopes of some concealment. No other stealth had worked, the enemy was some kind of sensor. “I'll admit, you were a real annoyant.”

Hiruzen burst into smoke and left a block of stone.

“Fire Release: Phoenix Sage Fire!”

Another spontaneous tree burst up behind the masked man, but Hiruzen had lied when calling out the jutsu. Instead of straight-flying fire blasts, a roaring Fire Dragon wound around the tree and exploded in the enemy's face from his blind side.

The masked man was blown off his feet and rolled away with the dull clatter of wood on rock, a clone!

“As I was *saying*,” the true enemy growled as his knife actually struck blood this time, straight through the heart. “You *were* a real annoyance, old man. As expected from Minato-Sensei’s-”

The Reverse Four Symbols Sealing technique annihilated Hiruzen’s blood clone in a black hole that was just a sliver too slow.

The enemy lost his right arm and leg, but no more because he partially evaded even that despite complete surprise, he was as fast as Minato!

Claims to be Minato’s student, but who – they’re all dead – unless – little Obito?!

The absurd claim momentarily threw Hiruzen’s mind into complete disarray. He just barely managed to keep his concentration on the chakra-containment barrier he was hiding in, down in the rock beneath the foe. He almost failed to press his last chance too.

He almost botched the next blood clone, and not because he was running on fumes after all the soldier pills. The jutsu was taxing on not just chakra, it took animated clay mixed in with blood, more blood than he could spare now, especially at his age. Hiruzen was cheating by using pre-drawn blood packs, but he was on the very last one there too. He also lacked the inventor’s ability to truly split his consciousness, so he practically had to leave his body behind to pilot it with one of the Yamanaka’s techniques, which also limited his range.

The only reason he’d included it in his prep-work for ROOT was because the close quarters and abundance of cover made up for the range. Even then, he was glad he hadn’t needed to use it after realising he’d overestimated Danzo’s reaction speed.

He wasn’t overestimating anything here.

Hiruzen – his *clone* – seeped out of his hiding place sideways, reformed well below the surface of that strange place, emerged in a flicker from the complete opposite direction from the enemy, and managed to strike *just* before Obito would have warped out of whatever this place was.

The enemy still managed to deflect Hiruzen's attempt to cut his head off. Even lacking two limbs and torso flesh down to the ribcage.

“Does everyone have a way to cheat death now?!” Obito grunted as he backhanded Hiruzen away with a tentacle of wooden branches. “I'm starting to feel offended.”

Hiruzen landed with a groan, the pain feedback rocking him down in his hiding place. The major benefit of the blood clone was that even the best bloodline techniques couldn't recognize it for a fake, if cast correctly. Also, the very slight delay in feedback with the original consciousness revealed even the most subtle genjutsu. The drawback of the Yamanaka mind-transfer jutsu was harsh enough on its own, but...

It's worth it, he told himself as he rolled to his feet. *It's worth it to break Obito's constant genjutsu attacks*

“Hng!” Hiruzen grunted, blocking the predictable kick but forced to give up his footing lest the sheer strength break his arms. He slid and skipped back two pillars and two bottomless pits. He used a chakra pulse from his original body to break the genjutsu Obito next caught his clone in, and spat an air bullet in the Uchiha's real face instead of the fake one he'd projected. Next kick came – evade, deflect next three, deflect chest strike, defend left face, right face, side-step dropkick, grab leg under the arm and throw.

Obito fell on his shoulder and managed to roll back to his feet by the end of his slide.

“Unbelievable,” Hiruzen wheezed. “It really is Minato's modification of the Uchiha interceptor fist.”

“Finally starting to believe, Lord Hokage?” The enemy taunted him, even though he still didn't realize it had been all clones for the past four engagements. “Wood Release: Sprawling Impaling Forest!”

Hiruzen leapt back as far as he could but the called attack never came, even as all the platforms shook and rumbled – he wasn't the target? Oh no!

He pulled out of his clone and back into his real body just in time to twist his neck out of the way of a too sharp spike. He cut a second with a wind-coated palm, but three more had already gored him despite his rock armor jutsu. It had diverted the worst strikes from vitals, but not completely turned them aside. He severed them too, used a hasty earth swimming technique to abandon his shelter barrier, and flowed up and out of the ground to jump clear of the danger.

He landed on the distant-most platform he could and wrestled with dismay at what he saw around him. The technique had been aimed out instead of up or down, every pillar in his line of sight had been drilled through by so many roots and branches that there was scarcely room to fall between the pillars anymore.

He finally figured it out, Hiruzen thought grimly, pushing through his light-headed weariness to force aside the pain. *He still couldn't find me so he just attacked every possible hiding place at once, what monstrous chakra, does he have no limit at all?*

Obito came down from above with an axe kick, so fast that even Hiruzen almost couldn't dodge it. Almost. He avoided the next three hits too, deflected two more, blocked the next feint to make it look like he fell for it, then he stepped into the roundhouse kick of Obito's now *entirely predictable* taijutsu to swing the secret chakra blade he'd kept in reserve until just then.

The wind blade grew outward from the tip and finally severed the foe's head clean at the neck.

Let that be it.

The Third Hokage jumped clear of the falling body just in case, but his knees buckled on landing. *I'm so tired.* He was exhausted, in pain all over, his stomach felt like it was eating itself from the ulcer of too many soldier pills and -

The headless corpse collapsed forward in a pool of blood.

Obito's head struck earth with a dull thunk, rolled away, and fell off the square platform of rock.

Silence fell, for a minute. Then two. At three minutes, Hiruzen stumbled forward and stabbed a kunai or shuriken in every vital and locomotion point of Obito's that he had weapons for. By the fourth minute, Hiruzen was hard-pressed to stave off the adrenaline crash, hands shaking as he

tried to bandage his own wounds. By minute six, his mind and body began to shut down all on their own at the lack of a threat. Eight minutes in, he could barely stay upright even on his knees. When the tenth rolled around with no further changes, Hiruzen finally allowed himself to slump forward and breathe.

The ground exploded upward.

Everywhere.

“Ogh!”

It was only his lingering suspicions from having recently experienced *Danzo's* Izanagi that saved his life.

But not his arm.

The Third Hokage gasped in agony as his right hand was caught in a razor net of branches just as he rolled away. His hand was lost from right above the wrist, along with his chakra blade.

Accursed Uchiha! Sarutobi Hiruzen grit his teeth as he used a hasty fire transformation to cauterize his wound, hoping not to faint from his body trying and failing to set off another adrenaline rush just after a crash. *But that was his last sharingan, he can't do it again, now he should be blind-*

The sprawling impaling forest didn't let him think further, or do anything but dodge, jump and run for his life as it erupted around him, for half again as long as he'd stood watch over the corpse. His breath got ever thinner, his body felt like it would come apart at the seams, his head felt lighter and lighter as the combat crash began to-

When Hiruzen finally felt like the wide-area destruction technique was winding down, Obito unexpectedly emerged from one of the branches, took Hiruzen's wind-coated hand drill through the chest without even trying to dodge, and reached out with his hand.

“ARGH!” Hiruzen cried out as he failed to lean away due to wood at his back.

Obito's grasping fingers ripped the Third Hokage's right eye straight out.

“Wind – Whirl – Hundred Scythes!” Hiruzen moaned. He couldn’t form hand seals and barely slurred half the technique name, producing a shadow of the intended jutsu. Obito was still blown away in their combined distraction, but the boughs and thorns between them were barely scratched.

If only I could summon Enma.

“I’m going to kill you, old man,” Obito growled from where he knelt on a branch above him, covering his stolen eye as it healed in place. “After all this, I might even enjoy it.”

“Finally – out of extra lives – boy?” Hiruzen panted with fake bravado as he covered his empty socket while glaring up with his remaining eye. “Is that all – it takes for – the mask to come off?”

“I could just leave you here to die.”

“Please do,” Hiruzen goaded, unsure if he should still hope for the opposite. Every moment he remained a nuisance was a moment Obito couldn’t abuse his teleportation and intangibility power in the real world. Every moment he remained a nuisance was time bought for those left behind. But Sarutobi was no nuisance to anyone like this, could he buy more time? “I will not be going anywhere.”

“No,” Obito darkly agreed. “Not if I don’t make you.”

Somehow, Hiruzen managed not to be blindsided by Obito’s next opening strike.

Their fight devolved into a repetitive, painful slog of punches, kicks, and jumping while running back and forth to throw more punches and kicks. Obito was much less formidable without sharingan, alas that Hiruzen was still weaker in his sorry state!

“Finally out of tricks, old man?” Obito mocked when it became all too clear he was the only one with unlimited stamina. “Where are your fabled one thousand jutsu?”

More harm than good when fighting an unlimited chakra regenerator. Hiruzen used Tsunade’s explosive strength to counter a direct hit and locked Obito in place. He formed the handseal for the suicide jutsu he’d used earlier, then cast instead a stone pillar jutsu with his foot when the enemy fell for it. It blew Obito’s retreating form away from an angle bad enough to break his legs.

It only gained Hiruzen several seconds, barely enough to assemble a fake hand out of pebbles bound in blood and puppeted by chakra threads. He lost the next taijutsu exchange due to Obito’s

sheer relentlessness, but at least now he had both hands to cast things with again. He waited for Obito to grab him, then used the strongest kai outflow he could.

To his great and far too belated vindication, it worked as he hoped and prevented Obito from latching onto his chakra and make the shift out of Kamui.

“Naughty – naughty boy,” Hiruzen panted during the next lull. “You’re not – getting out of this – like that anymore, you’ll – have to kill me.”

“I will.”

The Sea of Trees erosion returned with a vengeance.

By the end of it, Hiruzen wasn’t entirely sure how he’d survived without losing another limb.

Curse you, Danzo, Hiruzen thought as his knees buckled under him on the last landing. *If only I hadn’t needed so much chakra to re-seal your accursed bioweapon.*

The Jar of Poison Technique was just a fancy name for a ball of nano-sized bugs that the Aburame Clan had never managed to master. The technique spread faster than the quickest air release, and at nanoscale even solid matter couldn’t stop them long. Maybe solid rock would slow them, but not the edges, no matter how tightly pressed. They spread much faster than earth techniques would have formed regardless. *Even in death you ruin everything I fight for, Danzo.*

“What do my eyes see?” Obito’s voice asked idly as he hopped every which way, from one tree to the next, unseen. “Such a resentful look, Lord Third! Could it be you’re finally starting to regret your mistakes?”

“I am *rethinking* just one of my *choices*,” grunted Sarutobi. But the more he thought, the more he decided he did the best he could do in the moment, when Obito deployed the Jar of Poison. An elemental bubble had been the only way quick enough, air and fire in a sphere to contain the spread through before the fuuin snapped into place. The Hokage guards wouldn’t have managed the combo technique without orders, certainly not in time.

Even if Sarutobi had somehow been able to stop time and relay the right orders, they’d have needed all the advanced forewarning just to envelop the jar in elemental layers before the lid came off.

But would Obito see that? “Since I’d already wasted my lifespan on shadow clones, I could have eschewed the multi-technique resealing combination and used the Four-Violet Flames formation.”

“Amazing,” Obito’s voice mocked disingenuously. “A Hokage of Konoha, admitting failure! I never thought I’d see the day!”

It’s all just confirmation bias after all, Hiruzen thought with vindication he didn’t relish. “You still can’t see underneath the underneath.”

Obito’s chakra churned angrily at the familiar insult.

That Hiruzen was able to block the next strike *without* his bones breaking spoke to the enemy’s lapse in control. “Struck a nerve, did I?”

“The best,” Obito growled, narrowly failing to land a fatal hit on Hiruzen during the next exchange.

“The Four – Violet Flames – could have worked,” Hiruzen panted, taking his own turn to hide among the leaves and throw his voice this time. Whatever Obito’s other abilities, it seemed that oversaturating the environment with his own chakra worked against his sensor powers. “*If* I had been willing to sacrifice Raidō, Genma and Iwashii.”

“Sentimentality!” Obito scoffed from below. “All this dross about the Will of Fire, how can you live so long and still not realize that it’s a self-defeating dream?”

“You still don’t see it, do you?” Hiruzen mocked the boy in turn, though most of his attention was on the chakra charge in the air, and how fast it dissipated. “The casting time of the Four Violet Flames formation is not a trifle, much longer to set up than even the slowest earth wall technique. And then the casters would have been vulnerable to any earth moving technique or attack that worked remotely.”

He had one last idea, but the Dead Demon Consuming Seal took too long to set up. He had the Absolute Darkness illusion jutsu for precisely that reason, but Obito’s sensory powers would overcome it swiftly. Hiruzen would only be speeding his own demise, curses.

“I’d have had to make the barrier big and wide to contain everything, the others would have been caught within for certain. Died horribly, yes. But also wastefully. Tactically, it made more sense to contain the expansion at once and re-do the seal. The multi-element combination was chakra-

intensive, but also didn't take as many pairs of hands. It left my men free to counterattack whatever the new threat might be.”

“And look how well that turned out,” Obito sneered, forming hand seals one after the next.

“Overwhelming power does not change what the right choice is. It just means you're a brute with more strength than you could possibly have earned.”

The tree he was in split down the middle.

Hiruzen took to jumping and running from one bough to the next as fast as he could. “Even if they *did* have the means to run containment in my stead, and I engaged you directly from the start, all it would have taken was for you to phase past the barrier with your ridiculous technique and pick them off. Then we'd all have died when the technique failed and the insects escaped!”

“Even now you keep trying to twist everything!” Obito roared in anger, dropping an impaling spear tree right from above this time. “Too bad for you, that doesn't work on me anymore!”

“I had – enough trouble – casting the vacuum bubble,” Hiruzen rasped as he held the attack back with a rock dome jutsu. “At least without activating the celestial gates.”

“Go ahead,” Obito goaded, locking kunai with Hiruzen in a failed bid to gouge his other eye. “Do it. Try it.”

Alas, Hiruzen had already used that technique too much in his life, and was far too old for it now regardless. It was a bluff, and they both knew it. “Tell me, Obito, who sunk his claws into you? What moon did they promise?!” At this point, it was all about buying time. “Did they tell you about the monster sealed inside? Or perhaps you're fallen so low that you yourself would see the whole world devoured!”

“That's right,” Obito's agreement came from his left, so Hiruzen blocked the attack from his *right* and took two hits in order to sneak a pair of seal tags on the real enemy, damned wooden clones!

“Earth Flow Spears,” Hiruzen panted, the earth around him erupting in sharp spikes to knock the other back, and his copies. “Kai,” he wheezed. Explosions engulfed all of Obito's clones, and the original's right leg. “Hah!” He gasped, pointing his fingers to the last tag. It engulfed Obito's head in explosive fire and sent him falling to the right and away.

Hiruzen would have followed through, but his legs failed him. His knees folded and the Third Hokage sunk down, wheezing and sweating rivers. His arms shook, his legs couldn't support him, his stomach felt like it was being stabbed inside out, he was losing blood from more than just the too fresh stump, his hand of bloody stone was chipping and dripping, and his whole body – it burned from chakra overuse.

Down below, Obito climbed up from the heap he'd fallen in, because his head hadn't been blown off. His leg had been, but tendrils of wood extended from the upper third to absorb it back. It regrew even as Hiruzen watched.

“Lord Hashirama would never have produced someone like you,” Hiruzen said with grim resignation. His vision was blurring. And worse. “And I know it couldn't have been Orochimaru, not back then after Kanabi bridge. That just leaves Uchiha Madara, may all the spirits curse him. Even in death he won't let us have a moment's peace.”

“It's truly unfortunate for you,” Obito said as he approached with kunai bared. “Had you not been so stubborn, you *would* have finally had peace-“

Everything displaced suddenly, and Hiruzen's consciousness finally left him with the vague afterimage of yellow hair. If he was seeing Minato now, he must clearly be already dead.

He let go.

He came awake to the sight of Doctor Hirano, impaired depth perception, far too real pain, and and the unpleasant feeling of norepinephrine erupting through his brain with all the gracelessness of field medical ninjutsu.

He was still in Kamui.

But he didn't believe it. Not at first, because he was surrounded by a Four Violet Flame barrier maintained by four clones. Wood clones.

Of *Namikaze Minato*.

“Obito, there's no reason to do this, any of this!” the voice of Hatake Kakashi came, intersped with the grunts and pauses of combat, from far off like a dream. “Yes, it was my hand that killed Rin, but it wasn't murder, it was suicide! She-”

“If you think I’m doing all this over just you and Rin…” Obito’s voice replied disdainfully. “To call you mistaken would be a massive understatement!”

The sounds of renewed combat reached Hiruzen again, but he couldn’t look away from the face of Minato. Faces of Minato. He blinked. The mirage didn’t go away. Four times over.

Suddenly, the Third Hokage began to laugh. There was only one person brazen enough to achieve this absurdity. Even this absurdity.

Of course that man would do even this, what else besides infringing on the gods’ own realms is even left?!

“Then why-“ Kakashi tried again-

“I already know!” Obito barked. “Everything. That she chose to die. She decided to die at the hands of someone she loved, to protect the Hidden Leaf. No matter what words you say to me, the you who could not protect Rin is an imposter. A fake! As far as I’m concerned, Rin is someone not meant to die. So the dead Rin is also an imposter!”

Is it all just insanity after all? The thought scurried across Hiruzen’s brain even as he couldn’t stop laughing. *What a disappointing defeat!*

“Rin would never have wanted this for you!”

“Don’t pretend to know Rin, you didn’t know *anyone* back then, Kakashi. Don’t erase the memories of her now, and don’t pretend you care about anything else! You waste hours away every day in front of the memorial stone out there! Yes, I know! And I understand too. Rin sacrificed herself to protect the village. You can try all you want to fill it with delusions, but that hole in your heart won’t go away!”

Closure is a thing, the rebuttal snailed its way across Hiruzen’s mind in Masanari’s voice.

“The shinobi system, the Village, Konoha itself, they led to this! I don’t care what numbers and *statistics* that idealistic fool tries to sell, the shinobi themselves created these circumstances. What caused me to despair is this world itself. This counterfeit world! Even that fool Masanari agrees with me, no matter what delusions he plays at. His entire suffering is because he no longer has room for loved ones in his heart! It’s all full, filled with the dead!”

Dead that you-

“Dead that you caused him!” Kakashi said what Hiruzen was thinking.

“Kakashi,” Obito said sadly. *Genuinely*. “What are you even trying to appeal to here? There is nothing in my heart. I don’t feel pain any longer. There’s no need for me to feel guilty, and there’s no need for you to feel guilty either. The yawning hole in our hearts was opened by this world of hell. I only had pain inside here before, but then I asked myself – what’s the meaning in that? So I abandoned it all.”

Hiruzen’s laughter finally stopped, if only because his breaths finally lagged too far behind.

“Out of all of us, I’m the only one not suffering. Not at Rin’s grave, nor mine, not in front of the memorial stone on the meadow. Not like you. And yes, even Masanari – do you think he’d have done all he has if he wasn’t seeking death himself? His only problem was that he wouldn’t face the truth until me. Now he has to! Now he understands a bit of my despair.”

“...The Obito I knew was not this selfish.”

Obito laughed disdainfully. "If not me it would have been someone else. In the ninja world, those who break the rules and laws are regarded as scum, but those who would abandon even one of their friends are even worse than scum. Well, I'm scum anyway, so I may as well keep breaking the rules.”

The Third Hokage sought the eyes of the Fourth. He didn’t find them. All four clones had them closed. “... Is this permanent?”

“The clones no, the original, yes,” the reply came from Hiruzen’s blind spot. In the voice of Uchiha Itachi. Hiruzen had failed to scan his surrounding properly, so utterly was he spent.

Combat resumed. Looking past the impossible sight of Minato’s silent duplicates, Sarutobi saw a fifth Minato watching Kakashi battle Obito hand-to-hand.

“Beg pardon, Hiruzen, but I’ll be refocusing all my attention on the fight,” one of the clones, still not opening its eyes. “Wood clones are superior to shadow clones in all ways except one – they can become distracting in great numbers due to the open link to the original. I’ve not mastered the

jutsu beyond this stage. I'll be locking the chakra flow to the barrier jutsu but otherwise tuning them out. Itachi here will bring you up to speed."

"Lord Third," Itachi acknowledged from across him.

Hiruzen made to get up, but the doctor's hand on his chest dissuaded him. He grunted. "Report, shinobi."

Itachi reported.

And so, the Third Hokage of the Village Hidden in the Leaves learned that the past 24 hours had been even more of a disaster than his wildest fancies. Two different operations against Konoha launched at the same time, neither of which he'd known about beforehand because Konoha's internal security was apparently awful. Then Obito launched a follow-up ambush after he was repelled the first time.

And then *Orochimaru* got involved too, because the day couldn't end without *everything* in Hiruzen's past coming back to haunt him. To kidnap Hanzo!

He outright kidnapped the man! Because he felt offended at a civilian surpassing him in every way that mattered – and something about possessing his body, it was madness!

Masanari responded to all this by killing the snake Sannin. Somehow. A somehow which involved creating a colossal thousand-armed statue like something straight out of Hashirama's time, though Itachi only knew of that third-hand. It wasn't enough to have the most ridiculous biology known to man, apparently. Masanari Hanzo just had to acquire mokuton as well. And whatever else. That incorrigible man was collecting bloodline limits like Naruto did spiders.

And now Konoha was in complete disarray. So much so that everyone was desperate enough to let Masanari try and *bring the Fourth Hokage back from the dead*. Because he could do that too, now. Try and succeed! He could construct bodies wholesale, and the Uzumaki clan had a way to free people from the belly of their Shinigami that Hiruzen had never known!

"Here, Lord Third," Itachi finished his report by holding out a large scroll. "A package that Lord Hanzo arranged to be delivered straight to you in case anything ever happened to him. Lord Fourth decided a coma qualified."

He's not been ennobled yet, Hiruzen groused on the inside. He turned his head to eye the scroll from where he lay. Reached out to touch it. Pulsed his chakra through it. "This is not the original."

"Lord Fourth also decided sentimentality was no excuse to take unnecessary chances."

"That sounds more like him, but he has more important things to do than play delivery man."

"It was my understanding that Hanzo used his 'one-time ANBU hotline pass' for this, as he calls it."

Ah. "Minato should still have checked the contents, at least." The scroll didn't *seem* like it had been activated before, though being a copy it might not have carried over all the signs.

"I decided the contingency was made far enough ago that the contents are likely not actionable to the current crisis," one of Minato's clones answered then, not opening its eyes. Not completely tuned out then. "Also, the contents were marked specifically for you. He earned at least this much."

"I suppose he has." Hiruzen shamefully failed to manipulate the scroll one-handed in his sorry state, and let Itachi spread it at an angle for him to read. "Oh..." It was the 'rifle.' And what looked like notebooks and binders with schematics and descriptions for other things. "False alarm."

"Lord Hokage?"

"Hanzo has been working on many things, but of course I did not let anything pass without close investigation. Especially his weapons. I had Shisui deliver this to me for testing the moment Masanari first left his house, after he finished the prototype." Hiruzen activated the seal, causing the scroll to release a waft of smoke, and with it the 'sniper rifle.' "Unfortunately, though replicating a c-rank technique without chakra is admittedly impressive, the weapon is oversized, ungainly, requires an unacceptable time stationary to aim, and is as loud as the kyuubi on a rampage at midday."

Itachi hummed, though Hiruzen didn't miss the flash of vindication on his face. "May I?" The young man asked, gesturing at the second scroll layered with the first, titled 'User Manual – Read This First!'

"Go ahead."

Itachi's sharingan speed-read the contents in seconds. "... I can see how this could be dangerous." He could? "The drawbacks are considerable, but only if you miss the initial shot. Noise wouldn't matter when the projectile outruns sound itself. Unless one happens to be looking right at the wielder before the shot is fired, there would be no way to react."

Wait, what?

"The skill threshold is very low as well, at least in terms of training. Much faster to acquire than any of the existing shinobi tools, if the claims here are genuine."

Hiruzen blinked. Then frowned. He motioned for Itachi to show him the writing. Soon, he was forced to reconsider his initial judgment. There was, it turned out, more than enough reason why holding and shooting that monstrosity had felt so satisfying. Not at first, but when he finally learned its quirks and mastered the recoil enough to hit the bullseye consistently... But...

No.

There was clearly a mistake in those numbers, no possible chance that range was real, there was no way-

Mizudeppo no Jutsu! Came the memory of past wars.

"The Second Mizukage was a lesson we all failed to learn, wasn't he?" The Third briefly closed his eyes in chagrin. "Gengetsu Hōzuki and his Water Gun were the bane of the battlefield back then."

"... Perhaps it isn't such a bad thing," Itachi said cautiously. "There was still a threshold of skill there, at least."

And now there isn't, Hiruzen thought grimly, his eyes arrested by two words.

Supersonic speed.

There was no shinobi or weapon that moved as fast as sound. Only sound techniques did so, and only *some* lightning techniques were faster. Of them all, only a handful of the latter aimed for harm over debilitation, and *none* were lethal without long casting time and a tremendous chakra cost. A ninja...

An elite nin might be able to react on being hit to mitigate damage from a jutsu or weapon that already landed. Partially. But that still wasn't fast-as-sound speed, never mind better.

Kakashi did split a bolt of lightning with Raikiri, Hiruzen told himself.

But no, that was a feat of planning more than speed. He'd deliberately set up next to a lightning rod, and used the Sharingan to time his strike according to the rumbling flashes in the cloud. The bolt had been one of those thick, repeating lingering ones as well.

Not even the Raikage could reach the sound barrier, never mind break it despite his too great boasts, and he could outspurt the fastest knife and arrow. The only reason Minato was faster was because he literally teleported, and even then his reaction time was limited to whatever time dilation his Hiraishin managed to achieve. And *that* was based on the Hyuuga eight trigram skills, which themselves had never caused a sonic boom in the entirety of shinobi history.

The Third Hokage painfully dragged his good arm up to palm his face. "I'm the most arrogant fool that every lived."

The dark dimension was tensely awkward as Hirano and Uchiha both failed to decide, if they were allowed to reassure the Hokage when the only way to do so was to disagree with him.

Hiraishin is still faster, Hiruzen tried to reassure himself.

... But did that really matter? When the projectile hit before sound did, you had nothing to react *to*. It didn't matter how fast you were if the attack was faster than the environment your senses relied on. You had to see the shot being lined up ahead of time and dodge away from where the foe was pointing, but that applied to everything in a fight. Even then, good enough hearing could at least pick up a kunai or shuriken flying, even as their range simply did not compare.

Hiruzen's emotional crisis was abruptly halted by the sound of a thousand screeching birds.

Sarutobi Hiruzen motioned for Itachi to help him sit up, despite Hirano's protests. His head swam, but when it cleared, he saw that Kakashi had managed to drive the Raikiri through Obito's chest.

Everyone had stopped, seemingly surprised at the result of the fight.

Kakashi pulled out and jumped away, landing in a tense crouch.

“There is no such thing as peace in this world, Kakashi.” Obito said. With a giant hole in his chest. A fist-sized gap going right through from front to back, he was even missing the *spine*. But he could still speak. He didn’t cough, didn’t choke, didn’t fall. He didn’t even wheeze.

He just stood there, still speaking. “Reality is like a grand river, no matter how hard one tries to stop it, it will swallow them whole and mercilessly crush... but there is one way to escape from this suffering, and I’m not going to let anyone stop me from achieving it. If doing that somehow makes me less than a true shinobi, then I’ll just go and crush all of the so-called real shinobi.”

“Is that really all it is?” Minato finally spoke, uttering the first thing since Hiruzen laid eyes on the impossible sight of him again alive. “You think yourself the second coming of the Sage? He dreamed of world peace and stability, not this.”

“What world peace?” Obito spat, not as composed as when it was Kakashi questioning him. “What stability? Only the villages of large nations are showered in light, leaving the smaller countries in their shadow, dying. Wherever light strikes, there will always be shadows.”

“Not if the light is strong enough.”

“Don’t give me technicalities! So as long as there is a concept of victors... the vanquished will also similarly exist. You, Sensei, and all the other Hokage, you’ve always done this. Your selfish intent of wanting to preserve peace is the very thing that initiates wars. Then hatred is born to protect love. These are all nexuses, causal relationships that can’t be separated. But a world of just victors, peace and love... such a world can be created too.”

“In a delusion,” Minato said calmly. “Delusion and dream. The sort that justifies none of your actions against anyone else. If your solution is the false comfort of make-believe, that’s something you could easily have granted yourself a long time ago. You could have simply trapped yourself in a genjutsu until you wasted away. That’s precisely your plan after all. Don’t pretend you’re doing the world a favor by forcing the same on everyone else. That’s not peace, it’s the pettiness of the mean-spirited.”

For some reason, those words seemed to strike Obito like a physical blow. “Unbelievable, that lunatic even got to you.”

“He revealed many things to me. Though seeing as he actually succeeded in the second third of Madara’s plan, and had the good sense to completely ruin the last third that Madara himself didn’t know about, you’ll have to pardon me if I don’t have much good to say about the first.”

“... What are you saying?”

“Project Tsuki No Me,” Minato’s tone was hard now, as were his eyes. “Madara’s Rinnegan. Uzumaki Nagato. Akatsuki. The Infinite Tsukuyomi. And everything else too, the Ten-Tails, the Shinju, Black Zetsu and his plan to sacrifice the whole lot of you to bring back Kaguya. I *know*.”

“... You should not have said that, Minato-sensei,” Obito said lowly, his form beginning to crumble and fall apart – he’d replaced himself with another fake at some point in the fight! Or just now, during his speech! “Knowing someone else knows my plans makes me antsy to move things faster. What comes next will be on your head and no one else.”

The fake Obito flaked away.

All the while, Minato just stood and watched. Even he, ‘more powerful than ever before’ according to Itachi, even he’d been deceived.

... Or perhaps he chose to let his student go?

No, heavens please, don’t let even Minato make my same mista-

“Sixty-Four Hexagrams: Distinguishing Heavenly Edicts!”

Reality warped like molten glass struck by a blower’s staff.

“First Edict – The Central Master Orders Heaven and Earth.” Hyuuga Hiashi’s voice came from somewhere and everywhere.

The world was a looking glass that cracked like a broken mirror, and for a moment Sarutobi Hiruzen was as fractured as the two realities on both ends of Kamui.

Between one blink and the next, he experienced an echo of what Obito *would* have experienced if he’d finished escaping out to the living world.

Hiruzen fell back to the ground, feeling like every muscle and bone was trying to shake loose from the rest. He'd just witnessed *and suffered* an echo of what Obito would have experienced in the next six minutes and change. Hiashi – the Hyuuga – they had a technique that could do – what?

Time contraction? Hiruzen struggled to think as he pulled himself together, it – he was... Hiashi had just – *Space-Time taijutsu. But instead of dilating time, it accelerated it? No, condensed the future it into a single moment.*

Obito's ravaged form smashed through, up and out of the stone block pillar some way to the right, trailing dust and blood. He made no move to recover, or anything else. He just flew like a ragdoll, and fell the same way. It was the luck of the damned that he didn't break his neck when he crashed in the heap left behind by his own prior acts of random destruction. He didn't fall down into the void either, more's the pity.

Obito... he succeeded in escaping – would have succeeded, Hiruzen tried to make sense of what he'd just seen of the future that would have been. *But wherever he exited...*

Jiraiya was there, with Ma and Pa toad, and Enma too. Jiraiya had some sort of barrier seals that disrupted Obito's intangibility, then used senjutsu and supersensory techniques to keep constant track of him when he tried to flee. Tenzo too was there somewhere, all over the place spreading additional barriers in Obito's escape paths.

Whenever Obito escaped entrapment and successfully went intangible or tried to teleport, Kakashi or Minato would attack on this side. Every time he was disrupted in the real world, Jiraiya was there with a kick or a punch. All the while, Ma and Pa kept bombarding him with their genjutsu song, their jutsu completely unaffected by all the dimensional knavery.

Finally, Obito resorted again – *would* have resorted – to large-scale destruction in a last, desperate bid to get away.

That was when Enma descended upon him in all his fury and pummelled him a hundred times in the space of seven heartbeats, with the Compliant Golden-Hooped Rod grown to the length of a full mountain. Obito's scrambled wits would only catch up to him and tell him it was safer on *this* side of Kamui when he was nearly in the stratosphere.

Obito couldn't teleport and be intangible at the same time. He almost didn't survive the Monkey King's last attack.

Hiashi made him experience all of that in an instant, Hiruzen thought dimly. Incredulously. *Where – how – did the Hyuuga have this absurd ability this whole time?* The target's immediate future imposed inescapably on reality through Yin-to-Yin contact, an attack that struck the target in all dimensions simultaneously to inflict all *possible* harm at once. Even from sources other than the caster! Such a technique – it skirted the boundary of Yin-Yang release to inflict the complete inverse of Izanagi! What a dangerous, utterly brazen secret!

Ahead in the distance, Minato and Kakashi were both kneeling from having been so much closer to the backlash. Next to Hiruzen, Doctor Hirano was unconscious. Itachi wasn't, but just barely. Vaguely, Sarutobi noticed that Minato's wood clones were laid out on the ground now too, looking dead and no longer maintaining the barrier around the three of them. The jutsu rebound had disrupted them too, even at that distance, it was a partial jutsu *miscast* and it still achieved so much, what an absurd technique!

“That – was an experience,” Itachi groaned next to him, trying and finally succeeding to stand after the fourth try. “By your leave, Lord Third, I'll go do my part as assigned by the Fourth.”

The Third Hokage felt his world nearly stop.

No. They can't still mean to spare him, surely?

But the farther Itachi walked from him, the quieter the tableau ahead seemed. The more he watched, the more he saw Minato and Kakashi *not* finish off the enemy. There were zipwires, cuffs, seals and more seals, but no finishing blow.

He sat frozen in indecision up until Uchiha Itachi knelt next to Uchiha Obito, pried open his stolen eye, and used his own, new special doujutsu. Reality intruded on Hiruzen's thoughts with callous viciousness. Itachi had gained that strength because he'd just lost both his parents.

There's still a way to dodge, the realization dawned on him out of nowhere. *Killing intent. Any ninja worth their name will feel it, even when it's not aimed specifically at them.*

Sarutobi Hiruzen drew the seal of a sound-blocking barrier in his own blood, picked up the rifle, loaded it with the ammunition thoughtfully provided, aimed at the scuff mark one meter behind the target, and pulled the trigger just as the barrier went up.

Conveniently, the scope needed a single eye to aim.

The bullet smashed through Obito's left temple and splattered half the skull and brain on the way out.

Itachi flinched. Kakashi too. Neither of them had the slightest warning. Minato alone had the self-possession grab and flash the both of them away. Hiruzen thought that was it, but all three stopped with their backs to him. They assumed it had been a suicide technique. Or a cursed seal implanted in him by his malefactor.

Sarutobi Hiruzen reloaded, lined a second shot, and pulled the trigger again.

He was aiming for the heart this time, but the angle didn't match well. The bullet went through the throat instead and nearly ripped the head off with the spine.

This time Minato felt the disturbance in the air, the bullet passed fairly close to them compared to the first. He finally whirled around and saw what had really happened. Too late. Because there had been no sound to warn, and no killing intent.

The Fourth Hokage was suddenly in front of the Third, grim and crouched low to catch his one-eyed gaze. "Why?"

The gun clattered hollowly on the ground as Hiruzen exhausted his last burst of strength. He fell on his back, feeling like instead of Kamui he was sinking through Yomi's own dark haze. "No more mistakes."

"... And if *this* was the mistake?"

This is why Naruto likes me more than you. "Then let it be mine."

Minato's return should have been a joyous miracle, but now that they finally had their reunion, there was only the dark and the cold. The dark, the cold, and a thin, wispy trail of muzzle smoke.

In the end, it had been easy to not want to kill Minato's tortured student.

Even after everything, this was all that was left at the end of the world he made.

In the end, even after everything, all three of the kindest men he'd ever known lived long enough to become the same thing.

Hard, ruthless killers.