Summary

Sena Matsura, a Leaf kunoichi has been tasked with tracking down her father, former lord of the Matsura Clan turned rogue. After the devastation that transpired in his departure, can Sena finally track him down and restore her family's reputation? What happens when she confides in a certain Hyūga friend? Followed by a run in with a certain blond Akatsuki member?

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Leaping through the trees with clothes singed, bloodied and clinging to her skin, a raven-haired girl moved through the forest. Even though her legs threatened to give way at any moment she did not stop. The girl did not know how far she had gone from the village but she knew that she had to find a certain someone before she passed out.

Her breathing grew heavy and pain shot through her chest. The sweat stuck to her soot covered skin all while her body cried out, begging for it all to end. The burns on her hands began to sting as she dug her nails into her palms but the pain released the adrenaline she needed to keep moving.

The girl jumped down to the ground following the chakra patterns of the assailant. She grew delirious but determined as she continued to push forward, deeper into the forest. Even as the blood seeped through the wounds and the smoke suffocated her lungs she refused to stop for even a second. Then suddenly the earth rose beneath her feet, causing her to trip and fall onto her arms. With her body now flat against the ground and wheezing, she pushed herself up onto her shaking knees without bothering to inspect her injured arms. She was certain the skin was grazed.

There crouched on all fours, tears welled in her eyes as she clawed helplessly at the earth beneath her. Although at that moment she wanted nothing more than to sink into the soil below and become one with the earth she instead forced herself to her feet, body shaking.

‘Father!’ The girl called out into the darkness. ‘Father, where are you?’

She did not know how far she had gone or how long she had been running for as the need to find her father blinded her. She did not study the path before her and by the time she realised something was in front of her it was too late.

A trap, one she had used many times herself and should have recognised a mile away. When the girl took a step forward kunai from all sides shot at her at once. She took a fighting stance and began to block them with the clang of the metal reverberating throughout the night. One, two, three —

A moment of silence followed by the gentle thud of the girl falling to her knees. The final kunai struck her left arm and caused her to let out a silent gasp followed by an agonising scream. She began to fade quickly. With the wounds stinging she finally let herself drop entirely to the ground, clutching her bleeding arm where the kunai stay embedded.

Every second she lied there with the cool soil against her battered skin felt like a lifetime. Through laboured breath she winced as her fingers—shakily—wrapped around the hilt of the kunai. The kunoichi part of her knew it would be better to leave it in but the stubborn girl overpowered and she decided the the pain was too much. With a sharp inhale of breath the girl pulled out the dagger, biting her lip to muffle the groan that followed.

‘How could you let this happened?’ The girl whispered before her eyes fluttered closed and she plunged into darkness.

Her final thought was the notion that perhaps it was better this way; it was better for her to die.

The kunoichi’s eyes flashed opened then blinked furiously as she found herself beneath the treetops. It was barely daybreak and the images of the dream began to fade. As she rubbed her eyes
she exuded a soft sigh. The dream had felt as real to the kunoichi as the day she lived through it. Years had gone by since then and she was not a child stumbling through the forest anymore.

As she looked up she saw several white dots moving against the sky streaked with orange from the morning sun catching her attention. Birds. They flew in slow, tracing circles, then suddenly swooped and soared, flapping their wings. The kunoichi observed the birds for a long time, watching them dive and soar adjusting to the wind. She considered the layout of the land, the density of the forest and the river which she suspected lay in her path. Then calculated the distance realising if they were to avoid that point it might take twice as long to cover the ground. They would have to risk heading toward it, obstacle or not.

The kunoichi finished her analysis and threw aside the cloak she had adorned in the evening and revealed her shinobi gear. She wore black with violet detailing and a pouch across her thigh which she adjusted and tightened. She reached up and stretched her tired limbs feeling the stiffening toll of nonstop travel. Then stuffing her cloak into her pack the kunoichi slung it across her shoulder then pushed aside her hair in the process.

‘Well?’ A shinobi with spiky, silver hair and a heavy-lidded expression approached the kunoichi. ‘Are you ready to move, Sena?’

The kunoichi turned to face him and pulled the other strap of her pack over her other shoulder.

‘Ready,’ The kunoichi replied with a smile. ‘I can't believe we will finally be home, Kakashi!’

The shinobi gave her one of his signature smiles, barely able to make out through his mask.

They jumped up and began leaping through the trees. It was easiest way to cover ground especially in friendly territory. They were close to The Hidden Leaf Village and would arrive within hours. She just hoped that the object in their path which had attracted the birds attention was nothing more than a dead animal and not a fallen comrade.

As they came closer to the birds Sena saw there was a river as expected. She scanned the riverbed and found a gentle flowing stream almost dry and clear of any obstacles. They jumped down from the trees and crossed it easily without any chakra necessary. On the other side lay the object in question. She swallowed hoping she was right in assuming it was an animal and nothing more.

Kakashi followed as if knowing what she was thinking. They had been partnered long enough to be able to communicate with so much as a look which benefited them in a lot of situations.

The few birds that were left were scared away by the appearance of the pair. They soared high above, chirping at the disturbance. Sena saw the corpse immediately. It was a wild boar with a large gash in it's side long festered. She felt the tension lift and the relief flow through her knowing it meant there were likely no enemies nearby. She relaxed but then sorrow stirred within her at the image of the boar. It served as a reminder of the night she had nearly died alone.

‘Hm.’ Kakashi stepped forward and inspected the animal. ‘We should keep moving.’

Sena nodded, allowing her gaze to linger for a few moments. Seeing the dead boar caused something to twist inside her and give the feeling something bad was coming. She forced herself to turn away and followed Kakashi. There was no point dwelling on the beast and instead she thought of home and how close they were after all the time she had spent away.
When they reached the village the view of the main gate cause Sena to take longer strides. She picked up her pace and practically ran toward the gate as though it might disappear at any moment. The need inside her to get back home pushed her forward fuelled by the urge to see her friends and everyone she had missed.

Once they reached the gate Kakashi and Sena were greeted by Izumo and Kotetsu. After months of travelling in foreign lands with only Kakashi for company seeing their familiar faces made her want to explode in happiness but she managed to keep her emotions in check and maintain composure. The only evidence was the smile on her face when they approached them.

‘Well, well, look who is back.’ Kotetsu motioned to his partner to turn.

‘Kakashi. Sena. It’s been awhile since I’ve seen you two around,’ Izumo said, a smile on his face. ‘Does this mean your mission is finally over?’

Sena’s smile faded and her head dropped slightly.

‘Not exactly,’ Kakashi replied to which she was grateful. ‘Just reporting in.’

‘I see, we won’t keep you then.’ Izumo stepped aside allowing them to pass.

Sena and Kakashi walked on in silence comfortably even though there was still something in the air left unsaid between them. It had been a long time since they both were in a place they could let their guard down and trust the people around them. As long as they were there then they didn't need each other as an anchor to home; to serve as a reminder of why they were pursuing the mission. Sena had considered that perhaps she needed it more than he did but they both needed it nonetheless. It moulded a bond between the two even though they had little experience working together before the mission. It was a source of comfort for Sena considering the amount of people she had already lost.

‘You shouldn’t worry,’ Kakashi said, breaking the silence. ‘We will find him. It is just a matter of time.’

‘I know.’ Sena kept her eyes focused ahead as the buildings of the village came into view.

Neither of them spoke again and the comfortable silence returned until they reached the Hokage's office. She had hoped to run into one of her friends on the way however that was not the case. Retaining hope she decided she would find them later if they were not away on missions.

Reaching the door of the Hokage’s office they paused and Kakashi knocked twice before they were told to enter. They were then greeted Lady Tsunade and Shizune, expressions neutral as they exchanged pleasantries.

‘I am sure you are wondering why I asked you to return to the village.’ Tsunade said with closed her eyes, grasping a cup of steaming tea between her hands.

The pair nodded in response, waiting for her to continue.

‘We have received intel about the whereabouts of the target in question. It is believed that he will be in a village not too far from here in a weeks time. I’m not sure how accurate this information is or what his goal is but since the leads you were following have gone cold I want you to check this out and to do it quickly. I am counting on you both. However,’ Tsunade paused to take a sip of her tea. ‘You will not be taking on the entirety of this mission together.’
The pair exchanged glances before turning back to the Hokage.

‘What do you mean, milady?’ Sena asked.

‘I mean,’ Tsunade continued, ‘That you will be exploring two possible leads. You both will set out together but will part ways to search villages around the same area. You need to cover as much ground as possible. We need this matter taken care of and the mission completed. Is that understood?’

‘Understood.’ They replied in unison.

‘Very well. You will take four days to rest and recuperate before you head out. Shizune will provide you with all the information we have in these folders.’ She gestured toward the folders in front of her. ’Good luck and dismissed.’

The pair took the folders and bowed their heads to the Hokage before leaving the office.

Tsunade’s request troubled Sena even as they descended the stairs of the Hokage building. They were going searching for her father alone and Sena couldn't help but wonder if it was the wisest course of action. They had come close to finding him two months ago but it ended the same place it began, with a little to nothing. Perhaps completing her mission was an impossible task.

As the pair reached the bottom of the stairs they made plans to meet at the gates in four days before saying their goodbyes. Sena hoped that it would be enough time for her to see her friends and visit her family since it had been a long time since she had seen them. She bit her lip and became lost in thought at the possibilities.

She was about to walk away from the steps of the tower when she was interrupted by a familiar voice.

‘Sena, is that you?’

The kunoichi turned to see long a shinobi long, dark hair and lavender eyes.

‘Neji?’
Old Friends

‘Neji?’ Sena asked, her heart threatening to burst.

It had been six months since Sena had seen Neji and when he walked over to her with a familiar smirk on his face and surrounded by his usual confident air she couldn't help but smile. There was something about him being there that soothed the anxiety she had worked up at the mission.

As Neji stood before her, arms folded like no time had passed at all, she felt happy simply by his presence.

‘Your timing is impeccable,’ Sena said followed by an exhale that released all the built up tension. ‘Did you know I’d be here?’

Neji nodded then gestured for her to walk with him. ‘Shikamaru got word from the Lady Tsunade that you were coming back today so I came to see for myself.’

Sena smiled. ‘Well, you shouldn't be disappointed then,’ she spread her arms out wide. ‘Here I am, just like he said.’

‘Yes, indeed.’ He returned her smile.

As they walked, side by side, Sena felt adrenaline bubble inside her, a feeling she usually experienced when she was in his presence. It was a sense of familiarity that made her happy to be back but it also made her a little nervous. A smile found her lips when she observed Neji’s walking figure beside her. She was sure he noticed her looking but was purposely ignoring her. It was one of the few tricks he did to keep his composure since, she knew, it was easy for her to make him flustered and break composure.

Neji would never admit it either and Sena knew exactly how to do it at the best of times.

Goosebumps littered Sena's skin, whether from the cool breeze that blew or the memories that seeped their way into her mind, it wasn't clear but she did know it had something to do with being with Neji again. It made her want to stay in the village longer.

‘How is Shikamaru and everyone else?’ Sena asked, tucking a stray hair behind her ear. 'It’s been so long since I’ve been back to see them.’

‘I’m taking you to everybody now so that you can ask them yourself,’ Neji picked up his pace. ‘They’re waiting for us at Yakiniku Kyū.’ He turned to her frowning slightly before adding. ‘It was Choji’s idea.’

‘Of course, it was,’ Sena laughed. ‘Good thing though because I’m starving.’

‘Hm. Aren’t you always?’ His frown lifted.

‘Hey, I’m a growing kunoichi who needs sustenance. Besides I had a long journey here so why don’t you do the gentleman-like gesture and help a lady in need.’ Sena pouted her lips, resisting the smile that threatened to break through. She knew Neji wasn't one to be swayed by such actions but she never could resist teasing him.
Neji shook his head in objection but Sena saw the smirk on his face.

‘You have not changed a bit.’

‘Really?’ Sena sighed. ‘Here I was thinking I had grown.’

It was nice seeing him smile, seeming more carefree than he was in the past. Even Sena had to admit that he had come a long way from the wide-eyed boy she met as a child and even further from the pessimistic Neji he was during the academy.

They had both changed.

‘So Neji, how have you been? You’ve grown again, you know? Even taller than last time I was here.’ Sena gestured her hand from the top of her head out toward his arm where she reached height wise against him.

‘Oh, is that so?’ The Hyuga blushed and Sena pretended not to notice. ‘As for how I’ve been, let’s just say I’ve been content. Becoming Jōnin has kept me busy.’

‘To think we are both Jōnin now. It seems like just yesterday I was a Chūnin leaving the village with Hitomi Sensei.’

‘Yes.’ There was a hesitant pause. ‘A lot has changed since then.’

Sena hummed in reply, making a mental note to visit her old sensei, as they entered the busy streets of the village. Neji was right; a lot had changed and not just between them but within their village and beyond it’s borders. The kunoichi had seen it first hand in her travels, first with Hitomi Sensei and then with Kakashi. Dangers were growing more prominent, especially those in the past year. Rogue ninjas crossing their paths became more frequent, bandits were constantly scamming travellers and most concerning were the rumours of the Akatsuki growing in numbers. They were up to something that was certain but it wasn't something Sena could discuss with just anyone.

Sena pressed her lips together, sealing away her thoughts as she observed the people around her watching them talk, laugh at friendly banter and argue over whether or not the price for an item was acceptable. Looking over the buildings and the streets, Sena smiled feeling the familiarity of her home village and the security she felt both mentally and physically. She had missed walking familiar routes, talking to friends rather than strangers and enjoying a bit of freedom instead of remaining in the confines of a mission.

They walked on in silence, Sena continuing to observe her surroundings as if for the first time while Neji watched her closely. She felt like a child, bewildered by everything that had changed and cooing over the things she remembered. It soothed her while at the same time caused her pain knowing she would not be able to stay again.

‘Sena,’ Neji pulled her from her thoughts. ‘Are you really back this time?’

‘Not exactly,’ She turned away, wanting to hide her sorrow and to avoid that signature look of disappointment he had every time she came back only to leave again. ‘I’m only here for four days.’

‘Four days?’ Neji tried to hide his dismay but Sena knew him too well for it to go unnoticed.

The kunoichi wanted to admit she was disappointed too but it would only make it harder to deal with.

‘I have to find him Neji,’ It was too hard to give him a title. ‘I still, have the mission to complete.’
‘I understand. It’s just…’ He trailed off and she could feel his hesitation.

Sena turned to face him however, at that moment, he turned away from her and focused on something in the distance. Sena was certain that Neji wanted to say something and she could practically see the thoughts coming to the tip of his tongue by the way his jaw clenched and unclenched and the way his eyes avoided her gaze.

‘It’s just what?’ Sena reached out, placing her hand on his arm gently, hoping it would help him voice his thoughts. His eyes widened at her grip. The corners of her mouth twitched upward, hopeful it was working. Then a slight frown shadowed Neji’s face as his eyes caught hers.

‘It’s nothing.’ He snatched his arm from her grip, turned away and continued walking.

Neji’s blunt, brush off surprised Sena slightly. Not the fact that he was blunt, he had always been that way but the fact that it was directed her during that moment. Instead of inquiring further into his actions she decided to let it go to avoid an argument, knowing he would not tell her anyway if he did not wish to. There was no arguing with Neji, especially if he was in a mood.

As they turned a corner, Sena realised they were only minutes from the restaurant and excitement overcame her once again. She did not dare risk a smile though, she would not let Neji think that he could just brush her off like that. Instead, she kept her expression neutral and her eyes fixed on the path in front of them.

‘We are here.’ Neji declared as they stood at the entrance.

‘Finally.’

Sena went to enter when something caught her arm. She turned to see it was Neji, holding her left arm, his grip tight and almost desperate. He caught her gaze again this time with an intense look.

‘I’m sorry,’ He said quickly. ‘It was uncalled for, snapping at you.’

‘You are already forgiven.’ She replied, smiling again.

She was glad to be rid of the uncomfortable tension. Neji returned her smile with a smaller one then released her arm, allowing her to go inside.

When they entered the smell of barbecued pork and the sound of loud chattering surrounded them. They were greeted and then taken to the back of the restaurant, to a more secluded area. Upon reaching the table, Sena was met with a squeal, causing her face to cringe a little at the shrill sound.

‘SENA!’ Ino launched herself at the kunoichi, wrapping her arms around her into a tight hug. ‘I’ve missed you so much!’

Sena laughed, her expression softening at her friend's enthusiasm.

‘I missed you too, Ino!’ She returned her embrace. ‘You cut your bangs back?’

‘You noticed!’ Ino turned back to the table. ‘See Shikamaru, Choji. Sena noticed!’


‘Whatever,’ Ino turned back to Sena. ‘Come, sit, we’ve been waiting for you.’

‘Yeah, it’s time for barbecue!’ Choji added.
Following Ino to the table Sena was greeted by Shikamaru, Choji, Sakura, Tenten and Lee. She sat down at the head of the table, opposite Shikamaru while Ino and Neji took the empty seats either side of her. Once everyone had ordered, or in Sena’s case, Choji had for them, their attention turned back to her.

‘So, Sena what’s it like being back after so long?’ Sakura asked.

‘It’s a relief; I miss everything about this place. It’s a shame I’m only here for a few days though.’

‘That’s too bad.’ Sakura replied, while the others nodded.

‘Are the others away on missions?’ Sena asked, wanting to lift the mood.

‘Hinata, Kiba and Shino are away on a mission in The Land of Waves.’ Neji replied.

‘I see. What about Jiro?’ Sena asked.

‘Hey, isn’t he a Jōnin now?’ Tenten asked.

‘Yeah, he achieved the rank not long ago.’ Shikamaru replied.

Sena smiled, proud that her former teammate was finding his niche, finally. She knew Hitomi Sensei would be proud of his team and that made her miss him even more.

‘Yes, the power of youth surely flows through him,’ Lee added pulling Sena from her thoughts. ‘We must all follow his example and train harder, and we shall all achieve greater things!’

Tenten beside him sighed while Neji closed his eyes.

‘Wow, that’s great. Does this mean we are all Chunin and Jōnin now?’ Sena asked, amazed at how quickly things had changed from when they were Genin.

‘Yeah, the last of us who were Genin ranked up,’ Shikamaru paused before adding. ‘Well everyone who was here that is.’

Sena nodded her head, knowing he meant Naruto was the last one left since he wasn’t in the village. She was thankful she had become a Chunin before she left the village, saving her the worry. The Kunoichi felt sorry for Naruto though since he carried a heavier burden.

When the food arrived, Sena kept the conversation turned to them, learning about their missions, training and new techniques. It was way too painful to focus on her missions and to think about her target.

Sakura and Ino were advancing well in their medical ninjutsu training, leaving Sena envious but proud they had someone like Tsunade to train under, and Shikamaru was working closely with the Hokage too. Choji and Lee both had learnt new techniques while Neji and Tenten talked mostly about their missions. Neji’s leadership potential had been recognised and he was leading different squads on missions.

It was heartwarming listening to their stories and finding out everything that had changed but it also saddened her to know she’d missed out on being there.

In turn, the kunoichi shared stories of her adventures with Kakashi. Attempting to stick with anecdotes and positive experiences and leave out the more unfortunate details. Sena hadn’t realised the full extent of what she had faced until she described the events to her friends out loud, watching
their reactions. It was almost second nature to gloss over their lives as shinobi.

When Sena had finished sharing a few stories Ino took over talking, steering the conversation in her direction. Sena sat back in her seat, relaxed and half listening to the blonde talk about how unfair Sakura was as a mentor. She smiled to herself before turning to catch Neji staring at her. Their eyes met, and something sparked between them. When he smiled back before quickly turning away again, she felt a warmth stir within her.

It had finally sunk in that she was home.
Sena visits her family and old sensei then spends more time with a certain Hyūga boy.

It was late in the afternoon when the group finished eating and said their goodbyes, each of them going away to their own engagements. Sena couldn't help but feel as though there weren't enough hours in the day when she bid them farewell with a half forced smile. The thought of time running out quickly, knowing her days in village were numbered, hung over her like a storm cloud.

The only thing that helped keep the reminders at bay was Neji offering to escort Sena home. She was glad that he didn't have a prior engagement or mission commitments. They could never plan when she arrived back in the village because it happened sporadically. Although it was always a blessing when she did return, often it followed unpleasant events.

‘What are your plans for tomorrow?’ Neji asked as they had reached the Matsura compound.

‘I planned to visit Hitomi-Sensei and my family in the morning.’ Sena replied, her eyes taking in the familiar surroundings before adding, ‘It’s been a long time since I’ve had the chance to.’

The was a heavy pause that weighed between them.

‘And after that?’

‘Are you asking me out?’ Sena teased, clearing heaviness looming over the conversation. ‘That is very bold of you Hyūga, asking the lady of the Matsura clan on a date.’

Neji’s eyes widened the slightest bit before quickly crossing his arms.

‘Don’t be ridiculous.’ He scoffed, looking more tense than usual.

Sena couldn’t help but chuckle until he turned to leave with a scowl on his face.

‘No, I’m kidding.’ She called out, ‘Come back please!’

Neji turned back to Sena.

She couldn’t help but smile at how easy it was to annoy him. It was too rare an opportunity to pass up, even after all this time. Although deep down, Sena sensed that he enjoyed it just enough otherwise he would have left long ago.

‘Come on don’t be like that, ask me. Please?’ Sena put on her best apologetic tone but could not resist adding, ‘I promise I will be serious about this date.’

‘It’s not a date!’ His tone had softened, an indication he was not as irritated as she had expected.

‘Yes, you’ve made that clear, don’t mind my self esteem over here dropping.’

Neji let out an exasperated sigh.
Sena pouted her lips.

‘I thought we could train together.’ Neji relented. ‘I want to see how you have progressed and any new techniques you may have.’

Neji turned to face Sena.

Her brows raised waiting for something to sweeten the deal.

Neji sighed again. ‘We can get food after.’

‘Now that sounds like a plan! I’ll meet you around noon then?’

‘Yes, I will see you then, Sena.’

‘For our date.’

‘Sena.’

‘Goodbye Neji!’

The kunoichi waved her hand enthusiastically then quickly ran into the compound before he could say anything else. There was a wide smile gracing her lips that mirrored the giddy feeling pooling within her. But as she moved beyond the gates her smile faded and her paced slowed. Sena took a deep breath and observed her surroundings, taking everything in.

The first thing Sena saw was the remains of the Matsura head family residence. Her old home. It had been left burnt to the ground like a monument to the past frozen in time, untouched. Perhaps at the Hokage’s request or maybe her grandmothers. Sena couldn’t be sure.

Panic then overcame Sena as all the memories of the fire came rushing to the forefront of her mind. Her body shook as she recalled the fire, remembering the burning bodies, her reflection in her father’s eyes — no it wasn’t him. She had to remind her self of that fact.

She looked down at her shaking hands aware of her breathing and heartbeat increasing exponentially.

In an attempt to gain control Sena forced her eyes shut and take some deep breaths. Then she remembered what her sensei had taught her.

To stop the thoughts from consuming you, something else needs to be let in as an anchor.

‘It’s alright,’ Sena whispered to herself. ‘You’re home. They aren’t suffering anymore. You are Lady Sena of the Matsura clan. Get it together, damnit!’

Looking down at her hands still trembling, she thought back to her training in an attempt to push aside all other thoughts.

‘Wind,’ Sena began, ‘The first technique mother showed me. Lightning, the common nature affinity for the Matsura.’

Her breathing had begun to steady as her mind distracted itself.

‘Fire, Water and Earth. Together they are the five Nature Types.’

Sena felt a weight lift from her shoulders as her heart rate returned to a more steady pace.
After a few moments to regain composure, Sena turned away from her old home and headed for the newly built one, commissioned by her last living relative; her grandmother. Upon walking up the stairs she entered the new residence to find the old woman standing in the kitchen. She was staring out the window, seemingly deep in thought.

Instead of disturbing her, Sena instead approached her nurse who was at the table reading a medical book.

‘How is she doing?’ Sena asked, causing her to jump.

‘Oh dear, you scared me.’ The nurse took a moment to press a hand to her chest. ‘We have upped her medication since last time and she refuses to give up her duties.’

‘Hm.’ Sena smiled. ‘So it seems she is still as stubborn as ever.’

‘I can hear you two. I am not dead, yet you know!’ Her grandmother called, turning to Sena. ‘Now come here girl and give your poor, old grandmother a hug.’

Sena walked into the old woman’s embrace. She noticed how much frailer her grandmother had gotten in the six months she had been gone. Her condition didn’t seem to have affected her spirit and if the nurse's words held any truth, it meant that her grandmother had been working the clan members hard to restore their image.

‘I don’t think death would ever dare come for you.’ Sena whispered in her ear.

‘That’s because death knows better,’ She pulled away, 'Speaking of, you should know better too! Coming in here without a proper hello, where are the manners we taught you?’

‘Sorry, it’s been a long couple of days.’

‘You’re young, and you shall recover. Come petal, tell me what you have found about my dear son. Tell me everything about your father.’

Sena nodded, obliging with a little reluctance.

After spending the night recounting the events of the past months to her grandmother, Sena went straight to bed, feeling the exhaustion of the day. The night seemed to swallow her quickly into a dream and before she knew it she was waking up to find it was late morning. It was two hours before noon to be exact which gave her enough time to visit the rest of her family as she had planned.

Sena dressed in her shinobi attire and headed out. She was greeted by the warm sun as she headed toward her destination, stopping on the way to pick up several lilies. For once Sena was thankful Ino was not at the register since she didn't have the energy to be friendly. And Sena would never want to be rude to Ino for she was an important friend.

When Sena finally reached her destination, she had a little over an hour left before she was due to meet Neji and train. As she entered the Konoha Cemetery she walked her familiar path the row she had visited many times before. Then once she had reached them she knelt down against the cool grass and placed a flower on three separate gravestones. One by one she stopped, placed her hands together in a prayer then ran her fingertips along the names engraved.

*Sayuri Matsura, Tsutomu Matsura, Tadao Matsura.*
‘Mother,’ Sena whispered, her head bowed. ‘I’m sorry I haven’t visited in a while. I’m still searching for him. I promise I will fix my mistake. I will make it right.’

Sena kneeling, fisted her hands in the patches of grass below, her nails digging into the soil as she fought back the tears threatening to spill.

‘Remember what you taught me when I was younger? "Each shinobi harbours chaos within them no matter who they are." Well, I think I understand that now more than ever. I think I know how to utilise the good.’ She looked up at the grave stone determined. ‘I will save him, mother, I will save him from the fate we both endured. From the way you...’

Sena shifted her gaze to the other two stone slabs beside her.

‘Tsutomu, Tadao, my brothers. I know you are watching over me,’ her voice began to croak as the tears spilled, ‘I miss you both so much. You should both be here. If I had only gotten there, sooner — I-I am so sorry.’

Sena forced herself up before she indulged her sorrows further and moved onward. She stopped after she found the other person whom she had promised to visit. This time when she stopped, she sat down, cross-legged on the grass, knowing it would be awhile before she moved. She owed him that. Hastily she wiped away the few tears that managed to spill down her cheeks.

‘Hey Hitomi-Sensei, it doesn’t seem like all that long ago you were here. Yeah I know I’ve got Kakashi to help, but I am allowed to miss you, okay?’ Pulling a small flask from her pouch, she set it down next to the stone like an offering. ‘You’d be proud of your team. Jiro made Jōnin finally. That makes the two of us. Then there’s Kira. I haven’t heard from her yet but I assume she enjoys working at the hospital. You always said she was never made for the battlefield but the aftermath it brought. She has always been better at healing people than killing them. Still, I can’t fault her for that.’

Sena opened up the flask and poured some of the liquid over the earth beside the stone. She scrunched her nose at the overpowering stench.

‘I know you. You have probably complained about not pouring you a drink at least three times since I started talking.’ Sena sighed, remembering the times she had spent arguing with her instructor about his drinking habit. ‘I do miss you, old man.’

Sena sat there for a while longer, talking to the headstone of her old sensei, pouring the rest of flask contents onto the earth. She thought about the past and all that had happened then shifted to thinking about the future, wondering when she would be back home again. Time seemed to have passed quicker than Sena realised because the next thing she felt a familiar presence standing beside her.

Neji stood there in silence for a few minutes before he spoke.

‘Hitomi-Sensei?’ He asked.

Sena hummed in reply, running her hand over the engraving, letting her fingers linger on each individual letter. ‘Am I late for training?’

‘A bit late.’ Neji did not seem irritated by her lateness but rather that he had been expecting it.

‘Sorry, time got away from me it seems.’
‘You’re already forgiven. I had a feeling I would find you here.’ Neji offered her a hand which she gratefully took.

‘Hm.’ Sena smiled and caught his gaze. ‘You always know how to find me.’

Neji’s eyes studied her for a few moments, an unreadable expression on his face. Then he looked down at her hand in his and quickly pulled it away.

Sena thought she could see a blush dust his cheeks but he turned too quickly for her to confirm. He gestured for her to follow him. She obliged, followed Neji toward the training ground, where she found herself wondering whether he was hiding something from her. With a shrug she decided to try and simply let it go.
Chapter Summary

Sena and Neji have a training session and things become heated very quickly.

Song: Listened to 'Say Something Loving' by the xx while I wrote this

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sena was at one end of the field, clutching her chest. ‘Had enough yet Hyūga?’ She called through shallow breath.

‘Shouldn’t I be asking you that?’ Neji called back from the other side of the filed, also through bated breaths.

They each looked at each other, exhausted and ready to drop but both were too stubborn to admit defeat. Neither of them dared approach each other again at this point. Sena knew if she was hit with another of his Gentle Fist techniques she was done for and she couldn’t let him hit any of her chakra points. She also knew that if she could just manage to hit Neji with another Fist Slam, then he would be out.

After assessing the situation, Sena decided she did not have time to lose if she was going to give the final blow. She also knew that Neji would probably be thinking the same thing, meaning there were limited chances. She undid her already loosened pouch on the side of her thigh and threw it the side, making a bold statement: she wouldn’t need weapons to take him down.

Neji watched her carefully with his Byakugan activated, smirking knowingly at her. Although Sena always fought with her two chakra daggers, she knew they would not give her any advantage in a sparring match with a comrade like Neji. Besides she wanted to prove that she was superior to a genius like Neji even without her daggers.

‘Are you sure you know what you’re doing, Sena?’ Neji taunted but she simply smirked in reply.

Sena took a few strides toward Neji before taking a battle stance. He followed suit, and as they both stood waiting for the other to move, she closed her eyes and decided to make him wait. Sena knew patience wasn’t his strong suit when it came to her and when they sparred to the point of exhaustion, it was no different. Had it been the start of the training session perhaps he would be but now he would be more likely to make a fault. She could practically feel the tension build as she listened to his breathing — unsteady.

Focusing on her chakra flow, feeling it build up, Sena formulated a plan and waited for Neji to make the first move. If she were to have a chance to make this hit, then she would need him to think he was winning. His guard needed to be down.

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Neji’s patience finally ran out and he lunged at Sena, who had been expecting this, dodging the attack. He tried this a few more times, failing every time. A smirk appeared on her face as she
continued to play the defence for awhile which seemed to annoy him considerably.

Sena was usually the one to pick the offence, not wanting to waste time but it was more fun to play him for awhile.

Once the kunoichi felt his frustration had reached a significant level she made her move. She swung a fist at him, pushing her chakra into a lightning release but Neji jumped aside at the last second. Now he was prepared.

‘Damnit.’ Sena muttered at her failed attempt.

Neji grabbed her arm and tried to wield his other hand and hit the Sena’s chakra point but she was also quick to react. She turned and balanced herself so she could utilise his weight against him, pushing him to the ground with her falling on top. Sena tried to maintain the above position but his reaction was too quick for her and she was on her back in seconds.

There they were, Neji on top pinning Sena’s back to the ground. They were both hot, sweaty and breathing heavily, gazes locked in an unyielding embrace. A once frowning Neji softened his expression, eyes returning to normal as though he realised the compromising position they were in. His body was flush against hers, hands holding a tight grip around her wrists with their faces mere inches apart.

The tension was thick and the mood heated as Sena felt Neji’s chest brush against her own with every breath.

‘Battle tactic basics girl: distraction and the element of surprise. Don’t get distracted from your goal and see behind the enemies attacks. Utilise all the tools at your disposal because it isn’t over until one of you is dead.’ Her old sensei’s words rang through her mind causing a smile spreading across her lips.

Neji’s guard was down now; he wouldn’t expect her to make a move now so she could potentially utilise this distraction. He thought he had won but the battle was not over. Sena knew what she had to do.

In one swift motion, Sena lifted her head towards Neji’s and attempted to plant her lips on his. However, she fell short and managed to peck his chin instead. His eyes widened, cheeks blushing red and the grips once tight on her wrist loosened. She took advantage of this and rolled him over so that now he was the one pinned down with Sena on top of him. Both of them were breathing heavily, bodies so close they radiated heat and their eyes never once losing their gaze.

For a moment, though brief, the world around them stopped. Stuck in a trance neither of them moved, both like prey caught in a trap. Witnessing Neji like this, eyes widened slightly, questioning her, arms pinned above him—at any other time, she would have laughed. Now she didn’t, finding she wanted to be tender and not playful. Sena succumbed to the warm feelings and allowed herself to become lost in the moment.

‘What are you doing?’ Neji whispered, his voice coated in uncertainty.

The silent bubble that had been encompassing them both burst as the world started to move again and the moment passed. Sena found the playful feelings returning and another smirk came to her face. She leant back away from Neji then stood up to offer him a hand, which he took hesitantly.
‘Just utilising all abilities at my disposal.’ Sena replied casually.

‘Most people would call that cheating,’ Neji muttered, his usual demeanour returning. ‘Or at least indecent.’

‘Hm,’ Sena shrugged. ‘Better to be indecent than to die.’

‘This was training. I was not going to kill you.’ Neji frowned as he turned away from her.

The kunoichi wondered why he was doing that so often. Perhaps she was taking things a bit too far or maybe it was something else entirely. Either way, she knew he would not tell her, how could he when he would not even look at her?

‘You are just upset because you lost.’ Sena said.

‘No, I did not lose,’ Neji replied. ‘Besides it’s not that.’

‘Then tell me what it is?’

Neji stopped to consider he question for a few moments before shaking his head and turning back to face her, a neutral expression on his face.

‘That is enough training for the day,’ He began to walk away before turning back. ‘Come on I promised we would get food remember?’

Sena sighed in relief, realising at that point how hungry she had gotten from training. She smiled and thought about how she had missed simple things like training with her friends. The kunoichi also realised just how much she had missed Neji and their old routines. She ran to catch up with him and they began to walk side by side toward the village centre.

‘Hey, Neji?’ Sena asked.

‘Hm?’ He replied.

‘Train again with me tomorrow at the same time?’

The smallest hint of a smile crossed Neji’s lips.

‘Alright.’ Was all he said but she knew he was looking forward to it by that smiled.

Neji was one for routine and Sena was glad that she fit into his so easily.

‘Good. I want to see if I can win against you again.’

All evidence of a smile disappeared from the Hyūga's face and he gave her an unimpressed look.

‘I would not call that winning.’ Neji said.

He was losing his patience quicker than normal making it easier for Sena to tease him.

‘I would not exactly call it losing.’
‘Sena.’ He warned.

‘Neji.’

He let out a long sigh the shook his head and continued walking.

Once they had something to eat and Neji had insisted on paying for them both, he escorted her back to the Matsura compound as he had the day before. Sena had found the newly formed routine nice, wishing she could get used to it. And as she said goodbye to Neji, she found herself wondering how they would be if she had never left.

Chapter End Notes

Oh boy, things are getting tense. Neji POV chapter is up next. It's a steamy one.
It was early morning and the sun rays were barely breaking through the shades of Neji’s bedroom window when she came to him.

The girl opened the door slowly, grasping the handle as she peered in her body halfway into the room while the other hid behind like it was taking cover. She entered very carefully, moving silently through the room like an assassin, attempting not to wake him. These movements were enough to tear the Neji’s attention from the sober state in which he lie, waiting for her to come. The only sound then was that of her kimono opening, the silk garment brushing against her naked skin, her beautiful, delicate skin.

Neji felt as though he were stuck waiting for her, alone in the fathomless depths of the ocean, trapped beneath the surface of cold water flats. Afraid to break the illusion that was her, he dared not move. The girl came closer, sliding off her kimono slowly, revealing herself in full to him. With hesitation, she rested her knee on the edge of the large bed, as if testing the waters, eyes fixed on his still body. He observed her through lowered lashes, drinking in the sight of her naked body. Taking in the curves and contours that he wanted, needed, to touch.

The girl carefully eased herself onto the bed then onto him, placing her thighs either side of him. It was a strange occurrence seeing her this way but Neji didn’t question it. As she hovered above him on resting palms, she brushed his face with her raven hair and he remembered the first time he’d noticed the sweet scent of lilacs it usually carried, the scent that was missing now. She leant over him, touched him, caressed him. And he finally understood that he desired her above all others.

Undeterred by his sleeping state she touched Neji’s forehead, his cheeks then his lips with the tips of her fingers resulting in his smile. Very slowly, delicately he grasped the girl by the waist and she moulded into his touch. She smiled in triumph. The girl was menacing and mysterious but that was what made her so ravishing — what made him yearn for her in ways he never thought possible. He went to move but pushing with both hands, she maintained control and with a gentle but decisive roll of her hips, she pushed for a response.

Neji responded without hesitation, hardening beneath her touch, no longer afraid of breaking the spell. Soft moans escaped his lips as she threw her head back, shaking her dark hair so the waves fell behind her and her delicate neck was exposed. Neji captured the soft skin with his lips.
Her skin was electrifying and smooth, her scars nonexistent beneath his touch. Neji gazed into her eyes which were like sapphires staring back at him, reminding him of a deep ocean — one he wouldn’t mind drowning in. As they moved together, he sank further into the moment, kept surfaced only by the need to find that lilac scent he craved so much.

‘Sena,’ he whispered. ‘Sena…’

Then at once, everything vanished as Neji sank completely and the darkness consumed him. The sound of a faint thud sent his head spinning and his limbs flexing as he jumped with a start. The moment disappeared and his eyes fluttered open, disorientated as he took in his surroundings. He was still in his bedroom except now he was alone with no-one else there. Sena wasn’t there.

Taking a moment to allow his mind to clear and his body wake he rubbed his tired eyes. In pieces the dream started to come racing back. The image of Sena leaning over him and touching him so intimately caused heat to rise in his cheeks. He couldn’t shake the intense feelings that came with the dream, the stirrings inside him that confirmed at that moment he wanted her.

It was then Neji realised the full effect the dream had on him as he looked downward. Surely enough there it was, fully erect beneath his pants, longing for release. He groaned, head falling back into his pillow as he resisted the powerful urge that came with such a problem.

It wasn’t the first time that he’d had a dream like this — about her. The first time was about six months ago, just before she had left the village once again for her mission. It had happened a couple of occasions since then, on days his mind drifted to her but this was the first time in awhile. As Neji stared up at the ceiling a frown found his face and irritation overcame him. Why did this keep happening to him?

Embarrassment then shame overtook his irritation as Neji realised the dreams were about his friend who was someone he respected greatly. It was improper for him to think of Sena in such a matter, he didn’t have a right. Yes, her presence had become intoxicating to the point of madness but he should have better control than this. The kunoichi was special to him and he didn’t want to think of her in an indecent way. It wasn’t right.

Deciding, stubbornly so, that he would not think of his friend in that manner again, Neji peeled himself off of the bed and headed for a shower. He ignored the discomfort in his lower region as he stripped off and stepped into the water. Cold water ought to solve his problem.

Attempting to purge himself of all thoughts concerning Sena, Neji closed his eyes and allowed the cold water to crash on and around him. Instead of her vibrant eyes, he thought instead of his new training techniques. In place of her radiant smile, his mind went to trivial things like training or his teammate’s progress. He thought of a shuriken, a kunai, a herring, ramen, the cold water, anything else.

Forced attempts failing, Neji still found the image of the kunoichi’s raven hair brushing his cheek lingering in the back of his mind. He balled his fists against the shower wall, his memory trying to recall the sweet scent of lilacs he had always noticed in her presence. The distinct scent which the dream, though vivid, could not reproduce nor could he recreate in his mind.

The entire feeling was a paradox. On the one hand it soothed Neji but on the other it was the greatest frustration he had ever felt.

‘Damn it.’ Neji muttered.

He pressed his forehead gently against the cold tiles, water trailing down his tense back. All he
could think of was her.

— — —

Sena had arrived at the training grounds early in the morning, well before it was time to meet up with Neji. She lied on the grass in the centre of the field and looked up at the clouds thinking about her chakra control and the advancement of her abilities. Her mother had been the one to first teach her about the nature types, adamant that one day she would master them all just as she had tried.

Sena thought back to the first day her mother had taught her, letting the memory consume her thoughts…

In a large open field, surrounded each side by a thick forest, stood a woman dressed in kunoichi clothes adorning colours of maroon and black. She stood next to the small child with her curly, black hair blowing in the gentle breeze. The woman turned to her taking the child’s small hand in hers.

‘Sena, my child. Do you know why I brought you here?’ The woman asked.

‘No mother.’ She whispered, uncertain what was going to happen as her mother let go of her hand then walked to the centre of the flat field. They were a distance from the main part of the village and amidst the silence of the forest the wind was eerie.

Her mother stood there, eyes closed and arms stretched as if to embrace the cool breeze. It was almost angelic in the child’s eyes. After a few seconds like this, her mother’s eyes opened again, gaze fixed back to Sena.

‘I am going to show you something and it’s important you stand still. Understood?’ A serious tone was overcoming her usual gentle nature.

Sena nodded, pushing her feet firmly into the earth in obedience. She watched as her mother formed hand signs, almost too quickly to see while muttering something she couldn’t make out. The child’s brow furrowed and her mouth opened, about to inquire as to what her mother was doing but before any words could come, a gust of wind came from behind. It blew violently through the trees causing them to sway before it rushed passed her.

Sena lifted her arm, covering her face, and squinted her now watering eyes to try and combat the force of the wind. It was stronger than anything she had ever felt before, but it was not enough to harm or move her. She let out a soft groan as her clothes flapped about wildly.

Almost as quickly as it came, the wind died down again to the once gentle breeze. Sena blinked a few times realising it was safe to drop her arm by her side once again.

Her gaze went back to her mother who was still standing in the centre of the field, hands on hips with a menacing smile. She gestured to the child to come to her. The child swallowed and came closer and her mother put an arm around her.

‘Do you know what that was, Sena?’ Her mother cooed, a twinkle in her eyes as though she had been waiting a lifetime to show her daughter this. The child looked back at her in awe remembering what her father had told her about chakra and the different elemental natures.
Wind,’ Sena whispered, eyes widening. ‘That was a Wind Release.’

‘Yes, that is correct.’ Her mother beamed at her, gently patting her back in approval. ‘Now, that’s just one of the five different Godai Kihon Seishitsu. You remember what they are yes?’

‘Yes, mother. There is fire, wind, lightning, earth and water.’

‘Very good, it is important for you to remember these. It is part of the reason I brought you out here. To teach you and to show you but first it is important that you understand what you are learning.’

Sena stood there and considered her mother's words carefully. Did this mean she was finally going to get to control her chakra just like her older brothers did? A feeling of excitement mixed with stirrings of anxiety coursed through her as she turned back to her mother’s gaze she was ready to learn.

‘Sena, remember,’ she repeated, ‘nature and chakra are chaos, much like knowledge. It is both a blessing and a curse as much as determination and progress. It all depends on who wields them and to what purpose. The elements are everywhere around us. Easily accessible, attainable through trial and error and from the knowledge of the past and present. It is enough to gesture one’s hand. See? I’m moving my hands to make symbols. This allows for the chakra to conjure and release.’

Sena heard a dull, distant rumble coming from within the earth. She watched as the earth before here rose, a cliff side replacing where the plain was once flat, a wall of fire appearing across it. Sena felt a gush of wind blow wildly through her raven hair. She narrowed her eyes against the flashes of lightning which suddenly flared across the horizon. She automatically huddled up to her mother, against her black hair smelling of wisteria, like the sweet smelling flowers that cut through the soft scent of the morning's dewy grass.

Her mother dropped her hands and the lightning disappeared returning the sky to its former clear day, the earth once moved and charred remained still.

‘Nature is everywhere and in everything we do. The earth that you stand upon now. The fire that burns within and around it. The water that sustains us. The wind which carries you. And the lightning that lights up the horizon. It is enough to stretch out your hands to wield them, control them and master them. This is the legacy our ancestors bestowed upon us, extending their hand of knowledge so we can protect our village and it’s people. It is inherited as much as it is a gift.’

Sena nodded slowly. Her mother’s words encompassing her mind as she turned to face her, a warm smile now spread across her once serious face.

‘But you already knew that, didn’t you my little one. You have already felt the touch of our clan embrace you. You are a Matsura, Sena, which means traces of chakra from the world around you can be sensed and with enough focus, can reverberate within you. But with such a touch comes responsibility. Because with such power even the most experienced shinobi can harbour chaos within them. It is within us all. Just as there is both Good and Bad, in the end, it is our actions that define who we are. That is why it has to be learnt, along with control. And you will control it, Sena, that is what it means to be a kunoichi in this world.’

Her mother crouched in front of her, their eyes level. She reached out, placing a comforting hand on Sena’s shoulder. Her Sapphire eyes looked up into her mother’s dark ones.

‘Do you understand what I am telling you?’ Her mother asked softly.
Sena nodded, beginning to grasp the importance of control while determination overtook her. She felt the sudden need to learn everything she could about wielding chakra.

‘I want to learn control and be a strong kunoichi!’ Sena cried out, ‘I want to learn to be like you mother!’

Her mother chuckled and nodded. ‘Alright then, we can begin.’

Sena sat up from the grass, smiling at the warm feelings the memory had given her. Perhaps that was the answer to finding her father; to let in the good and not let the chaos consume her. To take the right path no matter how tempting it was to lose herself in the mission. Sena would do right by her mother’s memory.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading this far, feel free to leave comments. Things are finally starting to go somewhere.
In Two Parts

Chapter Summary

Neji acts strangely following the dream and it is Sena's last night in the village.

When Neji arrived at the training grounds Sena noticed he was acting distant and strange. He barely spoke, only forming small sentences or one worded replies when it was necessary and his attacks were fluid but held an inkling of distraction like there was something was troubling him deeply.

Sena knew he was hiding something but as to what she could not discern on curiosity alone especially since Neji could be hard to read. It was only natural for him to hide things after all, they were both guilty doing so, it was the shinobi way. They hide their feelings, hide their past and on instinct hide their true intentions. It was no different for either of them because it is what they were taught to do. Sometimes, Sena found it was hard to know what was real amongst all the layers of doubt.

After they finished training the pair walked away from the fields in their usual silence. Sena looked up at the sky, trying to imprint a mental image of the beautiful clear day to think about when she left the next day. It was her last night at home and she was left empty and unsatisfied, as though she were missing out on opportunities already. These feelings, on top of Neji’s cold attitude, had left her in a gloomy mood.

Sena was so preoccupied in her misery that she had almost forgotten Neji was with her until he broke the silence.

‘How do you plan on spending your last day?’ His tone was soft and his expression much to Sena’s annoyance still did not betray his thoughts or feelings.

‘I think I’m going to spend the rest of the afternoon walking around the village. I need some time to myself.’ Sena did not bother trying to mask her sorrow, she was too tired for that and his mood had impacted her.

Neji gave a short ‘hm’ in reply.

Sena turned to him with questioning eyes, trying figure out what was going on in his head. He opened his mouth as though he was about to say something else but then he forced it closed jaw clenching again. His eyes met hers, the usual spark igniting causing her mouth to open slightly, her mind in awe. There was something more to that look of his.

Sometimes, when Neji looked at her, the kunoichi could swear something in him had changed. The glances were more intense; his eyes seemingly charged and drawing her to him. A part of her liked it, loved it. She found herself wanting there to be this change, for this to become a bigger feeling because maybe, just maybe she would be inclined to act upon it.

‘I have to go.’ Sena said and he nodded stepping to the side to let her pass.

Something about the way Neji’s body stood stiff, fists clenching beside him that told her that he
still wanted to tell her something. Sena lingered in front of him for a moment but eventually forced herself to move. As she took a few steps away from him, he called out to her.

‘Wait,’ Neji called catching up with her. ‘I have to leave for a mission tomorrow morning and I won’t be able to say goodbye when you leave.’

The Sena’s brows raised as she turned back to face him, his words causing an overwhelming feeling of emptiness to consume her. That meant this was her last chance to see Neji for…she didn’t even know how long it would be.

‘So that means we have to say goodbye today?’ Sena asked and he nodded. ‘In that case, I shall have to see you tonight; I’ll come by later. Alright?’

Neji’s eyes widened slightly, giving away a small trace of hope.

‘Okay, are you certain? If you have other previous engagements I-’

‘I have no other plans,’ Sena cut in. ‘I just need some time to myself to think then I will be there.’

Neji let a small smile slip which warmed Sena’s heart. She realised that it was the first time she had seen him smile that day. Perhaps that was the reason he had been acting differently at training. Did he feel guilty for having to leave? That was supposed to be her role. The kunoichi couldn’t help but smile at that thought.

‘I’ll see you later, Neji.’ Sena waved goodbye has she headed into the crowd.

‘See you.’ Neji called back.

Sena spent some of the afternoon looking around the shopping district of the village, searching stalls and browsing vendors. She replenished her weapons and travelling supplies before heading out to the outskirts of the village. The kunoichi had truly wished to be alone to explore the spots she used to come to think. It had been awhile since she had been properly by herself since she was travelling with Kakashi all the time and it was nice.

Sena made her way to a clearing, near the training grounds in a secluded part of the forest. There was a river which flowed through with a gentle current, making it look like a small paradise. It was where her team would sometimes congregate to discuss strategy or just to hang out after a tough session with Hitomi Sensei. The kunoichi found herself remembering the times she had argued with Jiro about whose affinity was superior or whose technique was better. She smiled at the memories as she sat down by the river bed, letting her mind wander to her genin days. She missed her team, her sensei and the days where everything seemed more carefree. It was only the beginning then.

Caught up in her thoughts, Sena didn’t even register someone approaching from the south of the forest. Then in a flash, something materialised in front of her, someone she recognised instantly.

‘Jiro?’ Sena whispered, eyes widening at the appearance of former teammate.

‘Sena, I heard you were back.’

She leapt off of the ground and ran into his embrace. Jiro chuckled, returning her hug and lifting her off of the earth like she was a child. She giggled into his shoulder, excited she had the chance to see him again finally.

‘Do you have time to catch up?’ Jiro asked setting her down.
‘Yes, of course, I have time for you!’

‘Good because I need to tell you about these new techniques I have learnt that will surely kick your ass.’ Jiro smirked.

‘Ha. That’s what you think!’ Sena retorted, giving him a swift punch to the arm.

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It had been a few hours since Neji had left Sena. He had spent the time performing menial tasks like stocking up on supplies, running into Lee who insisted on having lunch with him all before he finally had the chance to return home. Sena had said she needed time to herself and Neji found he was in need of the same time alone to think. The images of the dream he had mostly faded throughout the day but the memory of her caressing him in such a way lingered in his mind. He still couldn't shake the feelings the dream had unlocked from deep inside him.

Neji knew he had been acting cold and distant during their time together in the morning but he had to guard his thoughts. The level of unease he felt in her presence was alarming and he wouldn't dare tell her such indecent thoughts. To do so would be of the utmost disrespect and he cared too much about her for that.

Letting himself fall back onto his bed the Hyūga sighed at his predicament. Over the past few months he thought perhaps these emotions would fade but even in her absence they had increased substantially like the wind igniting the kindling of a fire. Now that she was here he found himself drawn to her company and craving her presence.

A thought crossed Neji’s mind that perhaps Sena felt something similar when they were together but frowned and crushed the idea. But even he had to admit when their eyes met there was an underlying tenderness that flowed between them like they had tapped into a binding chakra flow.

The idea of talking to Sena had come in to play in Neji’s thoughts, but then he realised how ridiculous it would be. No, he would not talk to her about it, instead he would manage. Manage because he had to like a shinobi with no other alternative. He had overcome the vanity and pride of being different or at least had made an effort to try and understand that they are a pitiful defence against being different.

Instead of letting the thoughts and feelings overtake him, Neji pushed them aside and took out a book from his bedside table, deciding to distract himself by reading.

When a few hours passed Neji realised it was nightfall and picked himself up, deciding to go to Sena. He had expected her to come a little earlier but instead of lingering, he figured she probably forgot their arrangements and thinking that he was coming to her.

On approaching the Matsura compound he found himself feel a rush of anxiety flow through him. It was going to be the last time he saw the kunoichi for another lengthy period away. He wanted to make sure she was happy or at least content before she left. A small part of Neji hoped it would in a way convince her subconscious to complete the mission and come back sooner — wishful thinking he knew.

Before he had the chance to explore the thoughts further Neji was brought to a halt. As he looked up from the path he saw Sena there in front of the compound in the embrace of another man. A
great anger built up inside the Hyūga as he looked at them together, the man’s arms around her waist, hers around his neck, so intimate.

A string of envy shot through him, his body shaking as he stood there watching them. The man pulled away and Neji saw that it was Jiro which only fuelled his frustration more so as he watched him walk away from Sena, first indulging in her presence. At that moment Neji found himself wanting to be in the position Jiro had stood. He wanted to be the one embracing Sena, making her smile that way. It was the sort of smile, menacing and beautiful, that could start fires inside of him and invite him to yearn for her affection.

‘Neji?’ Sena had spotted him and waved, gesturing for him to come to her. ‘I was just about to come and see you.’

‘Hm. I thought you were supposed to be alone.’ Neji didn't even attempt to mask his irritation or bitterness.

Sena frowned at him obviously unsure as to his meaning.

‘I was alone. Then I ran into Jiro, he had just gotten back from a mission and I hadn’t seen him yet.’ She explained.

Guilt shot through Neji as he looked at the pain in her expression but it did not overcome his sense of envy. His emotions were powerfully surging through him.

‘Right. Well lucky for you,’ his words were unforgivably coated in sarcasm. ‘I am sure you are tired and do not have the energy to accompany me to dinner.’

‘Of course, I will come with you to dinner.’

‘Don’t do me any favours,’ Neji scoffed, unable to control himself, the heat of the moment taking hold.

‘Neji! Why are you acting this way?’

Neji’s expression remained stern as he looked at her. Sena’s eyes were wide and questioning him, reading him and making him shift uncomfortably. He hated that she could do that because it was like she was looking into his mind and reading his every thought. He tried hard to keep his emotions and feelings in check but around her it all seemed to explode within and around him.

When Neji did not answer, Sena remained silent, studying him through squinted eyes like she was trying to discern an answer. He expected her to say something, yell at him, ask again but she didn’t. Instead, they stood there awkwardly not knowing what to do next.

Then Sena did something Neji was not prepared for. Before he could move, she had already taken strides forward and wrapped her arms around his body, pulling him into a hug. His breath hitched at the sensation. The Hyūga on instinct had pulled his face away slightly, his mouth opening to say something but when she tightened her grip the words were lost. All the anger, the envy and the irritation he had felt caved under her touch and as she pressed her body closer to his he froze like a statue.

The coolness in the air and the rapid pace of Neji’s heartbeat only seemed to amplify the sensation but he ignored it all when he realised that she was hugging him. Then finally, after processing it all, he allowed his body to relax slowly, hesitantly wrapping his arms around her. When she moulded into his touch, their bodies warmed and he allowed his head to move so it rested on top of hers.
Allowing himself to embrace the moment fully, Neji inhaled a deep breath. Then he found that familiar scent he had been searching for — the sweet scent of lilacs that only her hair carried. As they stood together, bounded just by themselves, they were the world and the world was them. And as she stood there against him, oblivious his thoughts, oblivious to how she had shattered all that he was with just her touch and him wanting her to know. He wanted her to know but can not formulate the words or the courage to tell her.

‘I’m going to miss you too.’ Sena whispered, softly, knowing.

And, just like that, Neji fell deeply.

That fact alone was enough to send a panic through him and as the moment that was theirs disappeared, reality set in motion. In a slow, fluid motion, Neji pulled himself from her enticing embrace and turned away. He could not allow himself to be caught in a moment like that again because then he would have to admit just how deeply he had fallen. It wasn't something he was ready for and he was afraid he never would be.
Collision

Chapter Summary

Sena leaves the village and encounters a certain blond man.

In the early morning Kakashi and Sena met at the entrance of the village. It was warm when they set out, so they kept a leisurely pace while keeping to the main path. The villages that the pair set off to investigate were not far from Konohagakure and they would probably reach their destination before the evening set in. It took even less time for them to reach that fork in the path that indicated their differing assignments.

An uneasy feeling overcame Sena as they bid their farewells and a thought sprouted that told her they would be separated for longer than just this mission. It was true that they each had their own objective and place to search but something about going alone in such a dangerous mission that gave her the feeling that something bad was going to happen. It was a first, in all the time she had been looking for her father, to take on the task alone. Every fibre in her being screamed vigilance and she resigned herself to keeping her guard up at all times without Kakashi to watch her back.

Sena spent the remainder of her journey in silence, going over every detail that concerned the mission in her head. She was so absorbed in her speculations about the new leads that she barely registered arriving at her destination and realised it was time to begin her search. The information Tsunade had given her indicated that her father could perhaps make an appearance in the village to consult a scroll expert. All she knew about the expert was that he was supposedly a hermit living a ways from the village. It was finding this so called expert that would be the problem; she would need to ask around, perhaps even see if they had seen her father already but without too much indication of her purpose. The information may not even be entirely accurate but she dared to hope.

Instead of going straight to an inn to check into, Sena decided to follow the lead and figure out the worth of the information. If she had learnt anything while travelling it was always check the information first in case it took her on another journey.

Sena stuck the outskirts at first and casually worked her way through the small village, asking vendors if they knew of anyone who worked specialising in ancient scrolls while trying to blend. When she sized some of the warmer townspeople up she risked showing them pictures of her father. It was not the stealthiest approach, but with the little information she had, it was all she could do.

It was late afternoon by the time Sena had worked through the entire village. The people could not give her any information than what she already knew and the task was becoming tedious and feel like a waste of time. Sena decided to check into a weathered looking inn nearing the outskirts of the main district. She would try doing another round of questioning again when darkness fell and the people the of the night scene awakened. It would give her time to get in some training and relax a bit.

After dumping her pack on the scuffed floorboards, Sena fell onto her bed. It definitely wasn't the nicest place she had stayed but it beat sleeping on the makeshift bed that accompanied her on her travels. Although Sena did have to admit she did enjoy getting distracted by the stars when she found herself embracing the wilderness on certain missions.
It wasn't long before Sena became restless in her room and she decided to venture outdoors through the surrounding forest to find a nice spot she had passed on her way in. It was a secluded pool beneath a waterfall which flowed into a river. The current had seemed steady enough to swim in and she couldn't deny such an alluring scene to entice her. When Sena arrived there however she decided to practice some taijutsu and work on her weapons techniques in order to earn herself such a reward.

No matter where Sena was or what she was doing, Hitomi Sensei’s voice rang through her mind. He had been instrumental in her progress as a kunoichi and it was thanks to his guidance that she had come this far. It was always the same tone and sentiment and even after all these years she couldn't get rid of the memories.

Taking yet another sip from his flask, Hitomi Sensei gave a heavy sigh. ‘Come on kid, again. And for the love of Kami focus on you damn footwork!’

Sena nodded, taking a battle stance once again. Her eyes narrowed as she focused and Hitomi sensei studying her carefully as he paced around her before shouting orders.

‘Don’t huff at me, Sena. Attack, dodge! Block! Steadier on the execution, damn it! Don’t wobble! Lunge, thrust! Faster! Don’t you dare fall girl!’

‘I won’t fall!’ Sena yelled back at him, but he merely shook his head at her.

‘Ah, so she speaks again. I’ve told you once and I’m not going to tell you again: steady on your legs! And breathe, Sena, breathe! You’re panting like a bloody ninken in heat!’

‘Shut it, old man!’

‘Don’t get sweet with me. Practice! Attack, dodge! Steadier! Don’t wobble! Lunge, thrust! Faster! Half-pirouette! Jump and lunge! Foot- That’s it! Good!’

‘Really? It was good?’ Sena asked, beaming.

‘What? Who said that?’

‘You did! Decrepit old man!’

‘Hush, slip of the tongue. Again!’

Sena found herself reliving these moments in every battle and every sparring match. It was like a part of him was still with her. In a way it was comforting to her, knowing she was never truly alone. The stubborn, old man would refuse to leave her anyway.

The sun was beginning to set by the time Sena had completed her training drills and she decided to take advantage of the dusk light. Stripping out of her outer layers and leaving on her underwear Sena stepped towards the pool of water and eased her foot in. It was a cool sensation against her warm skin both soothing and tempting. Without another moment's hesitation Sena took another step forward and dived into the water causing a large splash.

Her body welcomed the cold, as a slight shiver to ran through her body while the warmth left in the sun spared discomfort. Sena felt free as she pushed herself deeper to allow her body sink, with guidance, to the bottom of the riverbed.

It was peaceful beneath the surface causing Sena to wonder what it would be like to breathe underwater. Whether she would prefer to stay in such a nice, peaceful environment for the rest of
her life. She let herself stay submerged, watching the sunlight dance on the reflects of the surface. Her mind drifted to Neji and the hug they had shared only the night before. To the Sena it had seemed like a lifetime ago; the warmth, the security and the pulling away to reality.

Sena allowed herself to the surface, breaking the peaceful environment with a splash and a strained gasp for air. With her eyes closed she lifted her head toward the sun and allowed the afternoon rays to warm her body. She moved her hands brushing the water droplets across her skin, slowly and carefree. Sena gave herself to the moment completely.

Reality came crashing down on Sena as she became aware of someone's presence. Her gaze snapped over to the riverbank where she found a blond man, half undressed and staring at her, eyes wide, mouth hanging open and his shirt in hand. By the time their eyes met and registered what was happening the shirt had fallen from his hand and hit the ground.

The two of them stood there bodies frozen, eyes bulging and staring at each other.

Once the moment had finally sunken in, Sena’s eyes narrowed and a shot of irritation shot through her.

Sena took a step forward, hands on hips and broke the silent bubble encompassing them.

‘What do you think you are doing, pervert?’

The man scowled.

‘Haven’t you heard it’s rude to spy on a lady.’ Sena added for good measure.

‘Hey, I’m no pervert!’ The man retorted, arms folding while his eyes were trained on her face.

‘Then explain why I caught you gawking!’ Sena was furious now. ‘You look ridiculous like a fish mouth hooked like that. Haven’t you seen a woman before?’

A smirk sprawled onto the blond's lips.

‘What’s so funny huh?’ Sena took several strides toward him reaching close to the edge of the bank.

‘The fact that you think I came here to spy on you is funny since I didn’t even know anyone else was here til you started yelling, hm.’ The man took a step forward as if to imitate her, mockingly.

The sight of his smile only added to Sena's frustration.

‘Your perceptive skills need work then. You clearly have no sense of your surroundings considering you missed the massive pile of clothes not five feet from you and the figure of a grown woman in the water.’

‘Oh, now that I saw.’ The man raised is brow, taking another step toward her suggestively.

_Was he actually trying to flirt with her at a time like this_?

‘Spare me your juvenile manner, please.’ Sena sighed. She wasn’t sure why but she suddenly was not as angry anymore. Perhaps he was not flirting but trying to defuse the awkward situation.

‘Come on look at me,’ the man insisted, 'I promise it was an honest mistake. I didn’t know you were here.’
'I guess, I was under water for a while.' Sena muttered, looking away.

'Yeah, what are you some sort of whale or something?'

Sena’s expression darkened. Every last thought of giving this man the benefit of the doubt disappeared. She stormed onto the bank, snatching her clothes from the ground before shoving past him.

'Hey come back, I didn’t mean it like that,’ the man called after her, ‘Come on tell me your name, and I’ll tell you mine!'

'Like I care!' Sena called back before disappearing into the forest.

Sena was so distracted by thinking about the mysterious man that she walked for ten minutes without realising she still was not dressed. A blush fell across her cheeks as she realised she had been in her underwear for the entire conversation. She quickly ducked out of sight behind a tree and dressed while the image of the man staring at her flooded her mind.

What was he doing there anyway? Sena mentally kicked herself for letting her guard down and for so easily thinking she had been alone. She needed to refocus on the mission and as she walked back to her room she began coming up with a plan of action for the evening.
Second Chances

Chapter Summary

While looking for information in the village Sena encounters the strange man from the pool again.

The next day, Sena found herself asking and searching through the whole village once again. The evening before had been a bust since only a few dive bars were open but a hot tip from a local informed her that this evening would prove more useful in more open venues. It was afternoon by the time she finished another day of searching without anything to go on. Instead of returning to the river, Sena chose to check the bars and other adult venues that were just opening for customers. She wanted to avoid running into the blond man again after such an embarrassing encounter and she also wanted to avoid letting her guard down.

Sena had been to three other venues before stopping in front of the Asagao Inn, a local dive that she had skinned the evening before. She stood outside the door for a moment and listened to the array of voices bursting from within. As usual, at this hour of the day, it was full of people. It was the perfect place for seeking information without standing out or causing suspicion. When she stepped inside, there was that familiar stench of sake in the air, mixed with the subtle hints of barbecue pork. On top of that the dull lighting seemed to match the disarrayed atmosphere.

Walking a lap of the premises in order to subtly observe the crowd, Sena decided to jump into the investigation as she approached the bar. Sena did not drink much alcohol, being young and a kunoichi and she did not want to be out of sorts with a clouded mind. But she also did not want to draw attention to herself, so she compromised ordering something low alcohol content and mixed with sweetened water. The innkeeper sized her up then filled a cup full of, what smelled to be, cheap spirits.

As Sena waited a large, broad-shouldered man who had not once looked away since she entered, got up and approached the bar where she sat. From where he stood, less than a metre next to her, Sena could smell the sweat and alcohol following the man. Her nose scrunched a little.

‘Great,’ she muttered to herself, ‘another drunk guy.’

Sena always hated looking for information in places that served alcohol or attracted drunk men for this very reason. There was always something about such locations the left her feeling dirty like she ought to shower at least three times just to get rid of the feeling. This place was no different and this man screamed trouble.

Ignoring his intense gaze that kept on her, she turned back to the inn keeper, pulling out a photo.

‘Have you seen this guy around here by any chance?’ Her tone was firm but polite.

‘Who is he? Some sort of bounty of yours to collect?’ The innkeeper asked, casually.

Sena knew the tone and content of her response would determine his answer. She would have to play a certain part to get what she wanted.
'He’s my father,' she pouted a little, 'and I’m supposed to meet him.'

'No, can’t say the face rings a bell,’ he replied, quickly.

Sena searched his eyes for any glint of recognition but they betrayed his cowardice and he merely shook his head.

She closed her eyes and let out a sigh.

'What about an ancient scroll expert,’ she cleared her throat, 'any who work or visit around here?’

'You ask a lot of questions.’

'Hm.’

'No there’s no expert that I know of here. Is that all?’

'Yes, thank you.’

'Oi sweetheart,’ the broad-shouldered man said to her, ‘I can be an expert for you.’

Sena rolled her eyes at the man, ignoring his suggestive line and turned away.

'Come on don’t be like that, I can help you in any way you want.’ The man insisted.

Sena looked at the Innkeeper who was wiping down cups in order to avoid eye contact. It seemed would be receiving no outside help, so she had to deal with the nuisance herself. A tricky business that would surely draw unwanted attention.

'No, thank you.’ Sena stood to leave, but the man grabbed her shoulder yanking her back towards him.

A twisted smile sprawled across the man’s face making her stomach churn. She scowled at his drunk and unyielding nature, not a good combination for her and it was making her incredibly irritable. She could render him harmless in seconds but that lead to questions and she would need reasons.

'I think you should reconsider, sweetheart.’ He snarled, trying to pull her closer but she resisted.

'I think you should back off,’ Sena retorted pushing him away, 'this is no way to speak to a lady.’ Her tone calm yet threatening.

'You’re no lady.’ The man scoffed, arms crossing.

Sena turned to leave again.

After taking a few steps, the man’s hand caught her shoulder but this time she was ready and fed up. In a flash she grabbed the man’s hand and twisted it, flipping him onto his back with a loud thump against the wooden floor. She had stunned him enough to keep him down.

The man groaned and cried out to his companions to help.

Without stopping to look down, Sena turned and said a quick apology to the innkeeper before stepping over the man’s body casually and out the door. When she stepped outside, she groaned and pinched the bridge of her nose. Now she was running out of leads and patience.
‘You know, you leave great first impressions.’

Sena turned to find the blond haired man she had encountered the day before, leaning against the wall of the inn, hands buried in his pockets and a smirk on his face. Sena’s cheeks burned, remembering their last encounter.

‘I like to think I am a good judge of character,’ Sena replied keeping her cool, ‘Speaking of character, what’s a pervert like you doing here? Not following me again, huh?’

‘You’d like to think that wouldn’t you, hm.’ The blond peeled himself off the wall and came beside her, ‘And I’m no pervert. I have a name which you so rudely declined.’

The kunoichi just stood there, an unimpressed look on her face causing the blond to sigh. It was obvious what he was waiting for her to say but she would not cave into such nonsense.

‘That is supposed to be the part where you ask- oh whatever, my name is Deidara.’ He gave the kind of smile that meant she was supposed to swoon at the introduction.

Instead, Sena just stared at him through narrowed eyes. ‘And I need to know that because?’

This time it was Deidara’s turn to look unimpressed. She knew she was getting to him but she also guessed that he enjoyed the banter.

‘Because I can help you find what you are looking for.’

‘How do you know what I’m even looking for?’

‘I overheard you in there.’ Deidara gestured to the bar. ‘You’re looking for a scroll expert, hm.’

‘And you think you can help me?’

‘No, I know I can help you. But first I want you to tell me your name.’

‘Fine,’ she relented with a groan, ‘My name is Sena.’

‘Sena,’ He repeated. ‘I like that.’

‘Now tell me how you can help me.’

‘Wow, pushy aren’t we?’ He said with a smirk, ‘I can help you easily. We seek the same thing: a scroll expert. So, I say we work together, considering I know where to find said person.’

‘You do? Where?’

‘Ah ah, now that would defeat the purpose of working together, hm. You are just going to have to trust me.’

Sena pressed her lips and considered his request. This information could be the break she was looking for and she would be a fool not to see where this took her.

‘Fine,’ Sena agreed. ‘But do anything out of the ordinary, one wrong move, and I will kill you.’

‘Yes, I’m sure you would.’ Deidara did not seem phased by her request but rather held admiration in his tone. ‘Now come on I’ll take you to him now. Hm.’

Deidara gestured for her to follow to which she complied, soliciting another groan before hand. It
only caused his smirk to widen, as though he enjoyed torturing her. Perhaps it was a small price to pay to find the ancient scroll expert.

Deidara took her to a small, wooden structure on the border of the village, that looked to be a store for knick knacks and junk. On entry, the inside of the shop was old, cluttered and full of what looked to be antiques. Deidara led the way into the back where they were brought into the presence of an old man.

‘Good evening young ones,’ the old man said, ‘come to browse some antiques?’

‘Actually, no,’ Deidara replied, 'hard pass on the antiques.'

‘We’ve come to ask for your help actually.’ Sena added, for good measure.

‘What can an old man like myself do for you, my dear?’

Sena reached into her pouch and pulled out a photo. It was torn down the left-hand side, previously paired with another half. The half she had in her hand was a picture of her father, the one she had used in her inquiries.

‘First I would like to know, have you seen this man recently?’ Sena asked, handing the photo the old man, his shaking hands retrieving it gently.

‘Hmm.’ He pondered with a serious expression. ‘May I ask who this man is to you?’

‘He is my father, sir.’

The old man hummed again, his wrinkled forehead drooping with his furrowed brow. He ran a finger, softly over the photo before handing it back to Sena letting out a soft sigh.

‘I have seen him before, in fact, I met with him regularly for a time.’ The old man replied.

‘Was it within the last couple of days?’ Sena asked, her desperation seeping through the seams of her words. The lead was the break she had been looking for, the information she needed.

‘No,’ The old man said. ‘In fact, it has been years since I have seen him, not surprising considering the scrolls he was fascinated in.’

Sena’s expression dropped. It had not been the break she needed. At least the old man knew something about her father but she feared it was something she already knew.

‘The Goryō Scroll,’ Sena whispered. ‘That’s what he was inquiring about.’

‘How do you know about that scroll, hm?’ Deidara asked, eyes widening as he stared at her.

Sena frowned.

‘How do you know about it?’ Sena asked unsure how someone outside of her clan, in this era would have knowledge about it — let alone a stranger she had just met. It was too much of a coincidence.

Before Deidara could reply, the old man confirmed her previous statement.

‘Yes, you are correct. It was the Goryō scroll but more importantly information on what the ancient artefact contained.’
‘The seal.’

‘Exactly. Your father wanted any information he could on it; the poor man seemed almost desperate. He said something about someone precious to him needing this information as soon as possible. I knew that could only mean one thing.’

‘Yes. Unfortunately, he ran out of time before he could do anything to help.’ Sena replied, recalling the memory of her mother she attempted to push away.

‘I see, may I inquire as to your father’s condition in regards the the scroll.’

Sena looked up at him with worried eyes, telling him everything her need to know as he gave a curt nod, knowingly.

‘I see.’ The old man sighed. ‘You are staying in the village, I assume?’

Sena nodded. ‘At the inn across the way, toward the outskirts of the main district.’

‘I know the one,’ he replied. ‘Should I meet with your father I’ll be sure to contact you.’

‘Thank you,’ Sena said, turning to Deidara. ‘Come on we have what we need. Let’s go.’

Deidara opened his mouth to say something before catching her eye and promptly closed it again. He followed her out of the store, the pair walking out of earshot before they spoke.

‘What do you know about the Goryō Scroll?’ Sena asked.

‘Not much, just that many people want their hands on it,’ He replied, vaguely. His eyes averted her gaze. He was hiding something.

‘So that’s why you are after it, to sell it to the highest bidder?’

‘No,’ Deidara scowled, seeming offended at the insinuation. ‘I’m getting it to prevent that.’

Sena frowned, a feeling of unease taking hold of her. How could someone outside of her clan know about the scroll? Sena was certain now that she and Deidara had not met on mere coincidence.

‘That doesn’t make any sense, do you even know anything about it?’ She asked.

‘Of course, I do! Do you think I’m going after something without knowing what it is?’

‘What it is and what it does are two different things!’

Sena’s eyes closed in frustration. She still didn’t have any real leads on her father that are recent and what’s more the seal was out in the open for the taking. Her thoughts drifted to her mother again, a familiar ache coming to her chest as she crushed the memory.

‘How do you know about it anyway?’ Deidara asked, her eyes opening to turn back to him. His eyes harbouring intense curiosity and that hint of admiration she kept picking up on around him.

‘That’s none of your business.’ She snapped.

‘Hey, I thought we were supposed to be working together, hm.’

‘That doesn’t mean I trust you.’
Deidara sighed. ‘Why do you have to be so stubborn, hm.’

‘Ugh, just leave me alone. You are so tiresome!’

‘Fine!’ He yelled.

‘Fine!’ Sena yelled back.

Deidara turned abruptly, throwing his hands in the air and stormed off away from her before she had a moment to calm down.

Despite her anger, Sena appreciated his help since she would not have found this man without him but she couldn't trust him. Deidara knew too much about what she was up to for someone outside of Konoha. She would have to be mindful should she see or speak to him again. Tonight she would set up safety counters at her room. As she walked back to her room Sena kept reminding herself of her decision not to trust him despite a small part of her wanting to risk it.
That Day

Chapter Summary

What will happen when Sena goes to see Deidara again?

Chapter Notes

Pumping out all this content, so here we go two chapters in one day. Yay! Hope you enjoy reading!

For the entirety of the night, Sena was plagued with guilt at how she had treated Deidara. Yes, the kunoichi did not know the man that well but she also never really gave him a chance. He had offered to help her, not selflessly which he was upfront about, and she just wrote him off. It was because of him that she even had any information at all, even if it was only something small.

When she awoke, late morning, the kunoichi decided to return to her river paradise. She was no longer afraid of running into the blond, in fact, it would be considered a bonus if she did — to apologise. Maybe she would even consider working alongside him since he had been so adamant to do so. The tone of admiration he had toward her confused her still.

Through the village and into the forest the kunoichi went. All traces of guilt had been removed as the idea of being able to apologise lingered in her thoughts. As she walked along, she noted the wildflowers scattered along the trail at seemingly random intervals, like art dancing along the grass. Sena noted the vines were running along the trees and the birds, pulling the twigs of the ground to make nests. As she began to climb through the shrubs, she found a large patch of white Tsubaki flowers, seemingly out of place in the middle of a forest but no less beautiful. She was not sure why but it made her think of Neji — she knew she missed him, terribly.

As Sena pushed on birds sang softly, hidden away amongst leaves overhead. It almost seemed like any other day, as if nothing bad could ever happen. And perhaps that was true for the birds and the trees, but as for shinobi, they lost their lives every day.

At first, it seemed no one else was in the water, and for a moment Sena was disappointed. She was soothed however by the sound of the waterfall hitting the surface below causing a gentle current to push along the rock bed.

Her disappointment disappeared entirely as she approached the river bank, finding a familiar pile of clothes. The sound of something breaking the surface, followed by a soft gasp filled the air, and Sena froze, eyes locking onto Deidara’s figure in the water. It took a few moments for him to notice her, standing up, so only his lower half was submerged when he did. Their gaze met, looking like a couple of deer caught in a spotlight.

The memory from the previous evening flicked through her mind, and she saw the scowl on the blond’s face, the shock at her insinuation. Now that her body did not feel like it was on fire from the rage, a tenderness flowered within her. She wanted to apologise, feeling no stirrings of
hesitation.

The kunoichi observed the blond’s face now, no longer bearing the scowl or any ill will but rather a softened expression of curiosity. And for the first time since she had met him, she believed he did want to help her, that she could trust him. It caused something warm to flutter inside her, a surge of adrenaline pumping through her body.

Her next move was risky, but she did not care. A part of her wanted to embody this trust physically, and, keeping their gazes locked, her fingers reached to the buttons on her skirt, looping around the elastic of her tights and pushed them to the ground.

Starting with her shirt she pulled it over her head, then her mesh undershirt, all of them falling, one after the other into a pile near where Deidara’s clothes were. His eyes lingered on her face, his body still in the water, watching carefully, thoroughly.

Once she had pulled off her final item of clothing, tearing her eyes away to see them drop to the ground with the rest, she stood there wearing nothing but her underwear. Parallel to the time, they had first met, yet this time the roles were reversed. A sense of vulnerability washed over her, but it did not stop her from taking a cautious step forward, dipping her feet into the cool water.

Uncertain, the kunoichi chanced another look up, and though there was caution visible in his sky blue eyes, he raised a questioning brow at her.

Sena felt like she had the upper hand at that point as she took a few more steps forward, swaying her hips, slowly, precisely when she waded further into the water. They both knew she was only taunting him, but the sight managed to set off something in Deidara as she watched him press his lips together, body tensing.

While wading in the river where the water reached just above her hips, she risked a smile at the blond before lowering her body in entirely, resting for a moment before coming back up.

Sena caught him resisting the urge to drink in the sight of her body, eyes still trained on hers. When she looked at him, now only a few metres away and found him standing the same spot from when they had started, she frowned.

No, Sena did not feel insecure about her body. Between fighting and sparring, there was a sense of pride in the marks that littered a shinobi’s body. There was one, however, old and deep that she had covered strategically with her hand.

A part of her had always despised that scar, self-inflicted and necessary to save those she loved, but she had never shown it others like this. Why did she want to show him this? Was it because of the trust, or was it something else that stirred within her?

Without another moment’s hesitation, she slowly began to lift her arm, eyes fluttering to look downward. The sight of the scar came into view; she looked up to see Deidara’s gaze fallen downward, taken back by the sight that stood before him.

‘Why…’ he began, his eye-line returning to hers, hands clenching into fists.

Sena offered him a warm smile as she took a bold few steps, so their bodies were only inches apart. She lifted her hand to trace along the scar that ran down her abdomen.

‘This is what the Goryō seal does. It destroys the people, leaving chaos and carnage in its wake.’ Her words were soft but carried significant pain for she knew the internal injuries of the seal were
far worse than the physical.

That was all it took for her to reach out for his hand, and place it on her scarred abdomen. He blinked a couple of times, hesitating and pulling it away from her skin. The kunoichi reached for it again, guiding it down to scar, letting it go as the fingers grazed the scar tissue, softly, uncertain. The blond’s eyes looked at her questionably before she nodded and let him trace the jagged line across.

Deidara’s expression was full of curiosity as he squinted, feeling the bumps. Then she felt something cold and moist against her skin causing her to yelp. Then he retracted his hand, looking at her, an uncertain smile appearing.

The blond turned his hands over revealing, mouths with tongues sliding in and out. Sena looked at them in wonder, her eyes wide, a smile spread across her face.

‘They’re mouths?’ She asked, astonished and Deidara nodded. ‘Fascinating,’ she added, holding his hand in hers so she could inspect them, in awe.

The kunoichi felt him relax and saw his smile widen like he had been uncertain what her reaction would be. Sena returned his smile, letting herself sink into the water, her head falling back floating off the surface.

‘Why did you show this to me, hm?’ Deidara asked. The kunoichi looked up at him, shrugging her shoulders.

‘You wanted me to trust you right?’ She saw him nod. ‘Well, this is me trusting you.’

The blond seemed to accept this for an answer as they both fell back into silence, their bodies floating together peacefully as they looked up at the sky. It was the most serene feeling the kunoichi had felt in months.

‘So what now, hm?’ Deidara asked.

‘We work together,’ Sena replied. ‘On one condition.’

‘I’m all ears.’

‘We do this my way.’

‘That’s a pretty vague condition, hm.’

‘We don’t have to work together.’

‘Alright, alright. I accept your condition.’

Sena sat up and face the blond, who was still looking upward. Millions of questions flooded her mind.

What kind of shinobi was he anyway? Could she truly trust him? What exactly were they after this? Was this a step forward in the right direction? What were his feelings towards her?

Deciding to break both their thought patterns she took a risk. Letting her hands fall beneath the surface, at once she lifted them up splashing the blond next her. He choked and gasped then glared at her before splashing her back, with a larger wave.
‘You have no idea what you’ve just started, Sena, hm.’ He called as she tried to swim away.

Deidara swam after her, stopping to splash each time she came close. Sena attempted to splash as she swam, certain she looked like an uncoordinated seal or something of similar ridiculousness. Still, she giggled, and through moments of choking on water and gasping for breath, she managed to have some fun.

They swam around like that for a long time, before they finally called a cease-fire. Both giggling like children they ended up wading side by side, intense stare like they could read each other’s minds. It was a connection she had only ever felt with Neji, her heart uneasy at the thought of her friend. She considered the fact that perhaps she needed to leave him behind, she couldn’t carry him around in her mind while she still had this mission.

Sena retreated from the river to the bank where her clothes lay. Deidara followed her, and they both began to dress, Sena watching the afternoon sky splatter hues of orange across the horizon. She turned to the blond to tell him to look when her eye caught something she wished it hadn’t.

It was a cloak on the ground, at the bottom of Deidara’s clothes carrying the cloud symbols of the criminal organisation she knew too well. Her eyes widened at the sight and body stepped back in fear.

‘You…You’re one of them,’ She said to him, catching his eye, her mouth agape. His eyes widened when he realised what she was talking about, what she had seen.

‘No wait you don’t understand, hm.’ He took a step towards her arms wide, ‘Let me explain.’

For every step he took forward, she took one step back, in fear he would try something — that he would hurt her. She pulled out a kunai from her pouch for good measure.

‘Stay away from me,’ she whispered, shocked expression turning to a frown. ‘You lied to me.’

‘It’s not as bad as you think—’ Sena cut him off.

‘—Do not try and justify your criminality to me.’

Deidara’s arms dropped his expression faded, leaving a look of betrayal sprawled on his face. Sena took a step back, making sure she kept her front facing him. He didn’t take any more steps toward her.

‘Sena I…’ His head dropped, half of him turning away, so his face remained hidden.

‘Don’t come near me. I will never trust you again.’ Sena’s words were full of venom, but she did not care, he had betrayed her trust.

The kunoichi turned away from him, sure he was not going to move, then ran back through the forest, to where she was staying. In a hurry she rushed into her room made sure all the entrances were trapped or sealed so no unwanted guests could disturb her.

Then Sena fell onto her bed, overwhelmed by the feelings and adrenaline coursing through her. It took her awhile to notice the note stuck to her headboard. Pulling the one from the surface, she opened it up to find an old acquaintance had requested a meeting that night. Someone whom she could not refuse.
Sena walked through the small village, finding her way down the main road. It was a warm evening yet she wore a black hooded cloak thrown over her shoulders. In a town known for attracting all kinds of suspicious individuals, she barely stood out even as she walked through the main district. It was still quite busy along the strip but nothing compared to the times she had been there during the day.

The Kunoichi stopped in front of the “Momo”, a low-key bar, that shadowed as an unofficial inn of sorts. A place suited for perverts, drunks and shady individuals in the like but also a place where one could expect discretion. The second stood outside the door confirmed this as she listened to the soft murmur of voices from within. Enough people to blend but not enough people to overhear any sensitive information divulged. Perfect.

Before stepping inside she closed her eyes and focused, observing the chakra signatures around her, remembering the note had said to be sure to come alone. Satisfied no one had followed her, mainly a certain blond, she entered the establishment. There was a stench of stale tobacco in the air, and the gloomy lighting matched the poor atmosphere. Scanning the room she spotted an older man seated between two whispering women in the corner and a lanky boy who looked no older than herself, perched by the bar. It seemed the person she was to meet had not yet arrived.

The bar tender propped his head above the counter top and sized her up with a glance. Sena stiffly nodded in his direction then found a seat in the opposite corner to the gentleman and his lady friends. She made sure to keep her hood on to avoid anyones gaze.

The bar tender coughed into his dirty sleeve then approached her table, old rag in hand. After giving the top a half-hearted wipe down he turned and asked if she wanted anything. She nodded in acceptance, allowing him to get a glimpse of her face as a gesture of good will.

‘A bottle of sake and also water, please.’

The man’s brows raised as he scratched the back of his neck awkwardly.

‘Hm. You don’t look old enough to be ordering a drink like that.’

Sena exhaled then eyed the man, wanting to avoid further questioning.

‘You don’t look like the type to worry about such things. Especially in an, how should I put this?
An establishment such as this.’ Her tone was calm but she managed to get the point across. ‘Besides the water is for me.’ She added.

The bar tender merely sighed, muttering a ‘fine’ before walking back to retrieve her order.

Left alone waiting for the person to arrive she allowed herself to think back to what had happened with Deidara. She couldn’t believe what she had gotten herself into. Perhaps he had already left the village now in fear of exposure. No, she knew he was too confident to fear something like that. Could she really become involved with him, knowing he was involved with the Akatsuki?

At this point gathering any information concerning her father was like trying to catch smoke with her bare hands. And the Akatsuki could have informants with the details the kunoichi craved. She needed to find her father and help him. Then she could finally return home. The bar tender interrupted her train of thought as he placed the bottle of sake and glass of water in front of her. Closing her eyes and taking a deep breath she cleared her mind of her father.

Instead she thought of Deidara and their last encounter. The way he had reacted was not something she was prepared for. She had expected a smirk, a sarcastic remark like ‘but fooling you was so much fun, hm.’ Instead she saw the pain in his eyes, the shock when she said would never forgive or speak with him again. Would it be worth seeing him again, even if it was just for information?

As Sena waited, the lanky boy at the bar who, got up and approached the table. He carried himself with that confident walk people get when they are drunk but pretending to be sober, unaware that their subtle sway gave them away. Once he reached the table he propped his hand upon the surface for support and leaned down slightly.

‘Not again,’ Sena muttered to herself. Just what she needed on a day like this, a drunk boy who thinks he owns the place. He stood there swaying a bit, eyes not quite focusing as he tried to find her face.

‘Hey there s-sweetheart. Y-you going to…to drink that all b-by yourself?’ The slur in his speech made her cringe but it was nothing to the foul odour of his breath. She could smell it half a metre away. Arms folded and brows raised she found herself in another uncomfortable situation. Just when the kunoichi was about to speak she was interrupted by a familiar voice.

‘I don’t think the little lady needs your company, now someone like myself is here. So why don’t you move along there pal.’

Sena looked up to see Jiraiya standing there tall, arms folded, behind the boy who had started backing away. She smirked, thankful that his timing, meant she didn’t have to make a scene and in turn, risk destroying the low-key nature of the meeting.

When the boy skulked back the bar with a sorry expression on his face, Jiraiya took a seat across from Sena, steady smile on his face. She returned it before gesturing to the bottle of sake in front of her.

‘Little girl like you shouldn’t be drinking a drink like this,’ he said pouring himself a cup while the kunoichi just shrugged. ‘I don’t drink really.’ Sena held up her glass of water and took sip as if to prove her point. ‘Besides, as I am sure you know, there are other situations I am more concerned with, Master Jiraiya.’ She watched as his expression turned serious. He took another sip of sake before letting out a lengthy sigh.
‘Yes I am aware of the new friend you made. It is as dangerous as it is fortunate.’

Sena frowned questioning why it would be fortunate. Then she realised he had probably been thinking of the same opportunity she had. The opportunity for information regarding not only her father but the safety of The Land of Fire.

‘As you may or may not be aware,’ he began, ‘I have been training Naruto outside of The Leaf, taking him on my travels as I do my research.’

Sena nodded. ‘Yes I am aware of this, and your so called research.’

‘Ah yes my books are known far and wide, along with my good looks of course.’ He gave a large smile, showing off his white teeth like she was supposed to be impressed. She raised her brows wondering how someone like him could be one of the legendary Sannin.

‘But,’ his expression turned serious. ‘What you don’t know is the main reason I am travelling with him in the first place. So listen up because what I am about to tell you is classified information, knowing it is dangerous and should not be repeated under any circumstances. Understood?’

Jiraiya waited for Sena to nod before he continued.

‘I’ve been tracking down our friends, the Akatsuki for quite some time now. Trying to workout what their plans are, gathering everything I can about them while remaining hidden. This is how I knew about your little rendezvous with the blond one. I also know the mission you are on and it was as easy as putting two and two together for me to realise what you were doing with him. You were seeking information.’

Sena’s eyes narrowed, wondering whether he was telling her this to convince her to stay away from them and find another way to track her father or because he was preparing her for something worse. The latter of the two made her stomach churn.

‘I’ll tell you kid, I knew you had a fire within you but I didn’t think you were capable of this at your age. Finding an Akatsuki member is one thing but consorting with them undiscovered is something I have to commend.’ He raised the sake bottle to the Kunoichi before pouring another cup for himself.

‘Depends on what you mean by consorting.’ Sena felt uncertain she was worthy of this praise. ‘All I’ve done is meet him a few times to talk. Even then all I’ve discovered is small indications of my targets whereabouts. It feels like I am grasping at straws.’

The Sannin gave her a smile, that warmed in the yellow candlelight.

‘Don’t beat yourself up about it. As I said before, they’re dangerous people Sena. They’re after people like Naruto and they will do anything and everything to get their hands on him. They would kill you for knowing him, after getting any information they can. That is why if you agree to do what I propose then I’ll be able to help you avoid that.’

‘What is it exactly you are asking me to do Master Jiraiya?’
The Decision

Chapter Summary

Sena is given an opportunity that’s guaranteed to change her life. Will she accept?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

‘What is it exactly you are asking me to do Master Jiraiya?’

He leaned back in his seat, taking a sip of sake, eyes closed in thought. After some contemplation the sannin opened his eyes again, pushing his cup to the side, a serious look on his face.

‘It’s not just what I am asking you to do but the Hokage asking herself. It’s a mission of great delicacy and importance. It could mean the fate of our village.’

Sena’s eyes widened. Could it truly mean the safety and survival of her home?

‘How could I be the fate of something this important? Why me?’

‘Circumstances for one. Your strong will and abilities for another. Either way you look at it, you’re the only one who could do it. No one else has been able to get close to them, let alone infiltrate them. It’s just up to you whether or not you can do it.’

Sena looked down at her shaking hands and took a deep breath. Could it be that she was truly the only one who could do this? She had vowed to protect her village, her home and her family no matter the cost. She had also promised to find her father and avenge her clan, restoring their reputation. Doing this could lead to her succeeding in both. Even if it meant she must sacrifice herself and her freedom. She balled her fists in determination and looked back up to face Jiraiya.

‘What is it I have to do?’

The Sannin’s expression lightened at this.

‘Firstly you would have to take on the mission officially. After that you will have to call on your contact again, the blond. You gain his trust, by any means necessary, convince him to help you complete your first mission and find your target. While you’re doing this you will find out what you can about what they’re planning. Anything they tell you can be vital, it’s up to you to gather what you can and decipher it. Now according to my intel, they still have about a year before they make their move and less time before I return with Naruto to the village, consider that your timeframe. If you can get out earlier then do it, if not then it’s your call.’

Jiraiya grabbed the cup he had tossed to the side and before poured his third cup. Sena felt that as though she was the one who needed a drink after hearing her mission briefing. They really wanted her, no needed her to do this.

Jiraiya was worried, this was made obvious by the way he watched her closely and the way he drank — quick and needy rather than leisurely.
‘I have to be honest with you Sena. We cannot guarantee your safety on this mission. As that is true with every mission this one is different as it’s dangers are greater and more unpredictable. We can’t risk sending backup if you’re in trouble while with them. We can’t communicate with you or you us. Once you go in, you will be on you’re own until you can get out. If you get out…oh there is one more thing I have to give you before you make your decision.’

His hand disappeared into the pouch on his side and emerged holding a scroll. He leaned over and handed it to the kunoichi. She hesitated, feeling as though taking this would make her decision final. However she pushed aside these emotions and took the scroll, knowing in her heart she was always going to agree.

Opening it she recognised it was from the Hokage, Lady Tsunade herself.

‘Sena Matsura,

As the Fifth Hokage I enclose to you this classified information:

Your previous mission is still considered active. Your new mission, which is to be taken alongside your previous, is to infiltrate the S-Class Criminal group known as the Akatsuki and gather information. You are to do this by any means necessary.

As a Jōnin with considerable talent and skill, I have faith that you will be more than capable of handling yourself in this task. However I do also acknowledge that it is an S-Rank mission of the highest difficulty. Moreover I am leaving the decision whether or not to take this mission to you.

I will have Jiraiya give you the specifics of the mission. You are to inform him of you decision.’

Once finished reading she immediately ignited the scroll with the candle in the centre of the table, making sure no evidence of what was written was left behind. She didn’t need to think about her answer anymore. She was done thinking.

Jiraiya eyed her carefully as if trying to coax her decision with a mere look.

‘I’ll do it.’ Sena took a deep breath. ‘I officially accept the mission.’

‘Very well. There is one last thing. You may need information to keep you alive and earn their trust. So if the need arises you will tell them this: Naruto will be with me in these locations on this day.’ Jiraiya slid her a piece of paper with the information and she gave him a questioning look.

‘Don’t worry I’m not actually going to have Naruto be there, but I’ll take care of it so they know your information is legitimate.’

‘I see, thank you.’ Sena let out a sigh, blowing her raven bangs out of her eye in the process. ‘Do you really think it’s possible to get them to trust me?’
‘From what I know and what I saw, I say one already does.’

‘I’m not so sure. But I guess I am going to have to find out.’

‘Yes and I am afraid this is where I must leave you. I have to get back to my in depth research.’ Jiraiya leaned back eyeing the door that lead to the more, discreet part of the building. She assumed it was where the unofficial inn was and shook her head. Naruto was right, he really was a pervert.

‘I hope to see you again kid,’ the Sannin said getting up. ‘Remember, it is all in your hands now. Be smart and be careful.’

After saying their goodbyes, Sena gave a curt nod to the bar tender before standing, ready to escape the shady place. She had been there far too long and the stench of tobacco mixed with sake made her feel ill. Opening the door was a blessing, as she breathed in the fresh untainted air and felt a cool breeze brush her face.

*This was it, the last moments of freedom.*

As the kunoichi walked back along the main road, a gust of wind came, blowing her hood off, causing her hair to wave behind her. She closed her eyes and spread her arms, taking in the moment. A sigh escaped her lips. One of relief and worry. A sigh that fluttered against the wind like a butterfly dancing through the air. This kind of wind reminded her of her mother. It felt like she was there with her.

When the wind died down and the moment faded, Sena continued to walk along the road again. It felt like she was walking into the unknown and as she passed the few people left on the street she observed them. There were couples, families and friends. And as she watched them, for the first time in a long time she wondered what life would be like if she was a normal civilian. To be free from guilt and responsibilities. The thought dissolved quickly as she realised that she would lose everything she had come to love being a kunoichi. This was the fate she chose and she would never let herself regret it.

When Sena arrived back at the inn she was staying, she began to feel the weight of the day. Everything that happened had left her feeling exhausted and in much need of sleep. As she fumbled the door open she found a note had been shoved under it and into her room. Curious as to who it was from, she quickly shut the door and picked it up to read. Her eyes widened as she realised who it was from. Deidara.

*Sena,*

*Meet me tomorrow at noon.*

*I want to help you, trust me.*

After the reading the note she let herself drop onto the bed, not bothering to get under the covers. Leaning her head back into the groove of the pillow, she couldn’t help but smile at her luck. He
wanted to see her, help her even. This was exactly the break she needed to begin her mission. Her smile soon faded once she realised it meant she would have to see Deidara again. She still wasn’t sure how to feel about him. He lied to her but he seemed hurt when she found out and reacted badly. Why did it concern her so much? Why did it concern him?

The kunoichi rolled over and groaned. What was this mission going to do to her?

Chapter End Notes

Wow okay lots of chapters today, lots of things happening. Feel free to leave a comment, Thank you for reading :)}
Sena begins the first stages of her mission.

Sena woke to the sound of hurried knocking on her door. The kunoichi groaned, pulling herself out of the half-slumber which she lied and throwing a dressing gown over her partially naked body. The knocking ceased and was replaced by her footsteps echoing throughout the room while a groan left her dry lips.

Sena swung the door open, prepared to yell at the perpetrator until she realised who was standing before her.

‘Kakashi.’ She breathed. Before she could finish her sentence, the silver-haired shinobi pushed passed her into the room.

Sena shut the door and turned around, ready to inquire as to what exactly he was doing there incredibly early. It would have to be a matter of urgency for him to show up like that at her door. As she observed him she noticed he seemed on edge as he took a seat on the side of her bed.

‘I know,’ Kakashi said in a low voice. ‘I know about your mission, the infiltration into the Akatsuki.’

‘Oh, heard about that huh?’ Sena replied, scratching the back of her neck.

‘Yes and I don’t think you should take that much of a risk just so that you can…’

‘Just so that I can find my father?’ Sena finished for him followed by a huff and the crossing her arms.

‘That’s not what I meant. I just don’t think it’s worth risking your life in such a manner.’

‘It’s too late Kakashi, I’ve made my decision.’

Kakashi let out a heavy sigh. ‘You’re so young, Sena. You have so much potential, why waste it?’

‘I’m not a child. I’m a kunoichi of the Hidden Leaf. It is my duty to protect my home and the people I love.’ Sena paused feeling the irritation spread, prickling her from within. 'If it means infiltrating a criminal organisation then so be it. If it means dying then that is a sacrifice I am willing to make. Isn't that why we became shinobi?’

Kakashi didn’t reply. He just looked at her, through half-lidded eyes which reflected a deep sorrow that even his mask couldn't hide. It had become easy for Sena to discern his emotions through his eyes after partnering with him for a long of time.

‘Tell me Kakashi, would you not do the same in my place? Would you not decide to find information that may determine the fate of your home?’ Sena asked.

Kakashi looked down for a moment to consider this then just as quickly his eyes looked up at her
again, his answer reflected in them. They seemed to say of course he would, he would take any and every opportunity to protect his village. They were shinobi and this is what they were expected to do.

‘Did you find anything, in your search?’ Sena asked in an attempt to diffuse the tension.

‘No,’ Kakashi replied. ‘I did not find anything we didn't already know.’

‘Damnit. What does this mean for you?’

‘I have to return to the village, likely to be given a new mission. They have entrusted this to you now.’

Sena hummed in reply.

‘You’re truly on your own.’

‘I know.’

Sena had known that fact for a long time. Solitude had crept up on her over the years, weavng it's way into the empty corners of her mind. The truth was she had felt alone in finding her father since the beginning but it have grown more so since Hitomi Sensei had passed.

Sena had also found that people like her and Kakashi, who were quite lonely, still had each other to keep them grounded. They alone held the secret satisfaction of being different while harbouring the unique agony that left them wanting something different. People like them took comfort in each other because it was easier to face the world that way. It wasn’t a romantic kind of connection but rather the unspoken platonic one that saw them through the day. A bond formed between shinobi comrades.

The understanding between them was the reason why that Kakashi was concerned, Sena knew that. They were going their separate ways, leaving her on her own which must leave him with guilt as her superior. It was a big burden for someone-to feel like if you leave a person, their world was going to wither away, like a flower in the blistering heat. The blistering heat of life.

It was a burden knowing what would happen if Sena were to die before she could be of use to her village but it that was a burden she would bear. Instead of dwelling on that thought she realised there was something she could do in the meantime to make sure that, if she left this world, it would be left better than how she entered it.

‘Can I ask you to do something for me, when you return to the village?’ Sena asked as she walked over to the bedside drawer and began retrieving writing utensils from it.

‘Of course.’ Kakashi replied, watching her.

Sena grabbed the paper and began writing, taking a couple of minutes to make sure she had included everything. Then letting the ink dry she retrieved an item from the surface of the table and wrapped it up inside some paper, tying it with string almost like a present. After tying the note to the package, she turned and handed it to Kakashi.

‘I need you to make sure Neji gets this.’

Kakashi nodded before taking the package from her and slipping it into his pouch. He stood up and walked toward the door, hands in his pockets with his usual calm demeanour. Sena watched him stop at the door, head turning slightly in her direction.
‘I saw what you put in there. Are you sure you want me to take this?’ Kakashi asked.

‘Just make sure he gets it,’ Sena replied. ‘I can’t take it where I’m going.’

That was all it took for Kakashi to leave through the door, letting it squeak close behind him.

Sena was alone now. Alone was how it was going to be from now on. There would be no help, no contact, just her and the mission. Then there was Deidara she would be with him too but that didn’t exactly make her feel safe.

Could she pretend to trust him? Would she be pretending? How would she be able to discern between the act and reality?

The kunoichi let out a weary sigh. It was nearing noon and she was due to meet Deidara soon which meant the mission would finally begin. A part of her hoped she would find something about her father and have to leave the Akatsuki quickly. Another part of her small but undeniably there, hoped she would be able to spend more time with Deidara and figure out the kind of person who would join such an organisation.

Why was she feeling this way? It was a strange curiosity.

Without giving it another thought, she gathered her belongings and packed them into her bag. Then slinging her bag onto her back, Sena prepared herself for the journey ahead. Knowing where he wanted to meet, she could not help but still think of it as her paradise. A paradise now twisted, cast out and lost.

As Sena walked the familiar path through the forest, a string of nerves bubbled through her. Perhaps it was a trap and she was walking straight into it. Then again Deidara had seemed disheartened when she discovered his secret, as though there was something more than an Akatsuki ploy. That didn't mean it was real though. For all she knew he was trying the same tactic she was to get information from her.

It seemed Deidara had taken an interest in her, even in the short period of time they had known each other. How could an S-Class criminal care for someone like her given what he was capable of and what he had done? Her mind began to wonder how he had become that way in the first place, considering how quick he was to help her. That showed some kind of compassion, surely? Could she exploit that somehow?

The contradicting thoughts only confused Sena further, causing the nervous stirrings within her to increase. She let out a shaky breath, putting on a calm expression as she approached the river. It was time to act like the kunoichi she was with added charm.

Deidara was the first thing to catch her eye as she met the river. He was sitting back and leaning on his hands by the river bank, his feet in the water and wearing his Akatsuki cloak openly. She frowned at the sight, uncertain of what to say, deciding between announcing herself or waiting for him to notice her. Before she could decide he had spotted her, jumping to his feet immediately.

Sena sized him up with a glance, doing her best to keep her expression neutral, as not to betray the tremor running through her body. His reaction was timid, seeming not wanting to scare her off with sudden movements like she was a stray animal.

‘You’re here.’ Deidara observed, breaking the uneasy silence.

‘I have no other leads,’ Sena said a little too quickly, blush spreading across her cheeks. ‘I need to find my father.’
‘Does this mean you will come with me, hm?’ Deidara asked, taking a step toward her, cautiously.

Sena retreated a step, still uncertain of his intentions.

‘How do I know I can trust you?’

Deidara sighed, reaching into his pouch and pulling out something small and white. The next thing she knew it expanded, turning into a large, white bird. He stepped onto the figure before turning to offer her a hand.

‘Come with me, I promised I would help you and I don’t break my word.’ He said, softly, in a way that made her want to trust him.

This was it, the opportunity Sena was looking for. She would need to be careful though, not wanting to seem to trust him so easily. Her reaction would have to be believable and not cast suspicion her way.

Reluctantly, Sena reached out and took his hand, a smile appearing on his face as she did. She felt the tongue of his hand-mouth graze her palm, causing her to jump.

‘You have today,’ she began firmly. ‘You have to explain everything to me. And then I’ll decide whether I trust you.’

‘Okay, hold on, hm.’ Deidara said.

Sena was about the ask ‘Hold onto what?’ when the giant bird they were standing on ascended into the sky, causing her to stumble. She felt two hands grab hold of her, either side of her waist as she fell back. Her breath hitched as her back hit Deidara’s chest causing him to chuckled in her ear, sending chills down her spine.

‘I told you to hold on.’ He whispered in her ear.

Sena turned her head slightly so she could see his face. Deidara was looking at her and their faces almost grazed against each other. His hands were still glued to her sides, like they belonged there. Sena was surprised how easy it was to ease into his touch, the way his fingers moulded into the curves of her body. At that moment she could not help but feel drawn to him and no matter how much she tried to loathe him in that moment she couldn’t.

Deidara was her enemy but Sena couldn’t deny the situation was far from being black and white.
Neji receives a message from Sena.

Three days had passed since Sena had left on her mission when Neji returned to the village from his with the rest of his squad. It was a bleak day, clouds overhanging, a storm predicted. The people packed themselves together like canned sardines along the sides of the street, hoping to complete their errands before the rain came. The buildings stood overhead, as he walked through the crowd, close, almost claustrophobic.

Neji loathed crowds, particularly ones that moved slowly and had no consideration for personal space. It was a relief to the Hyūga when they left the people behind them on approaching the Hokage’s office. Once inside they gave their mission debrief, which went quickly considering there were no mishaps or events to report. Lady Tsunade granted time off until another mission was available for them, then they were free to leave.

Upon exiting the Hokage’s office, Neji ran into Kakashi, who seemed to be on his way in. To the Hyūga's surprise, the Copy Ninja stopped in front of him.

‘Kakashi Sensei? What are you doing back here, is the mission complete?’ Neji asked, a string of hope pulling through him in the hopes his friend had returned also.

‘My part is over, the mission, however, is still ongoing,’ Kakashi replied.

As quickly as it had risen, Neji’s hope diminished, scolding himself for jumping to such conclusions. Of course, it would not be over so suddenly; it had stretched out over three years, it may even take three more. He shook his head at the thought not wanting to believe it would be three more years for Sena to come home finally.

Kakashi watched him carefully, as though he could see the thoughts unfolding inside Neji’s mind.

‘I was hoping to run into you actually. I have something for you,’ Kakashi said, retrieving a small package from his pocket.

‘For me, why?’ Neji asked, his brows raised, confused as to what exactly Kakashi could have for him, considering they barely were acquaintances. The Copy Ninja chuckled before offering the parcel to him.

‘Don’t worry it isn’t from me. I’m just the messenger in this situation’ Kakashi said. ‘Sena asked me to give this to you.’

‘Is she okay?’ Neji asked taking the package without any further hesitation. Kakashi took a moment to consider his question, alarming Neji.

‘Sena will be able to handle herself,’ He finally answered. ‘I’m sorry I am due to report in, I have to go.’

Kakashi’s vague answer and subtle escape caused waves of worry to flow through Neji. He looked
down at the package in his hands, wondering what she could have given him. Instead of opening it there and then he decided to wait, somewhere he could do it in private.

The journey home harboured by the curiosity burning through Neji caused him to cut half the normal travel time to get home. He practically ran, leaping across the rooftops, not stopping once, not even to check where his footing was. When he did finally arrive, he slammed the door behind him, kicked off his shoes and stared at the gift before him.

Sena had sent him this, making sure he got it through Kakashi no less. It must be important, but it also must mean something more. Could it be that Neji was special to the kunoichi, as she was to him?

Without waiting any longer, the Hyūga unfolded the letter and began to read, his heart pumping faster with every second passed.

‘Dear Neji,

Your friendship and many kindnesses I shall always carry with me. Such a bond has not been part of my life, so I thank you for your patience and understanding. In my most trying moments, every time I thought I should give up, you were there. And such comfort you brought me, such security. But I fear this time I must go into the darkness alone, this we both knew would happen eventually. Perhaps it is our destiny to walk alone.

While I cannot divulge the nature of my newly appointed mission, I must ask something of you, once again. Enclosed in this package is something very precious to me. I have faith you will look after it in my absence. It will give me something to come back for — someone to come back to.

Written with love, Sena.

PS- I am not sure what fate awaits me during this mission. If anything should happen to me, please know that I shall take solace in the fact that for a time, though brief, I knew what it was to be happy and you were at the centre of that. So I thank you and can only hope you will do the same, should the need arise.’

Neji was clutching the note closely, rereading each word, assessing every line.

Should anything happen to me.

Those were the words Neji's eyes kept coming back to, at first. Did that mean Sena's mission could prove fatal? Could it be that he may never see her again?

He pictured her standing before him, raven hair flowing in the wind, hand poised on the hips while she teased him insistingly. Would that truly be a moment of the past rather than something in the future?

No, Neji would never let that happen, he refused to lose her. Kakashi was right, Sena could take care of herself and then she would come back — come back to him.

Someone to come back to.

These words, this letter, meant that Sena wanted to come back to him. The question that raced around in his mind was: come back to him as what? What was he to her and her to him?

Neji placed the letter down on the bed beside him and retrieved the package. Taking a deep breath, he felt the edges of the paper with his fingertips, crinkling under his touch, curious yet afraid of the
contents. Much like how he felt about her.

Finally, he opened the package, tearing the contents free of its bindings, quickly, wanting, needing. He felt something cool, a type of metal, in the palm of his hand attached to soft, black cloth. The scent of lilacs overpowered his senses, and on instinct his eyes closed, lingering, for a moment in the memory of Sena.

What Neji would do at that moment to be with her, to talk to her, to hold her…his eyes snapped open. His attention returned to the item in his hands, he turned it over, observing it. It took him a second before he realised what it was, his fingers tracing the leaf symbol he had come to know so well.

It was her forehead protector, her Hitai-ate, and she had entrusted it to him.

Neji let himself fall back against his bed, her headband gripped tightly in his hand, resting on his chest. His heart was racing, the thump thump thump that came with every memory of her, beating against the metal he held against it, realising, consciously how he felt about her.

Just this once, he let himself think of her, untainted, without an internal battle. He pictured her face noting how she had these wild eyes, slightly insane but the particular kind of blue he began favouring after drowning in so many times. There was also this overload of compassion that she fearlessly carried, which obviously cost her something during this mission.

The Hyūga was beginning to learn—the hard way—that when someone is in your heart, they’re never truly gone. He hoped that also meant that they could find a way back to you, no matter what. Until Sena did come back to him, he was comforted knowing he had a small part of her, which he would carry with him, always.

And for now, that was enough.
Chapter Summary

We get an insight into what Deidara's thinking and feeling. Will Sena be able to trust him and perform her mission?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sena. Se-na. The name that found his lips with every opportunity, holding any excuse to speak those two syllables aloud, the precise rhythm of pronunciation that left his tongue tasting sweeter than it ever had before.

The first time Deidara saw her everything stopped. She stood there, angelic, illuminating light as the sun rays poured over her body, her raven hair streaming down toward her waist and across her breast. The eyes were deep, like the sea, holding the type of blue that artists could spend lifetimes trying to capture, always missing the twinkle here, the hue changes there which appeared almost wild. Her body turned toward him, framing her like a lover; poised, dark, fearless... And beautiful. He was drawn to her, even as she yelled and accused she was beckoning him, unbeknownst to her.

The second time when their eyes met Deidara felt the need to know her. A want, like hunger, began to build inside him to make her his. But she wasn’t ready for this yet, not ready for him. In time whether it be within the next day or month, whenever it was, he had no doubt that it would work. Then he realised why he was drawn to her; she had the same darkness inside.

Then there was the third time, the moment he came from the depths of the water, breaking the river surface to see her figure standing there. With but a passing glance, as she began to undress, showing herself willingly, he began to crave that side of her, the one she didn’t show to anyone else. This time when their eyes met, they met with fondness, understanding and even a tenderness — one Deidara had not realised he had.

Suddenly for him, she was the beginning and the end of everything. Sena was different from everything he had ever known. He had to know her, even if it was just on a whim, by Kami he had to know her.

Even now as Deidara stood upon his clay bird, with his hands carefully resting on Sena’s waist, like they were home, he could not help but become mesmerised by her. He had never really cared before, for people female of otherwise, no matter how noble their cause was. If it wasn’t his art—an explosion—then he didn't care. But Sena, she was different, monumental even. She had awakened something inside of him he hadn’t even known was there. He couldn’t help but think she had been an explosion into his life like his own personal art for the taking. He smirked at the thought.

‘We are going to set down here.’ Deidara whispered into her ear, feeling Sena flinch when he did, causing his smile to grow.

‘Get on with it then.’ Sena replied, tone fearless but Deidara felt the way she sunk back against his chest, as though she were bracing for impact.
The clay bird began to descend from the sky landing with a thud on the border of a forest with no villages in sight. Deidara released his hold on Sena reluctantly, before jumping down and offering her his hand. The kunoichi hesitated, looking down at him with a cast of judgement he was determined to take from her and make her trust him, stay with him.

Then Sena took his hand, allowing him to assist her. After retrieving the clay bird, Deidara walked and gestured for her to follow. It wasn’t long before they came to a small clearing on the edge of the forest still with no buildings in sight. They were alone.

‘So, why are we stopping?’ Sena asked, impatiently.

‘Close your eyes, hm?’ Deidara asked.

‘For what?’ Sena scoffed. ‘Are you going to leave me here, is that it?’

‘No, how many times do I have to tell you to trust me!?’

‘It wouldn’t have to be so many times if you weren’t some criminal.’

Sena’s hand found her popped hip as though to emphasise her disdain and Deidara knew then there was no use arguing with her. Instead he shot her an unimpressed look. She was testing is patience and testing his will. Still, he believed she was worth it.

‘Just do it, please.’

Sena let out an exasperated sigh, dramatically so, but then complied and shut her eyes. Deidara satisfied he had gotten her to listen, performed the necessary hand signs to release the barrier seal. When he did a small house, wooden, old and in need of repairs appeared before them. Satisfied with his work Deidara turned back to Sena.

‘You can open your eyes now.’

‘What was the point—’ Sena stopped as her eyes caught sight, ‘is that a house?’

‘Wow, nothing gets by your senses,’ Deidara said, words laced with sarcasm. ‘Come on let’s go.’

‘Go where?’ Sena asked.

‘Inside obviously. You wanted to talk so let’s go in and talk, hm.’

Deidara walked toward the house, not giving her time to respond and simply follow him. The truth was he didn’t know what he was going to tell her. He wanted to be honest with her and if he knew she’d stay regardless he might have even considered it. But he couldn’t for he was bound by secrecy. Instead, he would settle for telling her what he could. He just hoped it would be enough to form trust and perhaps convince her to stay.

As they entered, they came into a small room which contained two chairs and a table, almost like a living area. Deidara had been staying here recently while he was doing reconnaissance work in the area. That’s what he had been doing the day he met Sena.

They sat down in the seats, Sena taking an uncertain glance of her surroundings beforehand, and sat in an awkward silence.

‘So, where should we-' Deidara before Sena cut him off.
‘Why did you join the Akatsuki?’

The question had been simple enough, but the reason was complicated. Deidara didn’t exactly feel like explaining how he’d lost a fight to a certain Uchiha and joined to keep his word but he could see the fire in her eyes.

‘For the greater good, a whim, it was the only opportunity at the time. Take your pick,’ Deidara replied, before adding, ‘No beating around the bush with you is there, hm?’

‘No straight answers from you, is there?’ Sena retorted, earning a smirk from Deidara.

She was quick with her comebacks and it ignited something within him, something warm with a burning passion.

Another lull of silence fell, their eyes stuck in an intense gaze, as if they looked away they would lose somehow. Sena’s eyes narrowed at him and his smirk widened. There was an unspoken tension between them in every encounter and they both knew it, felt it. It gave Deidara such a rush he could become addicted to the feeling.

‘Fine, why don’t you tell me things to trust you,’ Sena suggested before adding, ‘And no lies.’ Her eyes full of fire with that fierceness that Deidara couldn’t help but become absorbed in.

‘What can I say to make you trust me? You want me to justify my actions, address the crimes I’ve committed, coming off as some unspoken hero? Well, I can’t because it isn’t true. I have been honest with you as have my actions and that alone should make you trust me.’

‘Your actions are the reason I don’t trust you. You lied to me.’

‘I didn’t lie! I withheld a small piece of information.’

‘Withholding the truth is the same as lying.’

‘No it isn’t. Besides I would have told you.’

‘When?’

‘Eventually!’

‘Eventually? When? After you’d committed more crimes and involved me in them too?’

‘No. Why did you even come here if you are just going to accuse me? Hm?’

Sena stopped to consider this with a furrowed brow and eyes searching, flicking from side to side as if she were asking herself the same thing. Deidara watched her deep in thought, curious himself as to why she had come. A part of him expected her not to show up but the other part, the part that held onto hope knowing that she would. It was as though she were drawn to him as he was to her. At least, he dared to hope that was the case.

‘I came for two reasons,’ Sena began. ‘Firstly, because I felt I owed it to you since you helped when you didn’t have to. I hate to admit it but it’s thanks to you I have information on my father.’

‘I don’t think that’s true. Give yourself some credit, hm.’ Deidara said.

Sena shot him a stern look. ‘Do you want me to stop?’

‘No.’
‘Then be quiet before I change my mind. It’s rude to interrupt,’ Sena’s tone softened. ‘The second reason is because I’m desperate for more leads on my father and I may need to go to extremities for help which is where you come in. Were I to trust you of course.’

‘You can trust me, I give you my word.’

‘That’s not much for me to trust on.’

‘It is because I won’t go back on it,’ Deidara assured. ‘If you don’t trust that then trust the fact that we both want the same thing, need to find the same person, so I want you to achieve your goal.’

‘Alright.’

‘Alright?’

‘I’ll work with, trust in that, if you promise me one thing.’

‘We do this your way?’

‘No. Well yes but not just that.’

‘Then what?’

‘You don’t ever lie to me.’

Deidara considered this for a moment, but the realisation that she was going to be staying with him was enough for him to agree.

‘Agreed.’ He said.

‘Agreed.’ Sena repeated.

The pact marked the beginning and end of something but as to what neither of them could be certain. There was no going back now they had agreed to stay together. And with that things were bound to change.

Chapter End Notes

Ohhhh first Deidara POV. Things are finally starting to happen. YAY! Feel free to leave comments on what you want to happen or what you thought. Thanks for reading, stay tuned for the next chapter! x
A Letter

Chapter Summary

Deidara and Sena begin investigating. Together.

Sena stayed with Deidara that night, agreeing to work together and to return to the village the next day. A wave of unease fell over her as she lay there unable to sleep in a strange place with a man who she still did not know much about. Except her mind kept begging her to trust him, let those warm feelings inside her to take control and let her guard down. But she could not, would not let herself give in so easily, even if it were her mission to gain his trust, she’d be damned giving it so easily.

There was a subtle hint of danger in Deidara when they first met that had made him interesting, almost attractive, but then she found out he was a criminal. It was more than just a bad boy visage; it was real atrocities he had committed, Sena needed to remember this. She had to remember the mission and not get caught up in the way he made her feel, though she was still trying to figure that out. What was he doing to her?

Sena barely slept that night and when she awoke in the morning a moment of panic set in as she forgot for a few minutes where she was. The reality of the mission was setting in, and she was feeling the pressure.

Together they returned to the village, stopping at the inn that she had been staying to check if the old man from the store had left her any messages. Once they discovered he hadn’t, they decided the best course of action would be to visit the store again in the hopes of picking up another trail or acquire another lead.

When they reached the store on the outskirts of the village, Sena paused at the entrance, a feeling of danger overcoming her. She held out her arm to stop Deidara who turned to her confused.

‘What is it, hm?’ Deidara asked.

‘Something is wrong,’ Sena said, closing her eyes to feel the chakra flow around her.

The energy in the air was off and somehow familiar. Sena couldn’t sense any chakra signatures around that were still present, meaning no one visible was around. They could be covering their chakra patterns, however, but she suspected they were alone, considering there was a faint tremor of energy in the air; like a faint scent of perfume that lingered even after the person had left the room.

The faint chakra trail was familiar, as if Sena had felt it before, a unique aura surrounding it that she could not quite figure out. Where had she felt it before?

A feeling arose in Sena which she had not felt since…They needed to investigate before her fears got the better of her.

‘Someone was here and could still be around. Keep an eye out,’ Sena whispered, and Deidara nodded, following her lead.
Sena carefully placed her hand on the door handle, slowly pushing it down as quietly and subtly as she could to see if it was unlocked. When the lock clicked accordingly, she turned back at Deidara, her kunai ready and nodded at him. Pushing the door open gently, causing the old frames to squeak slightly, she poked her head in to investigate the room.

The furniture seemed in order, nothing out of place, just the usual chaos of the antiques spread around the space. Satisfied that the opening was clear Sena cautiously allowed the rest of her body to slip into the room, kunai at the ready, the hilt balanced steady between her fingers.

Taking a few steps forward, looking over every corner of the shop, Sena heard Deidara come in behind her, following her path. It was strange how quickly they fell into a team, needing only small gestures for understanding, for him to follow her.

Easing herself more and more into the store, Sena found herself satisfied that they were the only ones there. Keeping her guard up regardless, she approached the desk where the old man had sat on their last encounter. The chair was facing the opposite direction, away from them.

Sena saw the hand immediately. It was the old man's, hanging over the armrest, blood trickling down, dripping into the pool that lay beneath. Inhaling a deep breath, readying herself she walked in front of the chair — the sight before her unsettling.

‘We are too late,’ Sena whispered, guilt filling her.

The old man sat there in his chair, a kunai embedded into his stomach, showing signs of multiple stab wounds focused on the one area. Sena assessed the body further. There was blood dripping from his mouth, not yet dried, meaning the kunai had punctured his organs, and it happened not too long ago. Perhaps if they had gotten their sooner, it could have been prevented.

‘There’s nothing we can do for him,’ Deidara said, standing next to her. ‘We should look around, though, might find something useful, hm.’

‘Hmm,’ Sena replied, eyes still fixed on the body. ‘Yes you’re right, I’ll check his desk here. I saw some shelvings behind there last time we were here; you should check to see if there’s anything on the scroll.’

‘Okay.’

Sena had expected some objection to her authority, but Deidara had listened to her without complaint. Maybe working with him was not going to be as hard as she had initially thought.

The kunoichi, letting her gaze leave the body, began riffling through the old man’s desk. She flipped through papers, skimmed documents and combed through anything that could prove useful. Pouring over his desk, she found letters to clients, receipts, purchase documents but nothing that even suggested ties with her father.

Letting out a frustrated groan, Sena turned away from the desk after giving up on its contents, feeling as if staring at it even for a second longer would drive her insane. She blew her bangs out of her eye, crossed her arms and began to watch Deidara.

The blond held a peculiar expression on his face as he looked through the various scrolls, squinting his sky blue eyes at the older, faded ones, pushing his lips outward to blow the dust off of the untouched ones — Sena found herself stuck in a trance watching him. It was different seeing him this way, unknowingly watched. There was no show of confidence or suggestive air, it was simply Deidara, performing a regular task. She almost forgot that he was a member of the Akatsuki.
Sena blushed when she realised she was staring, evading her eyes, looking downward instead. Scolding herself for being so careless, she shook her head of the thought. Then something caught her eye. She realised that the old man’s hand was clenched, resting in his lap, something poking out from his grip.

Carefully, Sena looked over at it, seeing the white material barely visible. Reluctantly she brought her warm hand to his now cold one and unclenched his fist, allowing the item to escape. As it landed, she realised what it was; a scrunched up piece of paper.

Sena snatched it from where it fell and quickly unravalled the ball to read it. It had two words upon it; two words which both gave her a lead and unnerved her greatly.

‘Did you find something, hm?’ Deidara asked, approaching behind her.

‘The old man, he must have known he was going to die. He left us this note,’ Sena explained, holding it up so he could see.

‘How did you know it was him and not a trap?’

‘I just spent over an hour reading all of the documents in his desk, do you think I would say it was his if I wasn’t certain it was his handwriting?’

‘Alright, alright. I see your point. What did it say?’

‘Two words: Goryō Shrine.’

‘Does that mean something to you because that’s not much to go on, hm?’

‘On the contrary, it’s the only thing we need to go on.’

‘How do you figure that?’

‘It’s telling us where to go. The Goryō Shrine. Which means one of two things.’

‘Which are?’

‘Either my father is going to be there, or there is something else, maybe a clue.’

‘Do you know where it is, hm?’

Sena nodded slowly, of course, she knew where it was, she was a Matsura after all. Their clans greatest secret, which had cost her the lives of her family, kept coming back to haunt her. The shrine was where it all began, all those years ago and now she was going to see it. See such a disturbing place with her own eyes.
Sena and Deidara headed out immediately, deciding the quickest way to get to their destination would be to fly. From the stories she was told as a child, Sena knew roughly where Goryō Shrine lay; in a secluded cave toward that bottom of a mountain near the border of the Land of Fire.

Sena recalled the old stories her grandparents and then her parents would tell her when she was a child. Stories of the past, the clan and their most trusted secret, a secret which she had become. Everything that happened to her; her mother, her brothers, her father, it all came back to the Goryō Shrine and a far off ancestor who started it all. She knew the dangers which they were about to face; they were the things of nightmares.

‘There’s something I need to tell you. Before we arrive,’ Sena said, not turning back to face Deidara who once again had his hands on her waist, for balance, or so she told herself.

‘What is it, hm?’ He asked, a whisper in her ear.

‘It’s about the Goryō Shrine, the seal, what it truly is. But I need to know I can trust you to keep this to yourself. It’s dangerous just knowing about it.’

Deidara was silent, as if considering this, his grip tightening on her waist, unsure whether or not he was consciously doing it. She felt his breath tickle her neck; his face had turned towards her, watching her. Closing her eyes, she felt his lips brush her ear before he whispered again.

‘Tell me; I want to know.’

It sent shivers down her spine, taking her a few moments to compose herself. It was strange how the blond could make her feel so uneasy yet comfortable all at once.

‘My clan,’ Sena began, ‘they are the guardians of the Goryō seal, the one’s who discovered the shrine’s location and the secrets within. It began with my ancestor, Takeo Matsura, the Lord of the clan. It was he who sought out the curse seal in the hopes it would give him the power to save his people. You see at the time, The Land of Fire was at war once again, the people divided, anything could tip the balance, so they grew desperate.'
Following rumours and legends, he set out on a journey looking for the shrine, which he soon discovered. When he entered he investigated every inch of the structure, sifting through the many items that lay within until he came upon an ancient scroll that warned of unharnessed chaos. Ignoring these warnings the Lord opened the scroll, unknowingly releasing the Goryō seal, which sought the closest living thing as a host — the Lord himself.

At first, the seal empowered him, giving him the ability to manipulate the nature types, a surge of chakra took over him, giving him unique capabilities and strengths than he had before. It worked in the lord’s favour, and he was able to do great things for the clan, saving them from extinction and allowing them to prosper. However, this was short-lived. You see, the seal began to have devastating effects, driving him mad with visions and voices, consuming his mind. It was said that whispers of death came to him. He no longer had control over his body, his thoughts or actions, the curse became him, completely, unforgivingly. It’s not a fate I would wish on anyone.

What about the shrine itself? Why do I need to know this before we get there, hm?” Deidara asked.

‘The Goryō Scroll was just one of the things within the shrine; it holds many scrolls, treasures, traps and none are worth risking your life over.’

‘Is this your way of warning me against taking anything?’

‘It’s my way of telling you that if you want to get out alive, yes don’t touch anything.’

‘What do you take me for, some kind of thief?’

‘Gee Fancy that, me thinking a criminal is going to commit a devious act.’

‘Hey shut up, hm.’

‘Whatever. We are almost there.’

They lowered, Deidara’s fingers digging into her sides as his grip tightened, Sena, leaning back into his chest. It was natural now, but it still sent warm feelings fluttering inside of her. Why did she keep feeling this way at his touch, in his presence?

The clay bird set down near where Sena had suspected the entrance to be, a small cave as the stories had described. Jumping off of the bird, ignoring Deidara’s hand she took a few steps closer to the cave, inspecting the outside wall. Eyes squinted, fingertips grazing the outer stone she felt for chakra tremors, markings, anything that would indicate a key.

The kunoichi did this for awhile, the minutes passing by and she could feel Deidara’s gaze burning into the back of her head. She did not need to turn to hear the question he wanted to ask. Strange, she thought, it ought to be here, that is what the Lord’s scrolls had said.

‘What’s the holdup, hm?’ Deidara asked, the impatient tone coming out like a whining child.

‘Have you any patience?’ Sena snapped before going back to running her hands over the stone.

Then the kunoichi found what she was looking for. It was a small symbol, a circle with a lightning bolt down the middle: the symbol of her clan. It must have been where it originated from. Her fingers traced it, fingertips lingering on each line. There was a stain on the rock, still visible, meaning someone had done this recently, before her. She removed her hand, knowing what she had to do.

‘Someone has already been here,’ Sena said.
'How can you tell?' Deidara asked.

'There’s a stain still visible.' Sena pulled out her kunai then pressed the blade into her palm before clenching it into a fist around the blade.

'Stain from what? Hey, what are you do—.'

Before Deidara could finish his sentence, in one swift motion Sena pulled the kunai from her clenched fist, cutting her hand in the process, blood drops sliding down her wrist. She turned to Deidara, his mouth agape, reminding her of the day she had first met him. A smile came to her face as she looked at him, his expression confused and questioning.

'What did you think we were just going to be able to waltz in that easily?' Sena asked. Deidara blinked at her a few times before his mouth snapped shut, then opened again as if he were about to say something. When he didn’t, she shrugged and continued. 'It’s one of the prices you have to pay for entry. Sort of like a test.'

Sena then pushed her bloodied palm against the seal, channelling some of her chakra into the stone. When she retracted her palm, they heard a rumble coming from inside the cave, indicating her efforts had triggered something within. She pulled a bandage from her pouch and placed it around her injured hand.

Deidara came up beside her taking her injured hand and the end of the bandage to finish the job himself. She looked at him, curiously, but not questioning his actions. A frown appeared on his face as his motions continued, before setting the end in place. Her hand lingered in his for a time as he looked up into her eyes, a hint of worry and something else that troubled her, something that resembled affection.

'I’ll be fine,' Sena said, pulling her hand back from his grasp and turning toward the cave. 'Let’s go.'

'Fine, hm,' Deidara said following her lead, once again.

They entered the cave slowly, taking care not to spring any traps, before coming to a stone door open askew. It must have been what the symbol had triggered when Sena activated it. They pushed the rest of it open slowly, peering into a large hallway, lit with torches.

Sena entered first, taking a few cautious steps then beckoned for Deidara to follow her. They walked side by side down the hall, slowly, both turning their heads to take in the vastness of the opening. Then they reached the end of the long hall, two large doors, lined with what looked to be gold in their path.

Deidara took a step forward and pushed the doors open with a large creek from the worn hinges. Sena watched as he entered the room, taking a few steps before stopping in his tracks, head snapping upward.

'Oh wow,' he muttered. 'Sena, come and take a look at this.'

Sena complied, taking two large strides to join him. She saw what had caught his intention immediately; a giant stone dragon, cut into the wall, appearing as though it were leaping out at you. Beneath it was rows of shelving containing scrolls and other artefacts that looked old and of great value.

'Remember—'
‘Don’t take anything, yeah yeah I remember,’ Deidara replied taking a step away from her.

They both looked around in awe and started investigating the shrine. Sena wondered what sort of dangers lay in the room alone questioned whether it was a good idea have brought someone like Deidara here. Either way, they needed to be here, the old man died leaving that clue for them and she would damned if it was in vain.

Closing her eyes the kunoichi channelled her chakra senses to see if there were any patterns around. She felt something, strong, unfriendly, her body tensing up as if to warn her as she walked towards it. At the same time, however, she also felt a presence, something or someone familiar.

‘Deidara I think there’s someone—Ah!’ Pain shot through her head, sharp as a blade, sending her mind spinning.

Sena’s hands clamped around her head, the agony too much to bare as she tried to fight off the feeling. Then the pain stopped, and her eyes blinked furiously, as she took in her surroundings. She wasn’t at the shrine anymore, she was at the doorway to her old home, ready to go inside. Her mission was fading in the back of her mind as this new reality clouded her memory.

The next thing the kunoichi knew she was at the door to her family’s study, the door open a crack so she could see the silhouette of her mother sitting in the chair. She pushed the door open, walking in, cautiously, like a frightened child afraid of authority.

‘Mother?’ She whispered, taking a few steps forward, stopping when she saw it.

Her mother, blade in one hand, scroll in the other, blood trickling down her wrists. Her breathing was faint, almost non-existent as a single tear slid down from her fluttering eyes. Sena froze, like a statue unable to comprehend in her mind the sight she was seeing.

‘Mother?’ She repeated, choking on her words, then again, this time the tears flowing entirely. She walked over to her mother and shook her softly then with more desperation with each second that passed. ‘Mother!’ She finally screamed ‘Mother, wake up please, mother!’

Sena pressed her hands against her mother’s wounds, attempting to channel her chakra into her but it was useless, she hadn’t learnt enough, wasn’t strong enough for that. Instead, she screamed for help, screamed for her mother to come back and didn’t stop until her throat was painfully dry.

Then she felt it. The skin of her lower abdomen was burning, like a brand as she ripped open her shirt. The mark, a small, circle with a lightning bolt down the middle burned onto her skin. Pain so intense she thought she was going to die, she didn’t however. Instead, she collapsed, next to her mother, wishing she had.

‘Sena?’ A voice, faint almost impossible to make out, called to her as she continued sobbing. She felt the carpet rub against her cheek as her head fell, no longer having the strength to keep it up.

‘Sena,’ the voice called this time clearer.

The world around her began to crumble, pulling her from this memory, her worst memory.

‘Sena!’ Someone was shaking her, palms still pressing against her head as if she were still in pain.

‘Hey look at me, Sena?’ She finally recognised the voice; it was Deidara.

Her eyes shot open to find him in front of her, arms around her, shaking her slightly. His eyes were wide, concerned and fearful. What had happened to her?
'Deidara?' She whispered, weakly, unable to compile her thoughts to make a whole sentence, body shaking violently as if she were in a snow storm.

'Are you alright?' He asked, helping her to her feet, an arm slung around her waist. When she didn’t reply his hold on her tightened bringing her closer. As she went to walk she fell back into him, hand clutching his cloak, face burying into his chest.

In the midst of her clouded thoughts, for a moment she was very aware of their position, and another thought went to Neji. Wondering what it would be like if he were here instead. She wouldn’t have to explain this to him, to worry whether to trust him, he simply would be here, no questions or faults.

That thought faded when she lifted her gaze to Deidara. He was looking down at her, and she caught a feeling reflected in his eyes, the one she had seen before; affection, except this time it was there fully, unapologetically. It sparked something inside her she immediately wished it hadn’t.

'What happened?' Sena asked, finally finding her mind clearing, body steadying.

'Well, I’m not sure actually. One second you were fine, walking over towards this scroll. But then the next second, once you reached it, you were on the ground screaming,' Deidara replied. ‘You scared me to death, hm.’

'I see, sorry. I’m fine really.' Sena said, earning an unconvinced look from the blond. ‘I promise, it was just a vision like some kind of Genjutsu.’

'From what I heard, it must have been bad.'

Sena frowned, shooting him a serious look.

'Then forget what you heard.'

Deidara’s eyes widened, apparently, he hadn’t expected this kind of reaction from her, but he kept his mouth shut. He knew better than that by now.

'Show me this scroll,’ Sena said.

'It’s that one there, at your feet.’

Sena looked down to see the scroll, bending down to retrieve it. When she went to unbind the seal, Deidara grabbed her wrist.

'Didn’t you say not to touch anything? Hm.’

'Yes, I told you not to touch anything. I never said anything about me,’ Sena said, pulling her wrist back, ‘besides I’ve already experienced what this scroll has to offer.’

Sena opened the bindings of the scroll and unravelled it slowly, careful to catch anything it may hold inside it. She skimmed the words, finding anything of meaning that could prove useful.

After minutes of reading, Deidara started tapping his foot, apparently impatient.

'Well, what does it say?’ He asked.

'It’s a list of places; I think other shrines,’ Sena said, half paying attention to him, as she continued reading, ‘the sites of other scrolls.’
‘You mean there are more places like this?’

‘Yes. Several more. In fact, they each have listed what unique artefacts and items they hold like an inventory of some sort.’

‘Well great, unless we plan on investigating every one of them then we are back to no leads, hm.’

‘Not necessarily,’ Sena said showing him the scroll, pointing. ‘See these two here? Well, these two share something in common with this shrine.’

Deidara’s eyes flickered over the lists beneath where Sena had pointed before her turned back to her.

‘They both hold seal scrolls, hm.’

‘Not only that but they also contain information on the seals in question.’

‘Meaning?’

‘Meaning that this must be what my father is after.’

‘That sounds reasonable, but why wouldn’t he take this with him? Surely he doesn’t want to leave a trail, or he would not have bothered to kill the old man.’

‘Remember what I said about the items in this place?’

‘Not to take them. Something about a fate worse than death, hm.’

‘Exactly, which is why we can’t take it either,’ Sena dropped the scroll before turning back toward the entrance. ‘Come on let’s go this place makes me feel uneasy.’

Together they left the shrine, squinting their eyes as they returned into daylight. Deidara once again readied his clay bird before turning back to Sena. She had to admit, thus far he had proved himself to her, making her want to trust him. Not just for the mission either, but actually trust him.

‘Which one should we go to first, hm?’ Deidara asked the suggested, ‘The first shrine is only a couple hours from where we are.’

‘I think that’s the wisest choice, do you think flying will cut off a lot of travel time?’

‘Yeah, but we have no idea how far ahead he is, if we are lucky we can catch up with him.’

Sena nodded, hoping back onto the clay bird, this time sitting down, still feeling the weight of the memory and chakra use. As they took off, Deidara knelt behind her, placing a hand on her shoulder.

‘Are you feeling okay?’ He asked.

‘I’ll be fine,’ Sena replied.

‘You keep saying that.’

‘And I keep meaning it.’

‘Hey, I’m just trying to make sure you don’t die on me.’
Sena didn’t reply, unsure as to what to say, feeling almost guilty for treating him this way. She did say she would give him a chance, perhaps taking more of a softer approach was something she ought to do.

‘Hey, Sena?’

‘Hm?’

‘The ancestor you told me about, that Matsura lord guy. What happened to him?’

‘Why do you want to know?’

‘Just tell me, hm?’

‘The Lord couldn’t take the pain anymore so he did the only thing he thought he could do. He killed himself.’

‘Oh,’ Was all Deidara said in reply, and they fell into silence.

Sena thought of her mother, reliving the memories of her eight-year-old self, finding her that way. She could not handle thinking about it for extended periods of time, even now. It was a wound that never really healed, nor did she expect it to; this is why, for now, she had to focus on finding her father.

Just when she began feeling alone, consumed by her thoughts of the past, Deidara wrapped his arms around her, pulling her into his lap. Sena hadn’t realised how exhausted she was until that point, allowing her head to fall back entirely, against his chest. She let her eyes flutter close and listened to his heart, pounding in his chest beside her ear. It soothed her.

Then for the first time since they had met, Sena let her guard down and fell asleep in Deidara’s arms.
A battle then sparks fly between Sena and Deidara.

Okay here we have almost 3.5k of goodness. What you’ve been waiting for, finally.

There is a reoccurring dream Sena has had since she was eight years old. She is sitting at the bottom of a pool of water, floating, with no destination and ability to breathe beneath the surface. At first, it is nice, calm, a peaceful environment. The sun rays reflecting in the water as she just drifts, watching them dance on the rocks. Then out of nowhere something grabs her and pulls her down, into the darkest depths. No longer able to breathe she screams, a silent scream unheard by no one. Then just as quickly she would wake up, in bed, clutching her throat, gasping for air.

Sena had this very dream moments before she awoke, except this time her eyes merely flashed open with a start. Her body stiffened then when she realised she was no longer drowning, her body relaxed, sinking into something warm. Her tired eyes blinked; once realising she was no longer on the bird, twice noticing that she was seated beneath a tree and by the third, was very much aware she was cuddled up in Deidara’s arms.

Sena shifted slightly, carefully, trying to figure out how much of a compromising position they were in without letting the blond know she was awake. She was sitting in his lap, her hand clutching his cloak, cheek pressed comfortably into his chest, hearing the sound of his steady heartbeat. Deidara’s arm wrapped around her, his hand on her free one, absentmindedly running his thumb up and down slowly, tenderly with his chin resting on the top of her head.

As much as the kunoichi wanted to stay there, in this position which felt comfortable, natural even, she knew that they had already wasted a lot of time sitting there. The kunoichi risked a movement, wriggling her body against his, causing a soft moan to escape the blond’s lips. She moved her hand, the one that had been clutching his cloak, up to her tired eyes, rubbing them. Deidara’s chin moved from her head, grazing her forehead softly as she felt him turn as if to face her.

‘You’re awake, hm,’ He whispered with softness, a tenderness she had not heard before.

Sena emphasised a stretch and forced a yawn, trying to act as calm as possible. She turned to face him, through fluttering eyelids, as he watched her, intently, with a certain mesmeric quality.

‘How long was I asleep for?’ Sena asked, eyes locked onto his.

‘We only landed about ten minutes ago,’ Deidara replied.

‘You should have woken me up.’
‘I didn’t want to, you looked exhausted, hm.’

Sena shifted, hesitating for a moment before standing up and dusting the dirt off her clothes.

‘Right now that doesn’t matter; this is too important.’

Deidara opened his mouth, looking as if he was going to protest however he quickly clenched his jaw shut again and frowned before begrudgingly muttering a ‘fine let’s go.’

The location of the second shrine was on top of a cliff where a body of water lay below, according to the scroll they had found in the Goryō Shrine. The shrine itself was supposedly located near large boulders, laid out in a circle and only accessible by finding the secret seal.

They approached the location, taking note of their surroundings as they found the boulders. Sena began to search for the symbol as she had previously done at the last place, feeling the cold surface of the stone and searching for chakra patterns. Deidara stood back and observed her, this time without complaining or interrupting.

It was not long before the kunoichi found it, the symbol freshly splattered with blood, a darker shade than the one before. This shrine had been entered recently, probably within the last hour or so.

*If Deidara had wakened her perhaps, they would have caught them.*

Ignoring that thought, for now, she focused on the task at hand, retrieving a kunai from the pouch on her thigh. Her fingers wrapped around the hilt prepared to once again open her wound, when she was interrupted by a strange voice.

‘I wouldn’t bother doing that if I were you,’ the voice said.

Sena turned toward the voice, Deidara joining her side instantly, as two figures approached them. The first, the one who had spoken, was a tall, broad-shouldered man, twirling a dagger in hand. The other, the shorter of the pair, had a scar over his eye, extending down toward his mouth.

‘Who are you, hm?’ Deidara asked, taking a step in front of Sena as if to shield her, she wondered whether to be flattered or insulted by this.

‘Doesn’t matter who we are, only matters who you are,’ The taller man said.

‘I think it should be pretty obvious who I am,’ Deidara said pulling his cloak as if to make his point and Sena saw one of his hands disappear into the pouch and retrieve something.

‘Your one of those Akatsuki,’ The shorter man said, sounding almost fearful, before whispering something to his partner.

Deidara let out a long sigh, muttering something she could not quite make out to himself. Sena watched as he opened his palm, a small clay creature dropping and disappearing into the grass below. She watched with raised brows for a few seconds before the taller man in front of her yelled at his partner to shut up.

‘Look we don’t have time for this so kindly step aside and let us pass through,’ Sena said, taking as step forward next to Deidara.

‘Sorry, no can do. I can’t let you enter, I’ve got orders,’ The taller man said.
‘Orders from who?’ Sena’s eyes narrowed, her hands dipping into her pouch to feeling for her chakra daggers, subtly.

‘He said you would know who.’

Sena’s eyes widened at this, her grip tightening on the hilts of her daggers.

So it was her father. She was right about this lead.

‘Where is my father?’ She said, taking more steps forward, her body tensing in anticipation.

‘Gone.’

‘Gone where?’ Deidara cut in, stepping by her side once again.

‘Somewhere where you can’t find him. He told us to deliver a message,’ the shorter man said.

‘And what message would that be?’ Sena asked.

‘Stop looking. Return to your village and stay there,’ the taller man said.

The kunoichi felt as though her heart was going to burst. Her father did not want to be found that was obvious but the fact that he did not want to see her at all, that shocked her.

The seal must be taking over completely.

That meant the kunoichi was running out of time, and there was not much of her father left to get through to. The kunoichi snapped her gaze back to the men in front of her, pulling her daggers into full view from her pouch.

‘Sorry, I cannot do that,’ she said. ‘Since he is not here, it looks like I am just going to have to send him a message of my own.’

Sena saw Deidara’s smirk out of the corner of her eye, filling her with more determination than she already had.

‘You can try,’ the taller man said, raising his kunai toward them.

‘Sena,’ Deidara whispered, diverting her attention. ‘When I say so, get down on the ground.’

‘What, why?’ Sena replied.

‘Just do it.’ Deidara’s tone was alarmingly serious, causing her to nod and agree.

The kunoichi took her battle stance, awaiting her partners signal, while the men in front of her took the same position. The anticipation mixed with the tension and the silence in the air caused her heart to race, pulsating throughout her entire body. She didn’t know what the blond had planned, and she had no choice but to trust him.

‘Now Sena,’ Deidara yelled followed by the command, ‘Katsu!’

She dropped to the ground as instructed not quite prepared for what was going to happen. The second she got the ground an explosion erupted from the direction of the enemies, the force of it rippling towards her as she buried her head in her hands. Then it waned, something blocking its path, feeling someone in front of her before it stopped completely.
Sena opened her eyes and lifted her head to find Deidara in front of her, arms spread, like a shield. Her eyes widened as she realised what he had done, quickly lifting herself to her feet in front of him. *He had tried to protect her.*

There was no time to dwell on this thought however when she felt a rumble beneath the ground. The men arose from the earth style shield that the taller man had managed to create in time for the explosion. *How had he been so fast?*

‘You are going to have to do better than that,’ the shorter man said.

‘Take the earth style user, I’ll get the other one and draw him away,’ Deidara said, retrieving his clay bird.

He began setting smaller explosions in the direction of his target, attracting his already attention as planned.

‘Take care of that guy, Kuro!’ The taller man said. The man named Kuro nodded and set off into the forest after Deidara who had flown away. Sena assumed — hoped — it was so he could release explosions without hindering her attacks.

‘Right,’ Sena said, attention averted back to the man, readying her blades. ‘It’s you and me now.’

The man laughed, causing the hairs on the back of neck to stand up.

‘Not for long, girl, believe me,’ he replied.

‘Men,’ she began, ‘all talk without so much as making a move. It’s as tiresome as it is pathetic.’

This sparked an irritation within the man, the kunoichi could tell by the way his body tensed, and his grip on his kunai tightened. She smiled at how much power her words had. *He really must have a fragile ego.*

It wasn’t long after that the man launched an attack, her chakra infused dagger colliding with his. Her words had set him off, with each blow an aggressive, animal-like force kept building, growing with every deflect. They danced this dance for a while, neither one faltering, the sound of metal against metal reverberating throughout the plain.

Sena concentrated on the defence waiting for an opportune moment, any inkling of an opening as she channelled her chakra into her daggers, the lightning buzzing louder with each moment passing. The frustration of the day overtook her, and she channelled it all into this fight.

*Lunge, thrust, pirouette, dodge and block.* The familiar voice of her sensei echoing through her mind, as her body reacted on instinct and her mind remembered.

Then finally the kunoichi saw an opening, taking the chance to lunge and thrust at his side. The man dodged at the last second avoiding a full blow however still receiving a decent cut. Sena smiled in triumph, as the man winced from the pain, she watched his body shake as the lightning release shot through his system.

The man jumped back, tossing his kunai aside and examining his fingers, covered in blood from the wound.

‘You’re going to regret that,’ the man said readying his hands. ‘Enough of this, you’re finished.’

Sena retracted her daggers and readied her palms, to counter any earth release technic he had
‘Earth style,’ the man began, hand signs forming accordingly, ‘Bedrock Coffin.’

The ground began to rumble beneath her then multiple sections of rock moved around her. She jumped, dodging the first attempt easily however the second attempt was waiting in her wake. The earth moved around her sealing her between two large sections that began to move inward, attempting to crush her.

‘I don’t think so,’ she muttered, readying her hand signs for her lightning release. ‘Lightning form: boundless storm.’

Sena felt her power flow through her, lightning releasing from every single part of her body, like a large electric current. She knew she wasn’t going to be able to hold this long, already using some of her energy earlier, she would have to be quick.

Without wasting another moment, the kunoichi threw her fists into the two pillars enclosing her, smashing through them instantly. Breaking free, she turned to the man; a shocked expression spread across his face as she ran toward him. She felt the strength of her clan flow through her, reaching the man within seconds, sending volts surging through his body then finishing him off with a final blow to the heart. The man’s body shook violently then dropped, just shy of the cliff face.

Exhausted, the kunoichi stopped the lightning form and fell to her knees. The man lay beside her, twitching every so often as the last of the currents flowed through him. Through heavy breaths, Sena noticed a stinging on her forehead, near her hairline, touching it to reveal a small amount of blood. A shard of earth must have hit her when she smashed through.

Then the kunoichi was aware of a presence behind her then a fire jutsu heading toward her. She turned in time to see it, knowing she would not be able to jump out of the way in time she began a shielding technique. Quickly, she performed the hand signals for a water shield.

At the last second, someone had jumped in front of her, shielding her view. Her eyes blinked, adjusting, realising it was Deidara in front of her, once again attempting to shield her. His eyes were squeezed shut as though bracing for impact, one which never came.

‘Deidara,’ Sena whispered, stunned at the sight before her.

The blond’s eyes opened slowly as if realising he was unharmed then turning behind him to see her water shield. Relief flooded his face when he turned back to face her, taking a step toward her, arm stretched outward. Before he could touch her, Sena’s breath hitched as she noticed a large fire style coming toward them, one her shield would not be able to withstand, her chakra too low.

On instinct she grabbed Deidara, wrapping her arms around his core and took a step backward off of the cliff face. It was impulsive and un-calculated, but she hoped the body of water below them was not too far as to hinder them but rather save them. Thinking so intently on the impact to come she did not notice Deidara fiddling around in his pouch until he pulled out something familiar.

Quickly as they came closer to impact, he threw the bird beneath them. A few seconds later they hit it hard then bounced off of it and onto the grass below them, Sena’s back sliding across it to a stop, near the border of the forest.

Sena’s eyes flew open moments after their softened impact onto the ground. Deidara was on top of her, their arms still wrapped around each other in a tight embrace, as if letting go would mean
disaster. They stayed like that for a few moments before he pushed himself up slightly, looking down on her.

‘You tried to save me,’ Sena whispered.

‘You did save me,’ Deidara whispered back, hovering above her.

Sena pushed herself to sit up, Deidara following her actions as he retreated into a kneeling position. Sena leaned forward, their gazes locked, reaching out her hand to push aside his blond bangs, revealing the eye scope that covered his left eye. Cautiously, her fingers found the cool metal, pulling the necessary latches to remove it from his face.

The blond’s eyes closed, his breath hitched as the kunoichi removed it, placing it on the grass next to them, then using the same hand to cup his cheek, still keeping his bangs to the side and softly running her thumb across his skin. Opening his eyes again to look at her, she finally saw both, an entrancing blue, as clear as day.

While holding this gaze, a silent conversation between sapphire and sky blue sparked that seemed to say that they would find each other, eventually. Pain, a longing, a vulnerability that she wasn’t even sure was there at first but the longer she looked into the depths of his eyes the clearer it was. It was captivating, seeing these raw emotions reflected honestly, willingly.

The coolness in the air and the rapid pace of Sena’s heartbeat only seemed to amplify the sensation, very much aware at this moment how attracted to Deidara she was. He leaned forward towards her, slowly, as though testing the waters. An all-consuming desire to be close to him overtook Sena causing heat to rise to her cheeks. She realised that, if he did not touch her right then and there she would lose herself completely.

Without another moment’s hesitation, the blond grabbed her, pressing her back down onto the bed of grass, pulling her against him while arms wrapped around her waist. His lips crashed against hers, messy at first but with the full force of everything he had been holding back and releasing into her.

The kunoichi kissed him back pressing her lips firmly against his, with an insatiable need, like she was starved of oxygen and needed him to breathe.

As they pushed their bodies against each other, her arms slid around his neck, grip tightening with every moment passed in an attempt to close the distance, no matter how small, between them.

It was kissing, but it was more than kissing; it was a moment of pure desire where the longing for each other erupted in such a passionate, intimate, wholesome way it caused them to become undone. And it was a deep longing satisfied, like an answer to a question they had been asking since the moment their eyes first met.

Sena broke contact, lips pulling away so that their noses were still touching, taking the opportunity to wrap her legs around Deidara’s core and roll him onto his back. A hot breath hung between as he leaned back beneath her, captured on all sides by her hands and knees. They lay there, consumed in the moment as their fiery gaze locked on each other as if caught under a spell.

He let her have complete power over him. He trusted her and finally she gave into the moment and decided to trust him too.

Sena’s lips crashed against Deidara’s, this time with greater ferocity, her tongue running against his begging for entrance. Almost immediately his mouth opened, flexing clumsily at first, before
finding a natural rhythm alongside hers; she knew then that it was his first real kiss.

Between kisses and breaths, he moaned her name like she was the most important being in existence, causing her body to tremble against his.

Sena slowed her motions, dragging out the movements, her tongue darting into his mouth every so often, slow but strong. It wasn’t long before he reciprocated the action, their tongues running against each other needy and aggressive.

Deidara let out a hearty moan, from somewhere deep that wasn’t reached often and the sound raised goose bumps across Sena’s arms. One of his hands found her hair, grasping it firmly, using it to pull her head closer to his, the other hand trailing down the small of her back, pulling her flush against him.

Their mouths melded, and the kunoichi’s hands slid down, moving from his face to his shoulders, his chest ending onto his sides where they clutched, nails digging down and tugging him against her. The blond tensed beneath her touch as her grip hardened causing him to whine, and she couldn’t help but grin into the kiss.

Nothing but running water and the sounds they made as they kissed could be heard. The two clung to each other, entwined, eliciting moans, as well as heavy breaths, encapsulated completely in their own private universe, disconnected from the world around them.

To be so close to him after holding herself back all this time…it was freeing as though she had escaped the madness within her.

Deidara’s hands caught her waist, holding her tight against him sitting them upwards; Sena in his lap, legs on instinct wrapping around him like a snake around its prey.

The kiss broke, his lips lingered ghosting hers, their arms clutching each other in an embrace so firm their bodies pressed together radiating heat. Their chests brushed against each other, hearts thumping, breathing heavy.

The kunoichi did not recognise the look on his face as she observed the blond’s flushed cheeks and half-lidded eyes. It left her feeling strangely empty at the break of contact between the two of them.

‘Sena,’ he whispered, softly, almost like another moan.

‘Hm,’ she hummed in reply.

Then they heard an explosion from the top of the cliff, where they had once stood. It sent them crashing back into reality, both of them leaping to their feet. The moment broken entirely, their private universe fading before her eyes. Deidara grabbed her hand and dragged her to the cover of the forest behind them.

‘Come on; we still have to get out of here, hm,’ He said.

Sena nodded, grip tightening on his hand as they began to run. The sense of euphoria still lingering over her, like she had just woken from a dream.
The pair evaded the assailants through the forest, taking Deidara’s bird to safety to another hideout. As they landed the weight of what had happened began to sink into Sena’s mind. Deidara had kissed her, and she had kissed him right back, without question. What did this mean for her mission, was she compromised?

The words *by any means necessary* ran through her mind.

The kunoichi looked down at her hand still in his, feeling the length of the tongue sliding along her palm now and then. It caused her to shiver but also for her grip to tighten, fingers intertwining with his. She decided that she felt safe with the blond after all — more than safe — she felt something warm bloom inside of her. A wave of euphoria still present from the kiss they had shared.

They approached another cabin like structure, way off in the middle of a forest. Without a moment’s hesitation, Deidara dragged her inside, leading her to the bedroom, before pushing her gently onto the edge of the bed. She watched him as he stood in front of her, hand running through her hair, holding it back while the other turned her chin to inspect the gash on her head.

‘I’ll see if we have any medical supplies, hm,’ Deidara said.

‘There’s really no need,’ Sena replied, but he was already out the door.

A small smile appeared across the kunoichi’s lips at his concern, realising it would be better to let him take care of her, necessary or not. She lifted a palm to her forehead, concentrating the little energy she had left into her medical ninjutsu to help close the wound. It wasn’t completely healed, but it was enough to sustain her.

If there was one thing useful Kira did for Sena, it was teaching her the basics of medical training.

Sena began to think of the position she was in, consorting with an Akatsuki member — intimately no less — and what that meant for the future. She felt something for him, that was clear, but what kind of real relationship could they really have. He was a criminal, and though she was playing her part, sooner or later her mission would be over.

All these thoughts vanished, and warmth flooded her again as Deidara walked back into the room, box in hand. He opened it on the floor next to her, pulling out a bandage and gauze. When he reached for her head again his hand stopped on her cheek, blinking a few times before frowning.
once he realised what she had done.

‘See,’ Sena said with a smile, ‘No need.’

Deidara’s hand lingered there while the other dropped the supplies back into the box. Her eyes caught his in that familiar, intense stare that set off something within her which she couldn’t push aside anymore.

She stood, meeting his stance, her hand reached out clutching his chest before moving, caressing up around his neck and finding his hair. The hand that held her cheek trailed down her side, around her back meeting his other as it pulled her body closer to his.

The blond looked at her without fear, without hesitation but with pure affection before leaning forward, softly capturing her lips with his.

The kiss was gentle at first, their mouths flexing at a maddening, slow pace, leaving her wanting. Daringly she pushed her lips against his with a touch more aggression causing him to smile into the kiss.

Sena pulled away, lips tingling as they grazed against his with every breath. She had wanted to talk to him, about what had happened — the battle, their first kiss. About what he had done. Why he had done it.

The memory from that afternoon played through her mind, taken back to the longing, and vulnerability his eyes reflected the moment before he kissed her and then after with his flushed cheeks, eyes half-lidded, glazed over with euphoria. The way he’d willingly thrown himself in front of her had tried to save her.

Now that they were no longer in a battle, away from the outside world Sena wanted to wrap herself around him. She thought of his yell when he shielded her from the explosion, the fact that he risked himself for her sake. And for the first time since their encounter, she believed that she wanted him equally as he wanted her.

Her next move was bold, but she didn’t care. Looking him in the eye, her hands left his neck as she took a step back, found the bottom of her shirt, taking hold of the hem and lifting it over her head. Next, her fingers reached for the buttons on her skirt, looping around the elastic of her tights, pushing them to her ankles with a seductive sway of her hips before stepping out of them.

Sena stood before the blond in her bra and panties, black like the rest of her clothes, knowing they were enticing him, teasing him. She posed strategically, hand on popped hip, determined to get a reaction from him.

Deidara didn’t move as she stood before him, hands plastered to his sides. Though he kept his eyes trained on her face, the rest of her body seemed to burn under the intensity of his gaze. As if she were daring him to look; to give into the feelings burning within him, to touch her, kiss her. He accepted the challenge, fists clenching as if using all the self-control he had to resist pulling her back into his embrace.

Then his eyes flickered down, indulging the sight of her. At once they widened again and flew back up as if he knew he had lost. He did not seem to care, though; she saw a familiar smirk creep across his face.

The kunoichi smiled in triumph knowing she had such an effect on him, but she did not gloat or tease. Instead, she took a stride forward and stood mere centimetres away from Deidara, not yet
touching him.

The blond shifted closer, pressing his body against hers, and looked down at her with daring eyes. She craned her neck, suggestively, causing a subtle lack of distance between their lips. His breath fanned across her face, and she closed her eyes, waiting, as they stood there for a few moments.

It was not the first experience the kunoichi had intimately with someone. Her first lover appeared when she was in The Land of Waves with Kakashi, following up a lead. Akio. He had been the son of a lord who had requested their help dealing with local bandits.

Something had sparked between them instantly, much as it had with her and Deidara. It was not long before she and Akio fell into a bed of pubescent hormones and curious exploration. Sena had to bite her lip to hold back a laugh as she recalled one unfortunate evening when Kakashi had stumbled in on them, a hot mess of tangled limbs. The poor shinobi could not look her in the eye for days.

Still, the moment before a kiss could still send shivers down Sena’s spine. And she knew from their kiss earlier Deidara did not have much experience in this kind of intimate situation. Even though he had never complained, never hesitated she found herself wanting to be slow with him.

So she waited. For him. Feeling the blond in front of her, mouth almost against hers, soft breaths tickling her nose. Something inside of her silently begged to be touched.

Then he closed what little distance there was between them, and the reaction was immediate. His hands found her hair, weaving his fingers through it effectively deepening the kiss while her hands ran down his chest. His tongue battled against hers in rough strokes, teeth occasionally clashing with a need — no a hunger — to have each other.

Somehow under the intensity of the kiss, she managed to think coherently enough to grip her hands at the bottom of his mesh shirt and tug the garments over his head. He broke the kiss briefly, lifting his arms in compliance as it was removed, closing the distance just as quickly once it was thrown to the side.

Gripping her by the waist, Deidara pulled her body full against his. Her hands found his chest once again, stopping as her fingers ran over the stitches on the left side. Deidara winced, as she did, squeezing his eyes shut.

‘Are you okay?’ Sena asked, softly, ceasing her motions.

— — —

Deidara opened his eyes again to see Sena staring at him, sapphire eyes full of concern. She was kind, caring, mysterious but above all she was beautiful. He found his breath caught at the sight of her this way, practically naked before him, offering herself to him so willingly but at the same time without force. Force would not even be necessary for she was the only thing in the world he had ever wanted.

He had been waiting for her to be ready for him and now she was, much like his art waiting for the explosion. And he found himself taken back, comprehending what was actually happening, him and Sena coming together like this, as one.
He was ready; he wanted this.

‘Sen,’ he whispered, brushing his lips against hers.

‘Say that again,’ she murmured opening her eyes.

‘Sen.’

‘Hm, no one has called me that before. I like it.’

With that Deidara kissed her with the full force of his lust, love and longing all at once erupting in a single moment. And it was then that Deidara knew he would no longer bear to be without Sena, never be able to part with her, wanting to spend the rest of his days with her by his side.

She alone had the power to ignite this fire within him needing only so much as a glance or sway of the hips to make him her’s. It was a singular desire; to scale mountains, dive into the darkest depths, to run to the ends of the earth simply for the chance to touch her, to hold her, to have her.

Sena’s lips moved from his, leaving a trail of fire down his skin as she worked along his jaw and down his neck. She then moved down his chest, tenderly kissing the stitches on his chest while at the same time her hands worked down his torso.

Deidara closed his eyes as he felt her fingers work lower, taking a sharp intake of breath as they glided under his waistband, cool against his hot skin. He shuddered against her touch, biting his lip to stifle a moan as the kunoichi continued peppering kisses down his body, feeling the blood rush to him the lower she got.

By Kami, he wanted her. She had lit his skin on fire, causing a lust to burn within him, that grew with every caress. He needed to make her his now.

As though she had been reading his thoughts Sena’s fingers hooked around the band of his pants, pulling them down in one swift motion to his ankles. That act alone, caused his arousal to take over, feeling himself harden already. He now stood there before her as an equal, practically naked, left in only his boxers.

A sly smile came to her luscious lips, once sweet with lipstick, as she traced circles just above his hips. She was teasing him, and it only made his need for her grow even more maddening. Kami, she knew how to seduce him.

Taking Deidara by the hand, Sena led him to the bed, laying back and pulling him on top of her. Their eyes met briefly, holding that familiar intense gaze which left him questioning how he ever lived without it. How had he ever lived without her?

The kunoichi’s hands cupped his face bringing him in for another passionate, heated and intoxicating kiss. Her hands found his hair again, tugging it free from its tie, his blond hair came cascading around her like a waterfall.

The blond moaned into her mouth as he felt her fingers trail down his back, digging into his skin. When her fingers found his waist, they dug down into his flesh and guided him, so his hips lined up with hers.

Sena arched her back, pressing her pelvis against his, causing his breath to hitch, ultimately breaking the kiss at the arousing sensation. Then she did it again, dragging out the motion with a focus on the bulge he felt hardening against the restricting fabric. The friction caused his eyes to roll back into his head, a wave of pleasure running through him, and, without thinking, grinding
back into her.

The motion elicited a moan from the kunoichi, her heaving chest brushed against Deidara’s, and a low rumble erupted from his chest. He wanted to make her moan more, to know he could be the one to bring her pleasure gave him such satisfaction.

His hands found her sides, his mouth-hands nipping at the skin, tongue darting along the flesh in time with his bucking hips. Another moan slipped out causing him to smirk.

She looked at him knowingly, obviously aware of what he was trying to do.

With both hands, she pushed him back into a seated position, climbing into his lap. Not wasting anytime she wrapped herself around him and gave gentle but decisive roll of her hips. The blond’s hands found her waist, taking a firm grip as he pushed back up into her in response.

Deidara watched as Sena’s hands disappeared behind her back unclipping her black bra and freeing her breasts against his chest. The skin on skin, the heat clung between them, bodies rocking together desiring the friction that felt oh so good.

Moans escaped her lips as she threw her head back, the black stormy tornadoes falling behind her exposing her delicate neck. He took the opportunity to capture the exposed skin with his lips, sucking down and leaving a trail of wet, red marks. As he did this one hand snaked around the small of her back while the other found her breast, groping it firmly.

The kunoichi whined as the tongue of his mouth-hand swirled around her erect nipple, focusing motions on the bud. His mouth left her neck and trailed down to her free breast, taking it into his mouth, sucking down, flicking his tongue in time with his hand.

Sena let out another whine, grabbing a fistful of Deidara’s hair in the process, which only spurred him on. He continued these motions before his own desire to be touched took over. Retracting his mouth and hands he sat back and her eyes returned to his, something dark reflected in them.

Before he even needed to ask she was touching him, lips pressed needy against his while her hands worked down his body.

Her hand reaching down, grasping to find Deidara’s cock through the fabric cupping then rubbing once, twice, and the rest of his thoughts were lost as he let out choked groan. This time it was his turn to throw his head back, leaning back onto his arms while she continued her movements.

The next thing Deidara knew her fingers looped under his boxers pulling them down, his back arching to assist her. The break in contact left him aching, his untouched cock driving him mad in anticipation.

Then finally, her fingers wrapped around him – already hard and waiting for her – pre-cum leaking from the head. And she began her ministrations, moving her hand up and down his length, adding extra pressure on the underside near the base of his length. Twitching as she rubbed her thumb across his head spreading the pre-cum across the slit. It was better than anything he could ever have imagined, never have being touched in such a way by anyone other than himself.

The blond’s eyes squeezed shut the intense pleasure he was feeling only heightened his emotions towards the kunoichi. His hips bucked up into her grip involuntarily, unable to hold back his moans or the way his body tensed under her touch. He was reaching close to orgasm quickly, too quickly. And though he wanted to make her stop, to avoid embarrassment, he couldn’t; it felt too good.
All of a sudden her motions ceased causing Deidara to let out a long whine at her absence.

‘Why did you stop?’ He choked out without thinking, without realising.

He heard Sena chuckle, opening his eyes to find her beaming at him. A small string of embarrassment strung through him, a blush rose to his already inflamed cheeks. She didn’t tease him or say anything for that matter but instead planted a gentle kiss on his forehead. The blond pouted at her.

‘It’s my turn, you’re not the only one who gets to enjoy themselves,’ Sena said, smiling, beckoning him.

Once again she took his hand and led him back down, so he was hovering above her. It was the first time since they had begun that he really looked at her, drinking in the sight of her curves and contours.

The kunoichi’s eyes which he had come to love so much glistened in the light, a hint of a twinkle hiding behind those various hues of blue. Raven hair dishevelled fanned out across the mattress below, picturesque carrying a sweet scent he could not pinpoint as anything other than heaven. Her cheeks were tinged a light pink, a smile across her lips. She was dark, mysterious, inviting — angelic.

‘You are so beautiful,’ Deidara whispered, ‘like a work of art, hm.’

Sena hummed in reply before he leaned in and pressed his lips to her ear.

‘I’m going to make you explode, like real art; with a bang.’

This time Sena shivered under his touch.

‘Good,’ She replied, ‘Because I’m going to make you explode too.’

Deidara smiled at her — she was the one. The one he did not even realise he had been searching for this whole time until she fell crashing into his world, unforgivingly.

‘But first, it’s my turn,’ She said.

Deidara gulped, realising he had no idea what to do to make her feel as good as he had seconds before. Fear washed over him as his hands found refuge on her abdomen, a tremor running throughout his body.

‘Deidara?’ She whispered. ‘Have you ever done this before?’ It was more of a statement than a question, he could tell by the way she looked at him.

Still, he didn’t answer — couldn’t answer — the words caught in his throat. He was sure the tremble in his body had given him away.

And still, she smiled at him, gently caressing his cheek as she brought his eye-line to hers.

‘Here, let me show you,’ Sena said.

He felt her hand grasp his then slowly, guide it downward. His eyes widened when he realised what was happening, feeling her wet heat as she guided his fingers beneath her panties, before pushing them down. This time determination came over him wanting to make her buck into his grasp as he did hers.
Sena guided the blond’s fingers across her slit, running them along it slowly, before stopping at her clit. Guiding his unsteady hand beneath hers, she began running circular motions around the sensitive nub. The arousal already shooting through her body as her thighs shook slightly.

Then speeding up the movements, telling him to keep his thumb there she guided his index and pointer fingers back to her opening. Before she could motion him, he had already moved, shoving one inside her. Her breath hitched followed by a deep moan as he began to move it inside her, clumsily at first before finding a rhythm.

Combined with the stimulation of her pulsating clit this was enough to send her into complete bliss. Deidara it seemed was a fast learner, and what she didn’t teach him he picked up himself through watching, observing her body, her twitching and trembling.

With that, he slipped another finger inside of her, stroking her inner walls. Something warm, something intimate began to build inside her. Before she could discern what the feeling was, he curled them, causing her to buck into his grip.

While his fingers continued to slip in and out of her, causing her wetness to pool there, his thumb maintained small motions her sensitive spot while he used his other hand to push her core down. The action caused his fingers to delve deeper inside, the tongue of his hand-mouth running against her adding stimulation that caused a high pitched whine to escape her lips.

The whole experience was euphoric as a burning heat began to coil somewhere deep within her. A feeling she recognised all too well.

Reaching out a hand, Sena stopped Deidara’s movements, a questioning look on his face. She smiled, pushing him firmly by the chest, so he lay on his back, capturing on both sides with her legs. Just as had happened earlier when they kissed, except this time they were naked.

His hands found her sides preparing himself for what was to come as she positioned herself above him. All over, her body felt hot, tingly and excited for what was to come. Taking his cock in her grasp just so, as she slowly lowered her body on top of him.

The kunoichi’s breath hitched the entirety of his length filled her watching as the blond’s eyes snapped shut. His nails were digging into her flesh as he bit his lip, holding back a moan. She waited, allowing them both to adjust to the feeling of him inside of her.

Deidara’s eyes fluttered open, observing Sena with affection and a sense of awe. His gaze seemed to say that only she would exist for him. And as they sat there unmoving he traced his fingers across her jawline then to the nape of her neck, down her rising chest then leading toward her stomach, grazing the curves and indents along the way.

Sena leaned over him, bringing her lips to his for a gentle kiss. He kissed back running his tongue along, before plunging it inside her opened mouth. As he did this, she rolled her hips against him, repeating the motion immediately with a quickened pace, causing him to moan into the kiss.

In turn, Deidara’s hips rose to meet hers, and she had to squeeze his chest to keep what little control she still had over the movements. The sight and sound of him almost made her heart fill, and it seemed that, at that moment, they were together completely, body and soul.
And then they were together in a bed of love again, the grass plain replaced by a mattress with bodies entangled in a familiar embrace, still warm and longing with desire.

Deidara raised a hand to the kunoichi’s, interlocking his fingers as the other hand slid up her side, her body moulding into his touch. There, it grazed across her arm, along with her shoulder, up her throat. His hand had cupped her cheek before he moved it through her hair, twirling it between his fingers affectionately.

While he did this, she did not stop rocking her hips back and forth, keeping the rhythm steady before it picked up as he watched her. Both of them occasionally moaned, softly, as if they didn’t want to wake the outside world.

It was not long before Sena began to feel Deidara tense beneath her, body trembling, biting his lower lip as he tried desperately to keep his eyes open. She would have to move quickly if she wanted him to hold off a little longer.

She ceased her motions, leaning down, fully covering his lips with hers. His grip on her waist tightened, his lips responding instantly beneath hers, returning the gesture.

Gently the kunoichi tugged him, rolling Deidara on top of her, so she lay on her back, his cock still throbbing inside her. As she lay there, her legs wrapped around his waist, gripping his hips tightly, she moved her body against his.

Deidara shuddered against her touch before taking control, removing his cock, holding it against her entrance before quickly pressing himself into her again. The next time he did this she pushed back against him, the sound of his grunt reached her ears, begging her to repeat the motion.

Now his speed increased, adding power to every thrust, finding and hitting the spot deep inside of her over and over again, earning moans mixed with whimpers. Their eyes locked in a fiery gaze as he leaned down and gave her a kiss, messy, hot but also full of passion. She watched him, his eyes narrowing, movements becoming more erratic, matching the intensity of the pleasure she was feeling.

Sena offered him a lopsided grin, feeling her body covered in sweat, her energy waning. Then he looked at her, with a look she did not recognise as if he had just realised something. She found herself wanting to know what it was even as he thrust into her, fucking her to the brink of orgasm.

‘Sen,’ he whispered through baited breaths. ‘I love you.’

Before she could respond the coil that had begun tightening inside her snapped and he lost her to a moment of ecstasy. The orgasm washed over her sending shock waves through her body, her limbs twitching, toes curling, eyes fluttering.

That was all it took for Deidara to join her, his cock twitching as he released himself inside her, muttering a swear word or two. His body trembled against hers, his head falling against her chest.

They lay there together, sweaty, sticky, breathing heavily, heartbeats echoing throughout their entire body. And as they came down from their high together, Sena realised what the blond had said moments prior.

Once heart rates returned to normal, and breathing steadied she shifted from underneath him and gently freed herself from under his head to lay beside him so that she could look into his eyes. He watched her look eagerly, and she got the impression he wanted to turn away, bury his vulnerability but didn’t.
‘Deidara—.’

‘I meant it, I love you Sen’ he said quickly, desperate. ‘I want you to be mine forever, hm.’

‘Deidara…’ Sena repeated but this time she was lost for words.

The man in front of her really loved her. No one had ever said that to her before, let alone in such an intimate moment such as this. Her heart filled at the sight of him before her, so honest, so willing.

Then she realised she didn’t need any words; instead, she leaned forward giving him a chaste kiss, caressing his cheek beneath her fingertips in the process.

It was the first moment of peace the kunoichi had experienced in a long time.
Metamorphosis

Chapter Summary

The aftermath of the evening.

Chapter Notes

So I couldn't resist adding more smut, so alas here we are post-smut chapter with more fun times. This one isn't as long and still has plot though. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

An air of euphoria lingered as Sena, and Deidara lay there, staring at each other through glazed over eyes, half-lidded yet still curious. They began to search each other, and they searched long and patiently, like exploring the aftermath of a storm. And as they lay there in the bed with scattered blankets, still warm with the intimate bond they had created moments before, Sena wondered how it had come to be. It had all happened so quickly.

Then she remembered her mission; finding out any information she could on the Akatsuki. Her mind never forgetting the fact that she was a kunoichi and that always came first.

‘Why did you do it?’ Sena asked propping herself upright with her elbow.

‘Do what, hm?’ Deidara asked, eyes still glistening in awe.

‘Why did you join them, the Akatsuki?’

The blond shifted, laying onto his back, gaze averting hers as he stared at the ceiling. It took a few moments for him to reply, and she waited patiently, curiously studying his motions and movements. She had caught him at a vulnerable moment that was certain.

‘Does it matter? It’s not going to change anything,’ He said finally.

‘You just…’ Sena struggled to find the right words.

Why was she asking? Was it as if any reason could justify him being a part of a criminal organisation or was it simply her self-conscious trying to justify her own actions? Either way she wanted to know.

‘I’m just curious; you just seem different in comparison,’ Sena said.

‘How so?’ Deidara asked.

Sena thought back to the day when she had discovered he was apart of the Akatsuki. The way Deidara had reacted to her outburst had always troubled her. He didn’t gloat or act smug, but rather he was concerned perhaps even ashamed. Perhaps it was because he needed her for his mission just as much as she needed him for hers and nothing more. Now though, after what they had just done,
she was not so sure about anything.

‘I’m still just trying to figure you out,’ Sena said, not exactly the truth but also not a lie.

‘What you still don’t trust me, hm?’ Deidara asked with a glare.

‘Of course, I trust you. I just want to know you.’

The blond’s expression softened, his eyes returning to the ceiling as if to consider her words.

‘It’s not like I wanted to join, Sen,’ Deidara began seeming uncertain whether to continue. ‘I didn’t plan on it happening this way, but I had made a deal and I couldn’t back out.’

‘What kind of deal?’ Sena asked.

‘I don’t want to talk about it,’ Deidara snapped, his tone unforgivingly bitter. ‘Stop asking about things you can’t change.’

Sena knew it was time to stop with the questions; it was going to be something that she had to slowly build up over time. Especially if she wanted to get anything out of Deidara, his mood so temperamental even as they lay there. She wanted to change the mood back to the wave of euphoria that had encapsulated them earlier.

The kunoichi’s hand found Deidara’s chest, fingers tracing soft circles in the centre as she watched his body tense at first then relax. He was still adjusting to her touch it seemed. Then she leaned forward, planting her lips against the skin of his neck giving a quick kiss.

‘I’m sorry,’ she whispered before returning her lips to the sensitive flesh, leaving a trail of kisses down toward his chest. Once she reached the centre, where her hand once sat, she sucked the skin there between her teeth before running her tongue over the mark.

The sounds of Deidara’s moan as she did this acted as encouragement and she did it again, this time slightly lower. She trailed hickeys down his body, slowly, making sure to suck each spot slightly harder than the last, earning louder noises from the blond.

By the time she had reached his waist she had him groaning beneath her touch. Sena decided she wasn’t done, she wanted more sounds, more moans, satisfaction flowing through her just knowing she could reduce him to this.

Taking one hand onto each of his thighs, grip tightening she leant down to his left hip and sucked, just above the bone. This caused his body to shudder, arching his back slightly before letting out another moan.

Sena lifted her head, moving to the right side ready to make her mark again.

‘Sen, ah—.’

The rest of his sentence came out in a strangled groan. Sena had already taken the soft skin between her teeth before he could finish. This time he bucked his hips uncontrollably, and she felt his length brush against her, already hardening.

Releasing the flesh from her lips, she looked down at her work, the red marks splattered across his figure as if she declared him hers. She smiled in triumph, knowing she had some form of control over him even with his outburst.
Sena ran her hands up and down his thighs, softly, so much so she knew it would feel maddening to the blond. Then she moved to his hips, running her fingers in circular motions. As she did this, she watched his body flex and tense beneath her touch, looking at him harden as if begging to be taken care of. She observed his expression; his cheeks flushed red, his eyes half-lidded and was biting his bottom lip in a failed attempt to hold back moans.

Deidara was completely at her mercy.

Not wasting another moment she took his cock in hand, giving an experimental lick, starting from the base before sliding it up to the head, swirling her tongue at the tip. She tasted the pre-cum, already oozing from the slit, giving her tongue an other motion for good measure.

Then, keeping her eyes fixed on the blond, she took him into her mouth, completely, inch by inch until she reached the base. She watched as his fists clenched against the sheets, his body already beginning to spasm by its own accord. She retracted and repeated the movement, this time faster and harder.

Sena continued this, occasionally flicking her tongue against the sensitive underside, near the base causing the blond to come undone beneath her. This time when she took him in full, into the wet heat of her mouth he whined — whined louder than she had heard him before.

Deidara began to jerk his hips up, so he thrust deep into her mouth, each movement becoming more erratic than before. His hands found her hair, grabbing hold unforgivably hard but Sena didn’t care, she knew he was close.

The blond began to guide her movements, pushing her mouth downward with each buck of his hips upward. His panting became more audible, and his moans were choked and uncontrolled as she continued.

Sena dipped her head, one, twice — and then she lost him completely. With a strangled groan he came, hard, releasing himself into her mouth. She rode out his orgasm, heading bobbing, slowly until he finished.

Wiping her chin clean of evidence, Sena looked down at Deidara who was observing her through lowered lashes, breathing heavily. He muttered a swear as his arm fell across his face, fists finally unclenched as he came down from his high.

After his breathing returned to normal and his eyes fluttered open again, Deidara grabbed the kunoichi’s arm and pulled her on top of him. His embrace was tight even as his fingertips trailed across her skin. Sena turned to face him, and their eyes met. There was something fierce, almost possessive in the way he looked at her that made her feel uneasy.

‘I’m never letting you go, hm,’ Deidara whispered, sounding almost like a growl.

Sena hummed in reply, yet she couldn’t help linger on the fact that it sounded more like a threat than a sign of affection.

Instead of mulling over the thought she realised just how exhausted she was from everything. The kunoichi let her thoughts fade, her body relax, and her eyes flutter close. With the warmth of Deidara’s body against hers, the comfort of his touch and the steady sound of his breathing, it wasn’t long before she drifted to sleep.
Deidara awoke early, before dawn, knowing he had something important to do. He rolled over to see Sena sleeping peacefully beside him; half her limbs entwined with his own. Through blinking eyes, he watched the way her body rose and fell with every breath, she was so beautiful, so alluring.

A smile came to his face once he realised what had happened the night before. He wanted to wake her and repeat these actions, but he knew he didn’t have time. Instead, he settled for leaving a trail of gentle kisses up her naked back across her soft skin.

She began to stir when he reached her neck as he buried is face into her skin, nuzzling softly.

‘Sen,’ he whispered, watching her stir again. ‘I have to report in with my partner, but I’ll be back. Alright, hm?’

Deidara pressed another kiss to the side of her cheek and watched her mutter something before nodding in reply. He lingered beside her for a few moments, taking in her floral scent that set his mind spinning. It was intoxicating.

‘Don’t go anywhere,’ He added before peeling himself away from her to get dressed.

As he picked up each item of clothing her ran the fabric through his fingers remembering, in as much detail as he could, how they had come off in the first place. The kunoichi actually had made him explode — together they were true art.

Pulling on his red clouded cloak, he gave Sena one last look, taking in the curves and contours of her sleeping body. Memorising how each crevice and dip of her body felt under his touch, the way her skin tingled against his and the way he felt each time they came together.

Deidara had meant what he said; he was never letting her go. She was a part of him now and would be forever. He would make sure of that.

———

Sena awoke sometime before noon, and the sun rays shining through the window onto her face. She groaned, the light warm on her naked skin, her eyes adjusting to her surroundings. Stretching her arms as she sat up she was very aware of two things. The first was the memory of the evening before now burned into her memory like a brand. The second was that Deidara was no longer in bed next to her.

The kunoichi craned her neck, attempting to work out a kink as she thought about the evening before through clearer thoughts. She had slept with Deidara — no he had *fucked her senseless* — and she let him. More than that he said that he loved her.

It had only been a few days, and she was already deeper inside the infiltration mission than she ever hoped possible. She decided to sort out where she stood otherwise she was going to lose herself to this mission. There was a fine line between what she pretended and what was real. She decided to keep a journal of some sort, in case she came across any information.

Getting up from the bed, Sena retrieved her pack and rummaged through her belongings until she
found a scroll. She needed to document everything that happened, every detail, every conversation, no matter how intimate and how she thought about it. It was the only way she would be sure to get the information the leaf needed in case her memory was messed with, or something else happened to her. It would also be a way of assuring she didn’t lose herself.

As Sena wrote, the clearer it became how she felt about the situation. She had known Deidara less than a week, and he told her he loved her. Perhaps he did, but she had suspicions it was only his idea of love.

The important question was, did she love him?

The kunoichi thought long and hard about this question and came to the conclusion that she did not. She was attracted to the blond, even would go as far to say she cared for him but in her heart, the kunoichi knew she could never love him. He was a part of something she could never stand for, a way of life she could never live. How could she love him?

Perhaps if he wasn’t a criminal? No. There was still something that would be preventing her heart from allowing him in. A reason she knew was there but couldn’t quite pinpoint.

Going along with his infatuation was something she was going to have to do to complete her mission — something she was going to have to do to survive. Even if some part of her felt guilty for doing so, she had to push that aside. Her clan, her friends, her village came first. Always.

Finishing her notes, Sena found her mind drifting to the people she had left behind. She thought of her grandmother, old and frail, still leading the Matsura clan with an iron fist, keeping them strong. Her friends, who she missed beyond words. And then finally, to that one constant in her life; Neji. She missed Neji so much it ached, she wanted to see him, talk to him, be with him more than anything.

The kunoichi felt saddened that she was missing out on changes back home. It made her feel like abandoning the mission. These thoughts aside she knew she could never allow herself to do that, she had a job to do.

As Sena wound the scroll back up, she realised that she needed to keep it in a place where no one could find it other than herself. She knew what she had to do.

Carefully the kunoichi pricked her finger just enough to draw blood. Then she began drawing a seal on her thigh with the blood, focusing on the details, making sure to get it exact. It had been a long time since her father had taught her this seal, certain it would come in handy one day — sure enough he was right.

Once she finished, she placed the scroll on top of the seal, channelling some chakra into it to anchor it. On activation she pushed the scroll down, successfully sealing it into her skin, watching as the lines disappeared as if it never happened. She gave a small smile in victory.

Then the kunoichi stood up and retrieved belongings, dressing into a fresh change of clothes. She stood up to face a mirror in front of her, cracked and hanging crooked. As she stared back at her reflection she took in a deep breath.

This is it, She thought to herself, this is the moment you leave the old Sena behind and become like them. It’s time to change into what you need to be.
Fear not Neji shall return in the next chapter or two! But ohhhhhhh some interesting developments huh?
Despondency

Chapter Summary

Over a month later, what are Sena and Deidara up to?

Over a month had passed since Sena, and Deidara had begun to follow the leads on her father. The mission had led them to several other sites like the shrines before, giving no other clues or indications on what he was up to other than where he was heading next. The pair found themselves upon a cavern in a mountain side, seeking out treasures of an old temple.

Exploring the temple they first looked over the scrolls, looking for any clue of disturbances as they had found in previous locations. They searched for what seemed like hours, splitting up to take up one end of the room each.

Sena noticed that Deidara seemed unusually determined this time. His enthusiasm had died down considerably after the first couple, and now all of a sudden he was ready to help. In the time they had spent together in such close quarters, she knew something was different with him this time, it was the reason for it that concerned her. Perhaps it was one of his sporadic mood changes, and she lucked out with a happy one — at least she could hope that’s what it was.

After pooling through dense documents and dusty scrolls, something caught the kunoichi’s eye. She saw a stone podium, toward the back of the room, set between two pillars. On further approach, she discerned that it was a weapon stand of some sort, probably once home to an artefact and most likely a dangerous one. It seemed to be a common theme running through the sites they visited.

Sena approached the stone podium, observing the stand which looked to have held a chokutō blade, now empty. Searching the stone for any information, she came across an engraving. Running her fingers along the plaque, she read the words carefully.

_The Amaterasu blade, named for its first wielder the Lady Amaterasu, the shining light of the future, the bolt across the horizon. A Master weapon made for those who possess the power to wield the five wills of nature._

Then further down there was another engraving, slightly different to the one above, as though added after the original. A warning to those who sought the blade, telling of imminent doom and life draining power, unsafe in the hands of those unworthy.

‘Hey Deidara,’ Sena said turning to the blond, ‘Come and look at— what are you doing?’

Deidara had his hand in his pouch, shuffling around awkwardly as if trying to be discreet. His eyes widened as if realising she had spoken to him, turning to face her.

‘Did you say something?’ Deidara asked.

‘Don’t you ever listen?’ Sena retorted.

‘I’m listening now, hm.’
'I asked what you were doing.'

Deidara shrugged.

‘Just looking through the scrolls to see if there is anything to go on.’

Sena gave him an unconvinced look but she didn’t really care what he was doing, suspicious or not, she wanted to show him what she had found. So she let out a sigh.

‘Come over here would you, I think I’ve figured out why my father was here.’

Deidara complied, adjusting his cloak back to sit normally as he did. Sena watched him through narrowed eyes. ‘There’s a chokutō missing from here, a special blade meant for unique chakra wielders. I think this is what he’s been looking for in the other shrines and temples.’

‘That would explain why there aren’t any scrolls out of the ordinary in this one. It must mean your father finally found what he was looking for,’ Deidara paused frowning. ‘It also means that he won’t have a trail we can follow anymore, hm.’

‘I was afraid of that.’ Sena turned away, masking her expression. This meant she was back to that certain place in her journey she kept coming back to, even now with the help of someone like Deidara; she was at a dead end.

‘Hey,’ Deidara said, wrapping an arm around her and pressing his chin against her shoulder, ‘I have scouts and contacts all around remember, I will find him.’

Sena sank into his touch, allowing herself to be comforted for a moment, before the anxiety she was keeping at bay came crashing back, like waves against the shoreline. Deidara only tightened his grip when her body tensed, in an attempt to relax her. She felt his lips press gently to the skin on her neck, slowly leaving a trail downward.

Stopping at her shoulder, he lifted his head to her ear, his hand retracting from her abdomen.

‘Come on,’ he whispered, ‘let’s go, hm.’

Sena nodded, knowing there was not anything else they could do now except wait for information. There was nothing for them here. Deidara took her hand in his and led her out of the temple, sealing it behind them.

In their weeks together, the pair had discovered that her father was after something to increase his power. Now that they had visited the temple they had discerned the what but still had to figure out the why. That missing piece of information made Sena’s stomach churn.

What was his ultimate goal? She knew she was running out of time to figure it out.

Neither of them spoke on the way back to their current hideout, Sena too deep in thought and Deidara not bothering to disturb her. When they did arrive, Sena went straight inside and plonked herself onto their bed. She was tired in more ways than one. Tired of always searching for her father yet never coming close enough, tired of being undercover, tired of being away from her home. There was no end in sight to her internal torment.

Deidara came after her, taking up the space beside her, wrapping an arm around her body and burying his face into her neck — a growing habit. He hadn’t even bothered to take his cloak off, only undo the opening. His hand made it’s way up her shirt, gently tracing his fingertips across her skin, causing her body to relax.
They lay like this for awhile before the blond lifted his head above hers, familiar intense gaze consuming her vision. He looked down at her, a small smile evident in the corner of his mouth as he leaned forward.

‘Sen,’ he whispered before capturing her lips with his.

It wasn’t long before he deepened the kiss opening his mouth against hers, plunging his tongue inside the moment she allowed him entrance. It never took him much to get him into a more intimate mindset, ever since their first night. It was one of the few moments with the blond she felt she had more control, even when he pinned her down or slammed her body against the wall, needy as ever, she always had the upper hand.

Deidara’s hands began to explore her body, taking in every contour, touching every crevice, slowly. Sena pressed her body into his touch, snaking a hand behind his neck to bring him closer. He climbed on top of her, lining up their bodies just so before he began grinding against her.

‘Tell me your mine, hm.’ Deidara’s lips ghosted against hers.

‘I’m yours,’ she said instantly. It was another habit she had trained herself into, along with the mental reminder of how she really felt.

Lips crashing against hers again, Sena moaned into the kiss, her body reacting of its own volition as her back arched pushing her against Deidara. Her hands ran down his body, gently down his arms at first before making her way to his sides. The cloak was covering her like a shield, as though she was for his eyes only.

Her hands brushed across the fabric of his cloak stopping when she felt something hard in his pocket — something that wasn’t him. She ceased her movements and caught his gaze.

‘What’s this?’ Sena asked, retrieving the item from his pocket. Her eyes widened once she realised what it was; a scroll. ‘Did you take this from the temple?’

Deidara pushed himself off her, sitting up so she could see his expression. It mirrored her own; shock and uncertainty.

‘I can explain,’ he said quickly, reaching for it, ‘give me the scroll, and I will explain.’

Sena yanked the scroll out of his reach, a frown forming on her brow.

‘No. You explain now, and I’ll decide whether you get it back,’ Sena said.

‘Damnit Sen, don’t mess around. There are things more important than how you feel about me taking a stupid scroll!’

‘If it’s so important then why didn’t you tell me?’ Anger was building inside her, ‘You lied to me and took this even though I said weeks ago never to take things from the shrines and temples!’

‘Just give it to me! Hm!’

They were both yelling now, unforgivingly bitter, neither backing down.

‘Just tell me!’

‘I can’t! You have your mission, and I have mine!’

‘Don’t be so pathetic! I told you my mission, and you’re still keeping yours from me!’
‘Did you ever stop to think that maybe I’m doing this to protect you!’

‘How could I think that when your actions say otherwise.’

‘Would you stop being so difficult!’ Deidara took strides toward Sena, backing her against the wall. ‘Give me the scroll!’

‘Why should I!’ Sena bent her head back to meet his seething gaze, determined not to back down. He was angry, but she was furious.

Then he grabbed her and pinned her against the wall, hard.

‘Sen, give it to me. Now.’

The emphasis on the now that sent an uneasy feeling through her body.

Sena didn’t move, she couldn’t, he had her pinned, and she wouldn’t be able to escape with the scroll. His gaze shifted from her to the scroll, then back to her. She loosened her grip, and the blond snatched it from her, this time putting it in his pouch beneath his cloak.

A fury had built up inside her, skin burning with a tremor running through her.

‘Get out,’ Sena said, jaw clenched, words coated in disdain.

Deidara scowled at her, fists balled by his sides as he took a step back from her.

‘Fine,’ he spat, before turning to leave, slamming the door behind him.

Sena fell back against the wall, letting out a shaky breath, body shaking from the adrenaline pumping through her body. Her body reacted before her emotions could catch up with her, hands shaking as the tears began to fall.

She didn’t like this; the Sena she had become.

Peeling herself off the wall, she once again crashed onto the bed, letting the tears flow. She missed her home and did not want to go through with the mission anymore. Instead, she allowed herself to succumb to sleep, hoping that somehow it would take her away from this place, back to those she loved.

Then she awoke with a start, eyes blinking furiously as her mind spun into reality. It was then a hand covered her mouth, muffling her scream, her vision impaired. She tried to wriggle free from their grasp, but something knocked against her head, causing her to once again succumb to darkness.

When she woke the second time the first thing she felt was a throbbing pain in her head. She tried to move her wrists to grasp it in pain but it was then she noticed they were bound and cuffed, in chains. It took her groggy mind moments to realise what had happened; she had been captured.

Panic shot through her as she looked around the room, trying to figure out what to do.

‘Well look who is finally awake,’ came an unfamiliar voice.

Sena watched as a figure stepped toward her, her body shaking in fear and anticipation.

What was going to happen?
Neji looked up at the treetops above, through to the blue sky that lay behind the branches. It was just after daybreak, the sun was finally shining through the leaves. Absentmindedly his hand reached inside his pouch; running his fingers over the cold metal of the memento left to him over a month before. He smiled thinking back to the letter, wondering how long it would be before they saw each other again.

‘Neji, Ten Ten, we are almost there let us work twice as hard and get there sooner!’ Lee called from the branch above. Neji’s smiled disappeared at this interruption to his thoughts, but he decided against snapping.

The three gathered their packs and headed toward their destination. The mission was to meet a guide, a woman, who would take them to a sacred crypt that had been robbed. They were to investigate, determine and capture the culprits before returning home. Neji assumed the mission was going to be much like the previous ones they had taken on in the area — routine and by the book.

When they arrived, Lee determined to be there first, they were greeted by the woman on the outskirts of the village. She was hooded, and they could not see her face at first.

‘Are you the ones sent from the leaf?’ She asked.

‘Yes we are, at your service!’ Lee replied enthusiastically.

The woman removed the cloak, revealing her to be a lot younger than Neji had imagined. She had wasn’t very tall and had short red hair and piercing green eyes, resembling the olive colour of the leaves in the forest.

‘My name is Ikue; I will be taking you to my family’s crypt. The one that was defaced is the main room, the oldest part.’

‘Lead the way,’ Ten Ten said, joining Ikue’s side while Lee dropped back behind with Neji.

While Ten Ten asked the necessary questions trying to get a grasp on the situation which they were about to face, Neji listened to her replies, with the occasional interruption from Lee. Routine and by the book.

‘Neji,’ Lee whispered as they dropped back further. ‘This woman is very beautiful.’

Neji grunted in reply, showing no sign of emotion on his face other than a raised brow. He hadn’t expect Lee to comment on something like this. The truth was it was something he initially had noticed as well but did not give it much thought until now.

‘I mean she cannot compete with Sakura.’ Lee continued, Neji’s silence doing nothing to hinder
Neji once again only grunted in reply for his thoughts drifted elsewhere.

The only thing he could think was Ikue’s eyes were indeed beautiful, *but they weren’t that deep, sapphire blue he could drown in.*

Sena looked up, her vision focusing as the figure stepped toward her and into the light. The man was a tall, muscular shinobi with a shark-like appearance and blue-grey skin. He wore a black cloak with red clouds, a symbol of an organisation she knew all too well.

‘Kisame,’ Sena muttered, ‘You are Kisame Hoshigaki, one of the Akatsuki.’

Kisame took a few more steps forward revealing sharp toothed grin, which sent shivers down Sena’s spine.

‘Well don’t we know a lot,’ he said. ‘Understandable I suppose since you are in a secret Akatsuki hideout. At least my reputation proceeds me. Now, why don’t you be a good girl and tell me what exactly it is you are doing here.’

He bent down to the kunoichi’s level, unnervingly close, causing her to press her back further against the wall. In the process, her hands caught in the chains, meeting resistance as she tried to pull free. The kunoichi felt weak, her chakra dangerously low.

‘There’s no point resisting girl, by now I’d say I’ve drained most of your chakra. So while you are in these chains, you will have no choice but to answer my questions.’

‘Sorry, but I don’t answer to you,’ Sena said with as much fire as her tired will would muster.

‘I think you are gravely underestimating the dangerous situation you are in here and don’t think I won’t kill you. This is the last time I will ask nicely; what are you doing here?’

Sena didn’t respond straight away this time. She had to consider her options; otherwise, he was right, she would die. Part of her considered mentioning Deidara, but that could tip the scales against her. There was no easy way out of this except giving them information that would be useful, but she’d have to do it in a way that wouldn’t have her killed immediately after. Sena had to play the part convincingly.

‘I don’t answer to you,’ Sena repeated through narrowed eyes then spat at him to emphasise her stance.

Kisame didn’t even flinch at this; instead, his smile grew. His hand shot out and wrapped around Sena’s neck, pulling her to her feet then slamming her back against the wall as his grip tightened.

‘That was a mistake but oh well guess that gives me a reason to play with you for a bit,’ he said, face closing in towards hers, too close for comfort. There was a sadistic quality that came from in him that caused Sena to shudder. ‘I guess we are doing this the hard way.’

Then the flash of a kunai blade appeared as it cut her cheek and a stinging sensation erupted from the wound. She winced at the sudden pain, biting her lip to muffle the sounds threatening to escape her mouth. She knew she could withstand more than this, a simple cut, she was a kunoichi, and what was to come surely would be worse.
‘Who are you?’ Kisame asked.

‘I’m no one,’ Sena said, straining under his monstrous grip. This only earned her another cut, this time across her chest.

‘Where are you from?’ He asked.

When she didn’t reply he cut her again across her arm, this one deeper and more painful than the others.

‘You better start talking, or I’m going to have to get this blade out,’ Kisame gestured to the larger sword on his back, bigger than any Sena had seen before. ‘This one is special too, can absorb the rest of your chakra, no chains necessary and no way left for you to fight back.’

Sena considered the position she was in. If she were to die here then everything she had done in the past years would have been for nothing, the infiltration will have been a waste. At the same time, she also saw the twisted sort of freedom it held like a weight would be lifted from her shoulders. She wouldn’t have to try anymore.

No. That would be the end, and Sena still had things she needed to do. People, back home she needed to see. Neji.

A smile spread across Sena’s face. A new wave of fearlessness that typically overcame her in battle took hold, and she laughed. Laughed at how ridiculous it was she had been caught, and more so by the people that could benefit from the information she possessed.

‘Maybe you should kill me, for then the information you Akatsuki so desire will be lost with me then.’

Kisame, slammed her head against the wall, causing her to cry out in pain, eyes squeezed shut as her head began to spin. This was the second blow today; surely it had resulted in a concussion. There was no time to dwell on that, for now was the time the information Master Jiraiya had left her would pay off.

‘What is it you know, girl? What do you know of what we seek?’ Kisame asked, but Sena just laughed again.

This time Kisame used the hilt of the kunai and hit her across the face, the hard material embedding into her cheek. A small amount of blood pooled in her mouth, dripping down her lip as she took in a sharp inhale of breath.

‘Well?’ He prodded again.

Sena spat at him again; this time blood splashed across his face.

‘My patience has reached its limit, pity that I guess—’

‘—That’s enough Kisame,’ Came another voice, deep and mysterious.

Kisame released Sena from his grip and she slid down the wall, legs too weak to hold her up. She hit the ground with a thud, landing on all fours, arms shaking as she attempted to hold herself up.

Why did she have to be so weak.

Pushing through the pain, the kunoichi forced her head up to see who the other stranger was. The first thing her eyes spotted was the same cloak that haunted her these past weeks. Then she saw
dark hair and onyx eyes that suddenly turned red.

‘Itachi Uchiha,’ Sena whispered.

‘Hello Sena,’ Itachi replied, cold and monotone.

Her eyes widened, he knew who she was, that meant her cover could be blown. She was going to have to tread carefully.

‘You know this girl Itachi?’ Kisame asked.

‘She is the daughter of Sayuri Uchiha,’ Itachi replied, elaborating no further.

‘She’s an Uchiha huh? I thought you killed them all.’

‘Matsura,’ Sena cut in. ‘Her name was Sayuri Matsura.’

‘Was? Well, I guess that answers that question,’ Kisame turned back to Itachi. ‘Give me a few minutes, and I’ll get the information she has.’

‘No,’ Itachi replied. ‘Your way will take too long.’

Itachi’s gaze fell onto Sena, and their eyes met, Sharingan red and sapphire blue. She knew the consequences of this action; Mangekyō Sharingan was not something she could combat. Kakashi had warned her of this, the mental torture that could be endured with so much as a glance. But it was already too late.

The next thing Sena knew she was floating in another dimension, body paralysed and unable to move anything but her head. A murder of crows appeared before her, taking on the form of Itachi himself. He turned to her, neutral expression still on his face. This was the man who killed her mother’s entire clan. Even though they had shunned her for marrying her father, she still had felt the personal bonds with them.

‘What is it you know?’ Itachi asked.

‘Why should I tell you?’ Sena replied.

‘Because if you do not, you will die.’

Sena didn’t respond, only observed him through narrowed eyes. There was nothing she could do to release this Genjutsu and nothing she could do to stop them from killing her. Except giving the information. A silence hung between them for a long time.

‘How did you get into our hideout?’ Itachi asked. ‘Seals are surrounding this place that can only be undone if you know how to look for them.’

‘I’m a Matsura. By definition I am a seal expert,’ Sena responded.

‘Hm, that is a half-truth.’

There was something about Itachi that made Sena want to trust him, not completely but to keep her alive. Perhaps it was because he was an Uchiha or more likely the fact that she would rather face him than Kisame. Either way, she was running out of ways to deflect, so she decided to tell him the truth.

‘Deidara,’ Sena said. ‘I came here with Deidara.’
'I see.'

Sena observed him as he watched her, knowingly. There was no need to elaborate, Itachi was intelligent, he probably put two and two together. Hopefully, he did not suspect her other mission, the one that affected him.

‘And what of your ties to the Hidden Leaf?’

‘That is not my concern right now. My only priority is finding my father and making him pay for what he has done.’

‘So, it’s revenge you seek. That is what led you to the Akatsuki.’

Sena didn’t reply, instead she dropped her head in an attempt to conceal the half truths she was spilling.

‘Tell me what you know.’

Sena took a deep breath, knowing once she gave him this information there was no going back. Nothing else could be done.

‘I know where you can find Naruto Uzumaki.’
Wounded

Chapter Summary

We find out the fate of Sena.

Sena was released from the Genjutsu after relaying part of the information Master Jiraiya had left her. The deal was they would check out this lead, determine if the information was useful then return to release her. If not then they would kill her. At least that was what Itachi had told her.

Her head was spinning, a sickening feeling in her stomach as if she was going to throw up. The Genjutsu mixed with her chakra depletion was taking it’s toll both physically and mentally on her body. She wasn’t sure how long she would last until she passed out.

‘Well,’ Kisame said, ‘did you get what we needed?’

‘Yes,’ Itachi replied, ‘I know where we need to head. Let’s go.’

‘What? Are you going to tell me why she is here and what we are going to do with her?’

‘No. It’s nothing to be concerned with, just leave her here and let’s go. We know where she is if we need her again.’

With that Kisame followed Itachi and left the room. Sena tried her best to sense their chakra, waiting to make sure they were gone before she moved. It was hard to read the signatures properly, she was exhausted, and out of the energy that she required.

The wound on her arm began to sting; the blood was still pouring out at an alarming rate. If the kunoichi had not have been chained and completely depleted, she may have had a chance of healing herself. But she could not, there was nothing left. Instead, she settled for clutching the wound in her palm, putting as much pressure on it as possible.

If her arms weren’t bound, she would probably be able to rip some material from her clothes and tie it round. She fantasised about breaking the chains with her daggers, but they were left somewhere in the rooms above. She imagined Deidara coming back and releasing her, but who knew whether he would after their spat.

The kunoichi sat up straight in an attempt to take in her surroundings. She had not given much attention to the room she was in while the shock of being captured took over her. The walls were natural, made of compacted dirt, the only source of light came from two torches that hung on walls either side of her. She was underground, beneath the hideout, in a place she hadn’t even known existed.

Judging by the set-out, the kunoichi came to the conclusion it was probably here for the purpose of prisoners and interrogation. Much like she was experiencing right now. It sank in that she was a prisoner of the Akatsuki. If the kunoichi did not get out of this place before Itachi and Kisame returned, then she would be killed.

If she was going to do something, Sena knew it would have to be now for she would only grow weaker as time went on. She just hoped by some miracle someone would find her soon.
Taking the handcuffs in a comfortable position, she wrapped an arm around each chain behind her. Then she leant all of her weight forward onto her shaking legs, feeling the chains slacken then tighten. Sena began to pull, pushing all of her strength against the chains in hopes they would break.

After straining for what seemed like forever she let go, allowing her body to relax. Then after a few heavy breaths, she tried again. And again. And again — until her body collapsed from exhaustion. Her arms were falling to catch her as her body hit the cool surface. Sena turned her head to face the door, her vision blurring — she was losing too much blood.

‘You need to let the good in, girl when the bad threatens to take over.’ Hitomi Sensei’s voice echoed in her mind. ‘We shinobi are all cracked in one way or another and for good reason too, but it allows the light to get in.’

_Think of good things, happy things._ She thought of home, of those she loved.

Then she saw him standing in front of her.

‘Neji?’ Sena whispered through shallow breaths as the blurry figure approached, kneeling down beside her. ‘I’ve missed you.’

The Hyūga smiled that rare smile she tried to bring out every moment she spent with him. Sena tried to reach out to him, but her hand was held back by the force of the chains. Her arm fell to the ground, no longer possessing the energy required to keep it elevated. It wouldn’t be long now.

‘I’ve thought of you a lot you know,’ Sena said, her eyes fluttering closed. ‘You were the one person who understood me even when you didn’t understand yourself.’ She paused to laugh, her body numbing beneath her. ‘I have so much of you in my heart it seems, it helped me keep going. But I think this time, I’m not going to make it.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ Neji retorted, and her eyes snapped open. ‘The Sena I know would not say such foolish things. She wouldn’t give up that easily, especially when a promise was made.’

A warmth inside of her bloomed at the sound of his voice, even though part of her was aware there was no way he could be there, saying those things. A bigger part of her wanted to hold on to this moment, onto the thought of him. He was right; she had promised to return. She had something to go back for, someone to go back to.

Yes, she would fight — fight to live. But she was so drained.

Then darkness took her completely and every moment felt like a lifetime passing. Her thoughts and consciousness became a jumble, spilling out the dreams of the past she had spent so much time evading.

_Sena first noticed the smoke after leaving the Hokage office. It was when she came closer that she realised where it was coming from. It was her home, the Matsura Compound._

_The kunoichi ran for what seemed like hours, screaming for her family as she reached the gate, already able to feel the warmth of the blaze. What could have caused such a disaster? Surely it couldn’t be…_

_She ran toward the Matsura mansion, the flames almost engulfing it completely. The rest of the clan was running around and shouting orders, attempting to put out the blaze with water jutsu and ordinary buckets of water._
‘Tsutomu, Tadao, where are you!’ She screamed toward the blaze.

‘Lady Sena, they have not yet come out of the mansion!’ A man approached her, clutching a bucket between trembling hands. She grabbed him desperately by the collar with both hands.

‘Saio, are you sure they were inside?’ Sena asked.

‘Yes, I saw them go inside myself with Lord Osamu.’

Sena’s eyes widened, a dreadful thought crossing her mind. Could it be that the seal had finally taken effect so soon? No, this had to be a coincidence.

‘Saio order the water style users to focus on the roof, that point there above the main study got it?’ Sena ordered.

‘Yes, Lady Sena. But what do you plan to do?’

‘I’m going in there.’

‘No! You cannot it is too dangerous!’

‘That’s my family in there! Now go!’

Then next thing Sena knew she was inside the study, the walls engulfed in flames.

The first thing she saw was her father hunched over two figures. The second thing she noticed was the bodies of her elder brothers slumped against the wall, kunai embedded in their bodies, blood splattered across them.

‘No!’ Sena screamed diving toward them, the tears already crashing down her face. Her father grabbed her and threw her backwards. ‘But why?’ She asked, then horror filled her as she noticed her father’s usual sapphire blue eyes had become a soulless black.

‘No,’ she whispered, ‘It cannot be, it’s too soon.’

‘Hello my dear,’ her father said, cold and distorted. ‘It’s been awhile. I guess I should thank you for the new body; this one had less of a fight in him.’

The pain took over, the ache in her chest threatening to destroy her. It was all her fault. The bodies of her brothers burned in front of her, the flames drawing near.

The sounds of her crying and screaming mixed with her father’s laugh were deafened by the sound of her heartbeat reverberating throughout her body.

It was all her fault. They died because she wasn’t strong enough.

Then Sena was dragged from her nightmare by another voice, a voice she was certain was not another hallucination.

‘Sen,’ it called, muffled yet loud enough for her to hear. ‘Sen!’

It was Deidara; it had to be, he was the only person to call her that. She tried to call out but her throat was dry, and she couldn’t muster the energy. She wriggled trying to sit up, the chains clanging together in the process but her body refused to budge. The only hope was for him to come down and find her.
Time passed excruciatingly slow, as she heard his voice become more frustrated and frantic. Then, finally, she heard the sound of his footsteps descending the stairs. Thank Kami.

The door handle began to twist, but it had been locked behind the others, probably taking the key with them. Sena hoped Deidara’s persistent and stubborn nature would flow through at this moment.

And it did. The door in front of her exploded open, Deidara’s figure emerging from the smoke and dust, but Sena could only watch, her body unwilling to shift. Did this mean she was going to make it?

The blond took a sharp intake of breath as his gaze locked onto to her wounded body. She saw how the shock reverberated through his trembling body through lowered lashes.

‘Sen!’ He yelled dropping beside her his hands fiddling with her cuffed wrists.

‘Deidara,’ She managed to say, her voice hoarse and barely audible.

‘Who did this to you?’ His voice was shaky, his anger erupting like an active volcano. ‘I swear they will pay; I will kill them. Tell me who it was!’

The blond finally got Sena’s wrists free, pushing them aside before lifting her body upright. One of his hands steadied her by the waist the other cupped her cheek, bringing her eye-line to meet his.

‘Kisame and Itachi came—’

‘Itachi did this?’ Deidara cut in, his eyes fiery with rage, his jaw clenched.

Sena closed her eyes and shook her head slightly.

‘It was Kisame,’ she said, bringing her shaky hand and pressing it against her cut cheek. Deidara grabbed it in his, running his thumb across it tenderly.

‘I swear to you I will make them pay,’ Deidara said before scooping her up in his arms. ‘I’m sorry,’ He whispered pressing a kiss to her forehead, ‘I’m so sorry I should have been here to stop them, hm.’

The blond carried her out of the hideout, his arms clutching her tight. Sena felt a cold breeze blow through her hair, soothingly. Her head fell backwards, and she could see the stars above her, twinkling and glowing. A thought crossed her mind that caused her to smile.

As long as we are under the same stars, I will be alright.

Then she passed out, succumbing to darkness once again.

— — —

Sena awoke in a disorientated haze. At first, she thought she was dead, but when she saw the bandages around her body, the kunoichi realised that she was alive. Each blink, as she looked at the room around her, brought to mind more questions.

Before she had time to gather her thoughts the swung door open and a woman entered. Sena watched as the woman froze in front of her, her brown eyes widening a small gasp escaping her lips.

‘Oh, you’re finally awake!’ The woman said, taking a seat on the bed beside her, inspecting her
How long was I out?’ Sena said, stretching her arms above her head. She winced as the stretched skin pulled around the cut.

‘Be careful, you need to rest your wounds and allow your chakra to restore,’ The woman said helping her adjust her bandage. ‘And you’ve been out for two days.’

‘Two days?’ Sena stared at the woman, eyes catching her long blonde hair. ‘How did I get here?’

‘Deidara brought you.’

‘Wait, Deidara. You mean you—’

‘Yes, I know who he is.’

‘Then why do you help him?’ Sena blurted out, without thinking. She mentally cursed herself for being so careless.

‘Why do you?’ The woman retorted, frown etched on her face.

‘Well we—’ Sena stopped to consider this. ‘It’s more him helping me.’

‘Hmph.’ The woman’s expression softened. ‘Yeah, I figured you had him wrapped around your finger. Can’t say I’ve ever seen him care for another human being before with my own two eyes, let alone bring someone other than himself to me to get patched up.’

Sena’s brow raised at that statement. It didn’t surprise her really, but there was something about the idea of her being the only person Deidara cared about that made her feel unique.

‘But anyway I should probably get him.’ The woman stood and walked to the door.

‘Thank you,’ Sena said as her hand found the knob. The woman smiled at her, a warmth in her eyes.

‘It isn’t me you should be thanking,’ The woman replied before she was out the door.

Sena looked down at her palms, blistered and bandaged from the chains she attempted to pull. It was then it hit her that she was alive — she had made it out and was safe again. At least she was for now.

Deidara entered the room in a flash, the door slamming shut behind him startling Sena out of her train of thought. He looked at her, his eyes intense but also red and blotchy. Had he been crying? No, more likely he just hadn’t slept.

‘Kami,’ the blond said, cupping her face in his hands, his forehead pressing against hers, ‘I thought I had lost you, hm.’

Sena lifted a weary hand to his cheek and ran her thumb across it, gently.

‘I’m alright,’ she whispered.

Deidara leaned in and kissed her, softly, with a gentleness behind his lips that usually held aggression. His lips lingered against hers as he pulled away, a sigh escaping, one of relief.

‘I am never letting you go again, hm.’ Deidara caressed her cheek with his hand.
Sena’s hand found his shoulder and gently pushed him away, so their eyes locked. She inhaled a deep breath before releasing him from her touch.

‘I want you to tell me why you took the scroll.’ Sena looked at him, determined, a part of her still unforgiving. ‘You owe me that much.’

The blond turned away from her and sighed as if considering his words carefully. After everything that had happened, she needed to find a way to trust him again. Otherwise, what was the point of the mission, she would get nowhere.

‘I’ll tell you, but you have to understand there are just some details I just can’t give you Sen. It is too dangerous, hm.’

Sena nodded, at least this was a start.

‘My mission was to retrieve the scroll,’ Deidara began. ‘It’s necessary for the next step.’

‘What next step?’

‘I can’t tell you exactly. The scroll holds information about sealing certain things in this world, things that aren’t easily sealed. The leader plans to seal them.’

‘This is has something to do with why the Akatsuki is after people like Naruto isn’t it.’

Deidara lifted a finger to her lips, catching on the bottom lip as he dragged it down slowly. His eyes shifting to evade hers as they searched the ground.

‘I can’t tell you anymore. I will not risk you getting hurt again, hm.’

He did not have to say anything though — he had answered her question by evading it even if he had not intended to. There was the possibility that he would tell her more over time, this was an opportunity she had to keep with.

Sena reached out and placed her hand on his, causing him to turn toward her again. There was a glimmer of hope in his eyes when they met hers, and she gave him a small smile.

‘Thank you,’ she whispered.

She shifted aside for him to lay next to her, wrapping his arms securely around her body as he did. He planted soft kisses on her cheek and down her neck before burying his face there. And Sena allowed him to do so, even though she wished she were lying there with someone else, the kunoichi relaxed knowing, for now, she was safe.
Within My Reach

Chapter Summary

Neji POV of his mission. Sena POV of her recovery.

‘He’s over there,’ Neji called as they scattered through the trees. ‘Lee, Ten Ten, be ready he is going to put up a fight soon.’

The two yelled back in response, before assuming their formation on approaching the assailant. The team had tracked down one of the culprits of the tomb desecration before he fled into the forest. However, Neji could easily keep him in his sights with his Byakugan.

‘Ikue, make sure you stay quiet and out of the way,’ Neji whispered, and she nodded.

The man stopped on the ground below, turning toward them in a battle stance. They stopped just above the man on the tree tops above, close yet out of sight. Neji gestured for Ten Ten to make her move while he and Lee would follow shortly after.

Ten Ten nodded back readying her weapons scroll, allowing anything and everything to rain upon him.

The man wielded earth hand signs, creating a shield above to stop the attack. Neji and Lee followed quickly, striking him one on each side. He managed to dodge both their blows, retreating a distance. The man laughed as he began to wield hand signs again.

‘You think you three leaf ninja can defeat me Sadao Toyo, you’re just a bunch of novices compared to me,’ The man called.

Neji’s brow furrowed at this. They were more than mere novices, and he was ready to prove that, but he knew better than to let such a petty insult rile him up. Lee on the other hand—

‘We shall just have to prove ourselves then!’ Lee called running ahead to attack and causing Neji to sigh.

Just before Lee reached Sadao, he finished his hand signs, and the earth opened up beneath them. Neji leaped to avoid it then jumped to the side where Lee had fallen in. Ten Ten was at his side in moments, reaching down to offer Lee a hand up.

Neji turned to find the enemy heading toward Ikue, ready to strike.

No, he thought.

Then without a moments hesitation, he ran to her aid, jumping in front of her with a rotation as protection. Sadao was sent flying into a tree. Neji watched him slide down unconscious through heavy breaths. Neji huffed at the pathetic display.

Then he turned to Ikue who now stood behind him, clutching to the fabric of his shirt shaking slightly. He turned to face her, a neutral expression on his face.
‘Hey you will be alright, now,’ Neji said.

‘You saved me,’ Ikue whispered, her eyes shining as they looked up at him. It made him feel awkward and uneasy, but even he had to admit she did have beautiful eyes.

‘I was just doing what the mission required,’ Neji replied.

Then much to Neji’s surprised Ikue launched herself at him, hugging him tightly. The Hyūga tensed, arms stiff by his sides while the girl embraced him.

‘Thank you,’ Ikue whispered.

‘You’re welcome but why are you hugging me?’ Neji asked, brows raised unsure what to do in the situation.

‘Oh,’ She murmured and quickly retracted her arms. ‘Sorry, I’m just…grateful.’

Neji grunted in reply, unsure of what else to say to the girl. It was then he remembered Sadao, as he glanced toward the tree where he fell. His eyes widened once he realised he wasn’t there.

‘What happened to Sadao?’ Neji called to the others who quickly looked back at the tree with confused expressions.

The Hyūga began to search the forest with his Byakugan but could not find any trace of anyone other than them in the forest.

‘He’s gone?’ Neji said, uncertain of to how it could have happened.

‘He can’t have just vanished?’ Ten Ten asked questioningly, approaching with Lee.

‘Perhaps a transportation Jutsu?’ Lee asked.

‘He should have just reappeared in the forest if it were that.’ Neji replied. ‘But still, I can’t be sure what happened. We should split up and search just in case.’

‘Right.’ They both replied, before scattering.

_How could a man simply disappear?_

— — —

Sena awoke the next day wrapped in a tangle of limbs with Deidara. His face as usual was buried in the crook of her neck breathing softly against her skin, causing goosebumps to form up her body. His arms were wrapped tightly around her, tighter than usual but she figured it was just the scare of her injuries.

The kunoichi attempted to shift, but that only caused the blond’s grip to tighten. She sighed, laying back into his embrace, accepting the fact she would not be moving anytime soon. Had it been under different circumstances she may have been inclined to enjoy it, but she was itching to move and check how she was healing.

She thought about everything that had happened. Deidara was beginning to let slip information and
may even let on to something big. It was a good start. But then all leads of her father had brought her no closer to finding him, to seeing him. There was something strange about his movements that she just couldn’t figure out. What was his goal?

Then Deidara began to wriggle against her, a sign he was finally waking up. He groaned softly before pressing a trail of kisses up her neck. Lingering there for a moment, before mumbling a good morning he sat up and rubbed his eyes. She noticed they weren’t a blotchy red anymore.

‘Hey,’ he whispered before leaning down to kiss her, this time on the lips. It was a chaste kiss, almost sweet. Almost.

‘Hey,’ Sena replied, her hands running softly up his.

Deidara leaned down, about to kiss her again when there was a knock at the door. His expression dropped as he groaned, letting his fingers trace her lips for a moment.

‘Come in,’ Sena called.

The door opened to reveal the blonde woman from the evening before. She approached the bed as Deidara reluctantly got up, allowing her to perform her routine checks on Sena’s injuries.

‘How are you feeling?’ The woman asked. ‘My name is Harue by the way.’

‘Sena,’ she replied, ‘And I’m feeling more like myself. Thank you.’

‘Good, I’m glad. You should be able to leave tomorrow as long as you keep resting you shall be fully recovered.’

‘Finally,’ Deidara moaned, and Sena shot him a look before returning her gaze to Harue.

‘Thank you again, really,’ Sena said.

‘You’re welcome,’ She replied. ‘Oh Deidara, a message came for you not long ago.’

‘A message?’ He asked, ‘Well do you have it, hm?’

Harue handed him the paper giving him an unfriendly stare in the process. Deidara snatched it from her hands and wasted no time reading it.

After replacing Sena’s bandages, Harue left the room, and she waited for Deidara to finish.

‘What is it?’ Sena asked, impatient and anxious.

‘There’s a new lead come up, hm’ Deidara murmured.

‘A lead for what?’

‘Your father.’
The Girl He Loves

Chapter Summary

Sena Pov, Neji Pov. The two find new leads while one comes to a realisation.

‘Well,’ Sena began, ‘do you think this lead will prove useful?’

‘I don’t know Sen,’ Deidara stripped off behind her, threw his clothes down and plunged a foot into the tub. ‘I do know that I hate this hideout, and I just want a real shower with warmer water, hm.’

‘The tedious life of a criminal,’ the kunoichi replied, not bothering to hold back the sarcasm. She watched as Deidara slid down, causing the water, heaving restlessly, to beat against the edges and splash out onto the floor.

‘Not so bad now that I have you.’ A smirk appeared across the blond’s face as he eyed her suggestively. ‘Why don’t you come and join me, hm?’

‘No.’ The kunoichi said. Bringing her face nearer to the mirror, she rubbed an ointment over the scar across her cheek and then over her lips. ‘We don’t have time to mess around. Just hurry up so we can find this informant of yours.’

The blond groaned and rolled his eyes in reply.

‘Spare me your juvenile acts please; you know this is important to me.’ Sena let her hair down from the messy bun, the raven waves falling behind her as she combed furiously to untangle them. It had been days since she had groomed herself properly.

She heard the water slosh as Deidara stood up, and walked up behind her, soaking wet from the bath. He looked at her in the mirror smirk back on his face as he pressed it beside hers. She glared at him, as if not to give in to the game she saw forming inside his head. There was no time for this.

‘Look out you’re spilling water everywhere!’ Sena groaned as he nuzzled his face into her neck. The kunoichi tried to push him away, but before she could, he had already taken hold of her waist, lifting her bridal style. Then, to her dismay, he dropped her into the water causing, even more, water to splash out of the tub. The kunoichi surfaced, coughing and spluttering the water out, as she clenched the side.

‘Deidara!’ She yelled, but the blond was lost in laughter. She shot him an unamused look before grabbing him but the shoulders and pulling him in with her. It only caused his laughter to increase as she tried to push her wet bangs out of her eyes.

‘Come here,’ the blond mused, tone softer. The kunoichi pouted as he wiped her bangs out of the way and met her gaze. ‘You’re cute like this, hm,’ he murmured.

Sena went to open her mouth to say something, but he took the opportunity to kiss her. She half-heartedly attempted to resist, but it wasn’t long before she caved, allowing her lips to move against his, slowly. Deidara pulled away from the kiss, hands sliding down her sides and taking refuge in
the small of her back.

‘You could have at least let me take the rest of my clothes off before you decided to throw me in,’ Sena said.

‘It’s just underwear,’ Deidara replied, his hand stroking up and down her back. ‘Besides I can take them off for you now.’ He pressed kisses down her throat slow and teasing, causing a shiver to run up her spine. She felt him smile against her skin.

‘I told you before,’ she said, making no physical attempt to stop him, ‘we don’t have time for this.’

Deidara pulled away at this, bringing her closer, so their noses were grazing.

‘You stress too much, and you need to relax.’ He arched his head back slightly, so their lips ghosted each other, brushing gently between breaths. His hand made quick work of her bra, undoing it promptly while the other clutched her waist. ‘I promise you that we have time, Sen.’

And with that she caved, finding herself wanting to relax for once and let all the pent up frustration this mission had raised to be forgotten — even if it were only for a few moments. Her, hands found Deidara’s face, and she tugged him toward her and into another kiss. This one deeper, passionate and answering a question he had not said aloud.

— — —

Neji and the others had found no trace of Sadao in the forest. However, Ikue gave them another possible trail to follow. There was a group of bandits that operated nearby using the forest as cover. They decided it would be the best course of action to investigate before giving up entirely.

They were about to leave when Ikue grabbed Neji’s attention.

‘Ah Neji,’ she began, cheeks a bright shade of red, ‘can I ask you something before you go?’

Neji nodded. ‘Ten Ten, Lee, go on, I’ll catch up.’ Then he turned back to Ikue who was looking down at her feet, playing with a button on her shirt. ‘What is it?’

‘Um I was just wondering if, m-maybe when you get back we could g-get dinner or something,’ Ikue asked stuttering over her words, not looking him in the eye, ‘If you can, that is.’

‘Why would you want to do that?’ Neji asked.

‘Oh, I just thought, well you saved my life, I’d like to repay you with something. Maybe a date?’ Her cheeks were an even brighter red now.

Neji’s eyes widened at her request. The girl had asked him on a date when she barely knew him for a few days.

As he considered this request he studied her carefully, the way the girl shifted on her feet, the way she avoided his gaze and the way her red hair shone in the light. Lee had been right when he had mentioned her beauty; she was pleasing on the eyes. Not that Neji ever worried about such trivial things. However, he couldn’t deny that a part of him indulged in her appearance at this moment and what was more; she was attracted to him.
Then he realised it would not make a difference how beautiful any woman standing before him was, now or in the future. Because to Neji all other women were the same because Ikue smells of lemongrass, not of lilacs; she is not menacing and mysterious. Ikue’s hair did not have wild, raven coloured waves that fell just below her waist, framing her like a lover; Ikue’s eyes are beautiful, sweet and a calming olive, but they are no deep sapphire, fearless and compassionate. Ikue will stand there awkward, timid, will turn her head and fiddle with her top; Ikue’s stance will not challenge him, hand poised on the hips as she smiled in triumph. She did not shatter his existence with her touch; she did not leave him wanting. Because Ikue… Ikue is not Sena. And Sena is the beginning and end of everything he knew.

‘I’m sorry, I can’t,’ Neji replied taking a step backwards.

‘Is it because there is someone else?’ Ikue asked, with softness and understanding but also a disappointment.

Neji didn’t reply verbally, but his body gave his answer clearly.

Yes, he thought in reply, yes there is only her.

His body stiffened, eyes cast down toward his hand which, out of habit, took refuge in his pouch, fingers brushing against the cool metal. A part of him, deep inside his chest ached in her absence, longing to see her again.

‘Do you love them?’ Ikue asked.

‘I…She—’ Neji sighed, unable to formulate the words or say them aloud and at the same time felt he had already said too much.

‘Would you’ Ikue hesitated, fiddling with her shirt, ‘Can you tell me about her?’

The truth was he had never told anyone how he felt about Sena, barely even able to admit it to himself.

What could he say about her? What was it about her that made him feel this way?

Neji recalled pleasant moments spent with the kunoichi on the slope of the hillside the nights she insisted on watching the stars, in the garden, on the rooftop, days spent sparring at the training grounds; and those of others where they were alone, free, but also together. The one that stood out most was the day Sena had revealed her curse seal to him, proving that he was not alone in the world, extending forward her friendship completely and unconditionally.

For that was how the kunoichi loved. It was wild, unlimited and above all unconditional. She had never expected anything in return, yet he found himself wanting to give her everything. And even though the world had given her every reason to be hard, to be cruel, she remained soft and compassionate. Neji admired that about her most; that when he allowed himself to become bitter, she was there in all her sweetness.

It was so clear to him now with all these emotions and feelings he felt for her rushed to the surface. Yet he still could not bring himself to say the words aloud. But he knew he had to say something.

‘Her heart…’ Neji began, soft and barely audible, ‘always understood mine.’

With that he turned around abruptly, not bothering to wait for a reaction as he set out after the others. There was no time for talk now, for he had a mission to complete after all.
Still, as he moved through the trees, his thoughts remained on Sena.

— — —

Sena and Deidara came to a bridge in the forest nearby, where they were due to meet the informant. Sena stood there, leaning against the tree Deidara was sitting on, a branch above, as she twirled her dagger in hand. It had been over an hour, and she was becoming impatient, and internally she was anxious.

‘Some informant of yours,’ Sena muttered. ‘Can’t even show up on time.’

‘You usually know when to make good use of your mouth but running it like that now is just annoying,’ Deidara replied.

Sena shot him a dangerous look, but he ignored her.

‘Keep that up, and I’ll go back to doing this on my own.’ Sena threatened.

This time Deidara was the one to shoot a look, unnerving her slightly but not enough to scare her.

‘He’s here,’ the blond said, jumping down and gesturing for her to follow. ‘Come on.’

The kunoichi sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose at his mood change before complying. She watched as a man approached them, noticing a stain that looked to be dried blood on his shirt. He had been in combat recently it seemed.

‘Deidara,’ the man said, nodding in his direction.

‘Sadao what took you so long, hm?’ Deidara asked. ‘If Sasori were here he would not be impressed.’

‘Sorry I ran into some trouble, had to lose a couple of pursuers. But I have the information you asked for.’

‘Well, out with it then.’

‘The man in question contacted my group and organised an extraction of sorts. We helped him and in turn found out what he was after.’

‘What was he after?’ Sena asked.

‘Who’s the girl?’ Sadao asked.

‘She’s with me, now answer the question.’ Deidara’s tone harsher than Sena had heard before but she didn’t question it.

‘We infiltrated the crypt and took what he sought — a scroll containing information on unbinding. The group trashed the place to make it look like a typical robbery or defacing.’

‘And?’ Deidara asked.

‘Here,’ Sadao retracted a scroll from his pouch and tossed it to him. ‘I made a copy since we had to
hand over the other one.’

‘Is that all?’ Deidara asked.

‘One last thing. I don’t think they were fooled into thinking it was a simple defacing. They sent three Leaf Shinobi after us, almost had me too. It’s best to be careful around these parts now.’

Deidara nodded before pocketing the scroll.

‘Deidara,’ came a strange, deep voice. ‘I see you are impatient as ever.’

Sena turned to see a man, short, as if hunched over, adorning an Akatsuki robe with a mask over his face. She tensed at the sight of him, remembering her last encounter with Kisame another member. The kunoichi hoped this one would not go the same way.

‘Sasori, my man, you are the one who is late. Aren’t you the one who hates to be kept waiting, hm.’
Broken Hearts

Chapter Summary

Sena, Neji and Deidara all in one place. What will happen?

There was an explosion in the distance, deeper in the forest and close enough for them to feel the rumble. Sadao ran without explanation towards it, not bothering with formalities. Deidara turned toward Sena, gesturing his head in the direction he ran.

‘Sen, be a dear and take care of him for me. We don’t want him to alert anyone of our intentions,’ Deidara said.

Sena nodded before turning toward the bridge, retrieving her chakra daggers from her pouch. She would need to hurry if she wanted to keep up with him and get it done quickly.

‘Once I finish up some business with Sasori I’ll join you,’ the blond added.

And with that Sena was off in pursuit of Sadao, knowing full well what she needed to do. If they were to have any luck finding her father, then they couldn’t allow anyone in contact with him the opportunity to pass on information or know that they were on his trail again. Not when they were so close.

The kunoichi crossed the bridge and entered the forest, leaping across branches as she trailed Sadao on the path beneath. She took a moment to examine the chakra signatures around her, sensing numerous people nearby. Her body tensed as she felt some familiar patterns but forced herself to keep moving. There was no time to stop and figure out who they were, especially at this speed.

Approaching the battle that seemed to be unfolding, Sena jumped to higher branches, in the hopes of getting a better view and cover. She instantly froze, palm gripping the tree beside her once she realised who it was beneath her.

Right before her eyes stood Neji, Lee and Ten Ten, all in battle formation. Surrounding them were four bandits, already dead and discarded on the ground, some embedded with kunai, while others were beaten and bloody. Perhaps she would not need to do anything after all — the team could kill Sadao, and she would keep her mission a secret.

Still the possibility of seeing Neji again up close; to talk to him, to touch him, even embrace him after he had remained nothing more than a fixed memory this past month. It would mean all of this was worth it, worth something. Because all she needed was him to wrap his arms around her and she would be home. But she couldn’t allow herself to give into this temptation, not unless it was necessary. Even then she would have to be careful.

So she watched and waited, hoping they would remain safe but also that she would be able to speak to him.

It was then the kunoichi saw Sadao strike, and she knew she had no choice; she had to move.
‘Ten Ten look out!’ Neji called as he saw Sadao move behind her ready to attack. Then he saw something else move, something fast.

A blinding flash materialised into an illuminating sphere of electricity, and within it loomed a shape, assuming contours and curves before his eyes. Neji recognised it at once. Those sapphire blue eyes deep as an ocean, the wild, raven waves that twisted down toward poised hips he knew so well. What he did not recognise was the expression upon the face. It was a look of rage and fury, the face of vengeance, destruction and death. It was Sena.

Then in one swift motion, she struck her chakra dagger through Sadao’s chest, the chakra and force driving it all the way through so her hand came out the other side. Neji swore he heard him breathe out a ‘why?’ But he was too awestruck to be sure. It wasn’t like him to lose focus in battle, even when Sena was there — but this, this was different. He had not expected to see her at all.

‘Sorry Sadao,’ Sena said, cold. ‘I can’t let you spread the information you kindly gathered for us.’ The kunoichi clutched onto the man's shoulder, retracting her arm from his chest the watched as he fell to the ground, dead.

Shock still paralysed Neji. As she took her hand, the blood dripping down her wrist and wipe it against her clothes, he found all he could do was watch. Even with his byakugan activated he couldn't believe his eyes. But the kunoichi really was there, chakra signatures and all, standing before him, wielding unknowingly, that intoxicating presence he craved.

‘Sena?’ He whispered, finally able to speak as he took a step toward her.

He heard her breath hitch. Then he saw three kunai flying toward him, one landing at his feet, the other two in front of Lee and Ten Ten.

‘That’s quite close enough,’ Sena said turning to face him.

_Wait, was she attacking him?_

No, he thought, _She would not have missed._

‘What’s going on with you?’ Neji asked, this time remaining still.

Sena lifted her head, her expression neutral, not betraying any stirring of emotion or hint of the kunoichi he knew. His eyes found hers, holding that usual intense stare that stirred something within the Hyūga, but this time it also held something else, something different like a darkness. His eyes narrowed as he searched the fathomless depths of sapphire he had resisted drowning in many times before. It was there he finally saw a flicker of emotion, like a message communicating one thing; danger.

As Neji looked closer, a wave of unease overcame him. He observed the abrasions across her body, his gaze moving from the cuts on her cheek and arm, to the bruises, a mixture of green and purple around her wrist and throat. Noting the bags under her sunken eyes, once bright with affection, were now darker, cold almost dispassionate. _Almost._ For Neji knew better, he knew deep down Sena would never lose her compassion.

But what was done to her? A wave of anger came over him at the thought of someone hurting her, of touching her against her will.
‘I suggest,’ Sena began coldly, eyes fixed on Neji, ‘that you turn around and run along back to your village, back to your Hokage. Now, before all of you die.’

‘Our Village?’ Ten Ten began, ‘but—’

Sena shot her a bone chilling glare, lifting another kunai in her direction, as if ready to throw it. Then Lee stepped forward.

‘Sena it is your home too, why not come back with us?’

‘No.’ The kunoichi said. ‘That is not important anymore; there is nothing for me there right now. The only thing I care about is my mission and those whom it concerns.’

Neji watched as Sena’s brow furrowed, a worried look in her eyes. There was an irritation building up inside her, he could tell by the way she gripped the kunai and the way her mouth twitched. What was she trying to tell him? He had to find out.

‘Sena, come with us.’ Neji offered out his hand, hoping she would take it so he could take her away from here.

Her expression softened for a split second, a second easily missed by those not looking for it, but Neji was. He saw the emotions clearly; regret mixed with tenderness. She was trying to make them leave that was certain, but he could not figure out why. Then her expression hardened again, the mask, cold and dispassionate reappearing.

‘No.’ She raised her hands as if readying herself to perform hand signs.

‘Wow Sen,’ came an unfamiliar voice. ‘You really did a number on Sadao, hm.’

Neji looked up to see a white figure, looking like a bird, a man standing on top. The man had blond hair and a grin that made him feel even more uneasy than he had before. That’s when he saw it, the black cloak adorned with red clouds; he was an Akatsuki.

‘Is everything sorted Deidara?’ Sena asked, and the blond nodded.

‘Yes, it’s time to get out of here, finally.’ Deidara said before gesturing toward Neji and his team. ‘Run into some trouble I see, don’t worry I can take care of them, hm.’

Neji’s eyes widened as he prepared his battle stance.

‘No,’ Sena said, monotone and emotionless. ‘They aren’t worth it. Let’s just go.’

‘Feeling sentimental, are we? They are from your village.’

‘I gave up on my village. They can send that message to the Hokage themselves.’

‘Fine.’ Deidara offered her a hand. ‘Come on Sen, let’s go, hm.’

Neji watched as she reached up to take it, feeling his body move forward without thinking, without caring. He couldn’t lose her.

‘Wait,’ Neji said, trying his best to keep his desperation at bay. ‘You can still come back. It’s not too late to come back with us.’

Sena froze and stared at him, hand stopping mid air just short of Deidara’s grasp.
‘Sen,’ Deidara said, tone harshening. ‘Come on, take my hand and let’s go, hm.’

— — —

Sena looked over at Neji standing there before her, still holding faith she would come and willing to put himself on the line. She had to keep her emotions and words in check. Otherwise, she would risk their safety. A part of her couldn’t help but ache inside, the way he looked at her, worried and full of love, even after what she had just done. That moment the kunoichi knew she did not deserve any of his affections.

Still, as the kunoichi watched him stand there, feeling as if leaving him meant his world would crumble. That’s what hurt her most. To feel like if she left him, his love was going to crumble away to dust.

No, she thought, she knew better than that. Neji was strong and understood her which is exactly why he would survive — she would make sure of it even if it were the last thing she did.

What the kunoichi would give to run into his arms at that moment, to leave everything else behind and run. But she couldn’t, it was impossible.

Sena turned back to Deidara, who was looking down on her and watching her closely. There was an intense look in his eyes, one that sent shivers down her spine. The kind of look an animal got right before it ensnared its prey. But even though it scared her, Sena saw through that facade. She could see the pain in his eyes, the hurt, the betrayal that reflected in his gaze.

The subtle ache in her chest that had formed in his absence manifested now like a sickness, taking hold of her heart. The kunoichi thought it might burst.

‘You have some nerve trying to take what is mine!’ Deidara called, grip tightening on Sena, fingertips digging into her side, painfully. He turned back to her, a sly smile sprawled on his face as he brought his lips to her ear. ‘You know, killing them also sends a message. Why don’t we send them out with a bang, hm?’

The words were cold and hit Sena like shards of ice. And as she watched the clay creatures run down his arm from his hand-mouts, her eyes widened. She had to do something if she were going to be able to protect them, protect Neji, but she couldn’t blow her cover in the process. Then an idea came to her mind.

As they began to ascend into the sky, she grabbed Deidara by the collar pulling his face forward, crushing her lips against his. It was the last thing she wanted Neji to see, and it pained her to do it, but it was better than him being dead. Anything was better than that. She would do anything to protect him.

Her hands slid behind the blond’s back strategically, coming together as they removed themselves from his touch. Deidara kissed her still, aggression behind every flex and motion as she felt him
claw at her clothing, attempting to find skin. Confident he was absorbed in the moment she began performing hand signs behind his back.

The kunoichi held the last one, waiting for the right moment to release it. It had to be the moment before the explosion otherwise it would risk him seeing it. Then as Deidara pulled away from her, pulling his on hands up ready to execute the explosion, she released it.

Flying away from where they once stood, Sena watched as the forest exploded, tearing the trees down in its path as the dust and dirt erupted into the air. The kunoichi closed her eyes and prayed she had done it in time, still channelling all her chakra into her release.

Please, she thought, Please be alive.

Once Deidara was satisfied with the explosion — his art, he turned back to face her something darkening in his gaze. He pushed her down, her back hitting the clay beneath as he climbed on top of her.

‘Tell me you’re mine.’ Deidara demanded with harshness, need and desperation all at once as he pulled her against him, rough and careless.

‘I’m yours,’ Sena whispered, attempting to elicit tenderness from him but it was too late for he was fixed in his need and he crashed his lips against hers.

It was a kiss, like the many they had shared before but it was more than that, it was his threat, his command and his fear erupting, bubbling to the surface like a once dormant volcano. And even as she kissed back she felt a fear building up inside of her. A fear of him, what they would become.

‘You’re mine,’ Deidara growled, biting her bottom lip, hard, enough to draw blood. ‘You can forget about him now. You’re mine and mine alone, hm.’

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Neji waited for death, embraced it even, but found it never came.

Part of him was relieved while the other was disappointed. Daring to open his eyes from the crouched position he sat in between Lee and Ten Ten, he saw it immediately. A sphere surrounded them, like a shield, buzzing of lightning and chakra, illuminating a bright forcefield that protected them from the explosion. The shock of situation cleared his mind for a moment, a small smile forming on his face as he found himself surrounded by familiar energy. A sign of the real Sena.

‘What is this?’ Ten Ten asked.

‘A shield, one full of powerful chakra,’ Neji replied as he looked over it with his Byakugan.

Then the shield faded, falling to nothing and Neji turned to the others, both of them dazed and confused. Then the simplicity of the moment passed and the reality of what transpired set in. He knew what they needed to do now.

‘Get up, both of you.’ Neji directed, walking passed them. ‘We need to leave now.’

‘What do you mean?’ Lee asked.
‘There’s no time to waste,’ Neji replied. ‘We need to get back to the village now.’

He jumped up to the tree branch and began leaping further into the forest, hearing the others follow him. As he moved, he thought back to moments before when Sena had been standing right in front of him. So close he could almost touch her, but the opportunity was taken from him.

A sickening feeling overcame him as he remembered the kiss. The way Deidara had held her, the way he touched her; called her his as if she were his property. It caused a surge of anger to pump through him, feeling his fists clench at the memory of Sena’s lips against Deidara’s.

His skin felt hot, irritated, his brow in a permanent frown, twitching from the intensity of his frustration. Sena was covered in bruises and scars, littering her body as if she had been tortured.

Neji knew if he ever saw Deidara again he would kill him, no question. And the next time he saw Sena he would save her from this fate she had found herself in, unwillingly he was sure.

The first moment he saw her after the rage and vengeance disappeared from her expression; he remembered wanting to tell her — tell her everything. And that hurt because even though some things he felt scared him, he still wanted her to know. Kami he wanted her to see, to understand the things even he didn’t fully comprehend them himself. But he couldn’t because she was with him. Everything he knew about her aside, Sena was with Deidara. And he needed to find out why.

‘Neji I don’t understand what just happened,’ Ten Ten called from behind. ‘Why was Sena with that guy and why did she attack us like that?’

‘It did seem very out of character for her, has she abandoned the village?’ Lee asked.

‘No,’ Neji replied without hesitation. ‘No, she is still one of us.’

‘Then can you please tell me what happened back there?’ Ten Ten asked. ‘We almost died!’

‘No, you wouldn’t have died. Not as long as Sena was there, and it’s because she was that you remained safe.’

‘What are you talking about didn’t you see what she did, she threw kunai at us! And that look she gave me was intense.’

‘Think about it Ten Ten, she had plenty of opportunities to kill you, and she didn’t. Not once did one of her kunai come close to hitting you, not once did she threaten your safety.’

‘But she did tell us we would die if we did not leave,’ Lee interjected.

‘Think about her words Lee, the way she chose them so carefully, so precisely. I believe it was to send us a message,’ Neji replied.

‘What do you mean Neji?’ Lee asked.

‘Just before the man turned up,’ Neji began, ‘she told us to return to the village, our Hokage before we die. She did not threaten us, but rather I think she was trying to warn us to leave before he came.’ Neji thought over each moment, every word. ‘If I’m correct then that also means she mentioned the Hokage for a reason. And to find out what that reason is we have to get to Lady Tsunade. I think she knows exactly what is going on; she would have been the one to assign her last mission after all. It will be the confirmation we need to know she has not betrayed us.’

‘But “before we die” that’s a big jump to conclude it was just a warning.’
‘See that is what I keep coming back to as well,’ Neji replied. ‘But like I said before it’s the wording, the way she said it. Her body made no move to attack, her words though serious were not threatening. It was supposed to be a warning, but she couldn’t be forthcoming about it, she had to have faith we would understand.’

*She had faith he would understand.*

‘I guess that makes sense but are you sure we can trust that?’

‘Didn’t you see the shield Ten Ten? Neither you, I or Lee cast that ninjutsu. It had to be Sena.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes. I saw the hand signs myself, even though I didn’t realise at the time, I know it was that now. Besides the Jutsu she used is one that few can perform; It’s a lightning speciality. Something a Matsura can wield.’

The others remained silent, considering his calculations and conclusions. He had no doubt in his mind that Sena hadn’t betrayed them and the shield had only strengthened this sentiment. He only wished he could have saved her from the clutches of the Akatsuki, to bring her back home, back with him. The void she left within him in her absence had grown now, threatening to consume him entirely.

‘If you trust her Neji then we should trust in her too!’ Lee said finally, while Ten Ten agreed, although she was more reluctant than her teammate.

‘Let’s get a move on then,’ Neji said.

‘Wait Neji aren’t we forgetting about our other mission, we still have to report back to Ikue and let her know the bandits were taken care of,’ Ten Ten said.

‘I know we will have to stop, it’s on the way back, luckily.’ Neji did not want to stop at all, but he knew he had to complete his mission. He was a shinobi after all, and that came first. No matter how much his heart ached, he would fulfil his responsibility.

As Neji moved all he could think of was Sena. What had she gotten herself into?
Shipwrecks

Chapter Summary

The aftermath following Sena, Deidara & Neji encounter.

The journey to the hideout following the kiss was made in silence. Sena had an uneasy feeling flowing through her the entire trip, observing Deidara every couple of seconds, afraid of what was to come. She had never actually been afraid of him until now, and she wasn’t sure why.

When they reached the hideout, which was sealed behind a large boulder, Deidara mentioned something about it being the main one, and that she should stay close to his side. With an arm around her waist, painfully tight, he led her down a series of hallways until they came to a large black door. Sena assumed this was his — their — room.

He opened the door and gestured her to go in before him. The kunoichi hesitated for a moment but realised she didn’t have any other choice; she was stuck with him now. She stepped into the room, and Deidara followed, slamming the door shut behind him.

This was the moment she had been dreading.

Turning slowly, like she was trying to prolong her fate, she faced Deidara, who was breathing heavily, an unnerving, intense look in his eyes.

‘Who were they Sen, hm?’ Deidara asked. It was a quiet tone but anger shook deep within him, she saw it threatening to surface with every breath. She could tell by the way he was standing, his fists clenching and unclenching constantly.

‘It doesn’t matter now; they are gone.’ Sena attempted to brush it off, throwing her hand up in an aloof gesture walking by him, hiding her face. But he knew better, he could tell.

‘What about him.’ Deidara came up behind her, pressing his body against her back. His breath coming out quick and shallow and she could feel the heat of it against her neck. ‘Who was he?’

‘Why does it matter?’ She retorted a little too defensively as she turned back to face him. She knew it was obvious the second the words left her mouth and could tell by the way Deidara’s eyes narrowed and the tilt of his head that he knew it too.

‘Tell me!’ Deidara started to yell causing her body to tense. ‘Tell me now, hm!’

‘Why do you care!’ Sena yelled back attempting to maintain control of the situation.

‘Just tell me who that leaf brat was!’ He slammed his palm against the wall behind her, just above where her head rested. Her eyes widened at the outburst of anger directed at her.

Instead of caving into his wishes, Sena stretched out her arm, her palm flat and ready to slap him across the face. But just as she was about to make contact with his skin he caught her wrist.

Deidara’s frown only grew as did his anger. He captured her other wrist and pinned them by her sides and pushed her back against the wall, hard. His grip was tight around her wrists, tight enough
to burn from the friction of his fingers.

Sena scowled at him. Mirroring his emotions an uncontrollable anger began to flow through her, feeling the heat rise to her skin with every passing moment. She couldn’t stand the thought of him talking about Neji in such away, but she also couldn’t give away any more than she already had.

‘Damnit, Sen.’ Deidara pressed his face close to hers. She wriggled against him, attempting to pry herself from his grasp but to no end. He was too strong and far too emotional to let her go. ‘Just tell me who he is. Tell me you’re…’ He stopped and closed his eyes, his grip tightening more than she thought possible.

The entire weight of his body was pressed up against her, almost suffocating her beneath him. She was trapped; unable to move and unable to flee. The grip on her wrists was becoming unbearable, and it wouldn’t be long before the situation got out of control.

Sena knew she had to do something, distract him, incapacitate him, something.

Then an idea struck her, one she resorted to every time he was in one of his moods. However she was uncertain what the outcome may be this time, he had never been this angry before or at least not toward her.

‘Deidara,’ the kunoichi cooed, forcing herself to be soft, gentle and seductive — all the things she needed to calm him down. ‘I’m yours; you know that.’ She rolled her hips, grinding her lower half against him. ‘Always yours and only yours.’

She repeated the action this time eliciting a reaction from him. His eyes shut immediately followed by a sharp intake of breath. The grip on her wrists loosened but still kept her there wedged between him and the wall. Undeterred by his dominant state, she continued to move her body against his until she felt that inevitable bulge.

‘Let me show you that no one else matters to me.’ She said, keeping her tone soft yet determined. ‘Just you and only you.’

Then his eyes opened, the intense anger still there but now along with something else, something dark and needy. Deidara’s hands moved from her wrists to her waist, his fingers digging into her flesh, hard and unforgiving, bound to leave more bruises. He pushed his lower half against hers, eager and demanding.

‘Tell me again,’ he said, giving another thrust which caused more friction between them. She knew what he wanted to hear.

‘I’m yours.’ She complied without hesitation. It had become a mundane routine, these lies were something that rolled off the tongue without even thinking. Sena moved her hips a littler harder this time.

His hands, pressing firmly against her skin, found their way up her body, her chest and then stopped. His fingers wrapped around her neck, applying pressure, not enough to stop breathing but enough to press against her tender bruises. She shuddered, feeling his tongue dart out of his hand-mouth.

‘Tell me who you want,’ He commanded, bringing his face only millimetres from hers. His hot breath against her cheek as his eyes watched, holding her gaze with such intensity it scared her. And she knew she didn’t have a choice, this time she would have to say it, would have to make him believe it.
‘I want you,’ she whispered.

That was all it took for his lips to crash against hers, with an aggression she had never felt the full force of. She couldn’t linger on the thought because the next thing she knew Deidara was ripping her clothes off, tugging her pants down and then his own.

Placing her hands on his chest for stability while he grabbed her waist and hoisted her up against the wall. He pressed himself, already hard, against her entrance, rubbing it back and forth until he grew impatient. Then he was angling his tip against her opening and pushed himself inside her with a single thrust, hard and fast.

‘You know I love you,’ Deidara said, as he held her firm and steady not yet moving. Sena bit her lip trying to hold back a whimper from the friction she had just felt.

‘And I you,’ Sena whispered back, her voice shaking.

He looked at her through narrowed eyes, wanting to say something but instead he pulled out and thrust into her again. The force behind his thrusts increased quickly, the uncomfortably of the friction disappearing and a numbing pleasure starting to unfold. And with that Sena closed her eyes and thought of home.

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After finishing their mission, Neji and his team ran and did not stop until they reached the village and then the Hokage building.

‘I see,’ Tsunade said, eyes closed and chin resting on closed hands. ‘I was afraid of something like this.’

Neji felt his stomach twist, his thoughts jumping to the worst conclusions as he tried to maintain his composure. He felt Ten Ten and Lee tense next to him, mirroring his anxieties. It was Lee who voiced them first.

‘So does that mean that Sena—‘

‘Shizune!’ Tsunade cut him off. ‘Alert Kakashi to what has happened and tell him to come here immediately.’

‘Yes, milady.’ Shizune replied before promptly exiting the room.

There was an uncomfortable silence in the air, the tension thick and unbearable. Neji felt his heartbeat reverberate throughout his entire body.

‘What I’m about to tell you is not to be repeated to anyone, ever.’ Tsunade began, eyes still closed. ‘In fact, I should not even be telling you three at all. However given the circumstances and what you have told me of your encounter, I think it wise. I don’t want any of you attempting an unnecessary rescue mission after all.’

‘Unnecessary?’ Ten Ten asked.

‘That will be explained. First I need your word that will not repeat anything that I tell you, for the
consequences of doing so could prove fatal for all involved.’

The three of them exchanged uncertain glances before they agreed.

‘If what you saw was correct that means Sena indeed is a part of the Akatsuki.’ Tsunade opened her eyes at their gasps. ‘Which means she has completed that phase of her mission, as per our request.’

‘What are you talking about?’ Neji asked, an irritation growing quickly inside of him as he tried to keep his tone in check.

‘Her being a part of the organisation is no accident.’

Neji’s eyes widened. How could they ask her to do such a thing? To put her in that amount of danger.

‘While on her retrieval mission,’ Tsunade continued. ‘Sena had an encounter and managed to do in one day what even the best of our Anbu couldn’t do over the course of months. Not since we discovered their threat. She managed to not only speak with an Akatsuki member but to compel his interest and trust. Naturally, we saw the opportunity to get intel on a threat, and we took it.’

‘Why did it have to be her?’ Neji asked, without thinking.

‘Like I said, she has been the only one proved capable of accomplishing it.’

‘But to risk her life like that.’

‘Shinobi risk their lives every day with every mission. Sena understood that.’

‘This isn’t just some routine mission you have given her; it is suicide!’ Neji was almost yelling now, and it took all of his self-control not to lose it completely. He reminded himself he was in the presence of the Hokage. She eyed him carefully, and he forced himself to take a breath attempting to push his feelings aside.

‘It is necessary. What Sena gathers on this mission could determine the fate of the village and the safety of the people, which is why she agreed to do it. She knew what was at stake and we should respect her decision.’

‘But Lady Tsunade,’ Ten Ten spoke up, much to Neji’s surprise. ‘We saw how she looked, she was covered in bruises and scars, there’s no guessing what happened to her. How can we be sure she will…come back?’

Neji felt his breath hitch at those words. Ten Ten had wanted to say how could they be sure she would survive but she had chosen her words carefully.

He had to admit, she did had a point; how could they be sure when there was no way to contact her? How could she come back when she was in such a dangerous position? How could she return to him?

‘There is no guarantee she will.’ Tsunade sat back in her chair, arms folded. ‘All we can do is wait and have faith she can figure that part out on her own.’

‘Send me,’ Neji said. The words came out of his mouth before he could even process them in his mind. But it was then he realised he didn’t care; he was done listening to what they had to say.
'What?'

‘Send me,’ he repeated, eyes fixed on Tsunade. ‘Send me to find her and bring her back.’

‘No, it’s far too dangerous to risk.’

‘I don’t care.’

‘You may not, but I do. We can’t waste skilled shinobi on a mission like that, especially when we don’t know how far she is in gathering her information. For all we know we could ruin her progress.’

The frustration within Neji was threatening to explode now. He balled his fists, feeling the strain in his neck as his jaw clenched. How could they refer to her in such a way, not even caring about rescuing her when she obviously was in trouble? Whether she agreed to it in the beginning or not that should not matter now.

‘When is her mission supposed to end then.’ Neji said through clenched teeth. Tsunade shot him one of her looks, frowning at the cold tone he knew was escaping him.

‘When discussing the mission with Jiraiya, Sena and he both agreed she would be there for only a few months at most. She is supposed to return to the village before he and Naruto come back, before their plans are due to become a reality.’

‘And what if she doesn’t?’ Neji scoffed, not bothering to hide his bitterness. ‘What happens if she can’t get out? What will you do then?’

A part of him knew he shouldn’t let his bitterness take over and that if Sena were there, she would shoot him a look. But she wasn’t there; that was the problem, and it was their fault. He could picture her voice, even now, telling him not to worry, that it was her choice, but that was just her compassionate side talking. It didn’t mean she would be safe; she couldn’t guarantee that.

When Tsunade didn’t respond, Neji knew he was at breaking point and needed to stop himself from causing a scene. Ironic considering it was always someone else who risked doing this, someone else he had to stop. This time, however, he was the problem.

It was then Neji turned away from Tsunade, walked out the door and slammed it behind him. He didn’t care about not being dismissed or the message it sent, taking solace that it wasn’t his words saying something he knew he’d later regret. He knew when he was angry like this his words could prove improper and unforgivable.

Neji was blind with rage as he stormed down the steps of the Hokage building. He’d never felt like this before, never so uncontrollably emotional, never so helplessly concerned for the well-being of someone he cared for. It seemed like he was the only one willing to do something.

Deep down he knew that Sena was a skilled kunoichi and more than that she was fearless and strong. But he feared that it would not be enough this time, for it could prove her undoing in the company of criminals.

He felt angry. At himself for being so weak, not being able to do a thing to save her, to help protect her. Anger at Tsunade for giving her such a dangerous mission to begin with. But above all, he held anger toward the Matsura clan and their pathetic curse seal that started this whole thing in the first place.

It made him want to hit something and to release everything building up inside.
‘Neji.’ Came a familiar voice, causing him to stop in his tracks. He turned to see Kakashi leaning casually against the building in front of him, beneath a street lamp which illuminated above.

Neji looked up at the sky wondering when it had gotten so dark. His mind had been so focused on getting back and redeeming the reputation of his friend that everything else had been blocked out. As the stars twinkled above him he thought of all the times Sena had pointed them out, forced him to lay beside her and watch them. He’d started noticing them more and more once she came into his life.

‘Kakashi,’ Neji’s attention snapped back. ‘Did Shizune find you?’

‘She did,’ Kakashi replied.

‘Then you know what’s happened.’

‘I do.’

‘Did you know?’ Neji asked, the accusation clear. ‘Did you know what she was doing? Is that why she wrote that letter?’

The pain reflected in Kakashi’s eye was enough of an answer, and Neji couldn’t help feeling blind sighted, betrayed. He was never close to Kakashi, nor had him as a mentor, but Neji had trusted he knew how much he cared for Sena. Especially after he had delivered her package to him.

‘How could you let her do that!’ Neji was losing his control now; he couldn’t keep the anger buried any longer.

‘I tried to stop her, but it was her choice to make,’ Kakashi replied. He seemed defensive, trying to be the voice of reason but the guilt was there, reflected in his gaze.

‘You of all people should know that it was never her choice.’

It was never her intention for any of this to happen, Neji knew, but Sena chose to accept the mission because of who she is. Her compassion is what drove her along with her sense of responsibility, her sense of duty. None of this was her fault yet he saw her do everything she could to stop it, to protect everyone, even when it wasn’t her responsibility to do so.

‘Neji,’ Kakashi said. ‘Sena is capable of handling herself.’

‘You didn’t see her!’ Neji yelled, his anger erupting. ‘You think getting beaten, tortured and who knows what else is her handling it?’

Kakashi took a deep breath, hands burying deeper in his pockets as he averted his gaze. Neji knew he was making him feel guilty, but he felt no feelings of remorse. It was their fault, all of them. They could have done something, but they didn’t, and now Sena was out of sight, a problem they threw aside for another day and the killed him inside.

‘For now,’ Kakashi continued in his calm manner. ‘There’s nothing we can do.’

‘None of this should have happened!’ Neji replied. ‘And if you had completed your mission and tracked down her father then she would be here with us now.’

‘I know.’

‘Good.’ Neji turned, ready to leave. ‘Maybe you should think about that while she’s trapped with
Neji didn’t care about sparing his emotions, not when he had something to feel guilty about. He left Kakashi and took off home, not wanting to be around anyone anymore. Something inside him was threatening to break, and he needed to be alone.

When Neji reached his room, he shut the door and leaned back against it. His head fell back, and he let out a heavy sigh — a sigh that released everything he had been holding back since he had left the forest, since he had left her. Suddenly every thought, every emotion, every feeling hit him at once.

He clenched his fists, the ache in his chest taking over, clouding his focus and restraint. He felt his eyes begin to sting from the emotions that threatened to break free, ones he had controlled for so long.

‘Why?’ He questioned himself, desperately. ‘Why do you feel like this.’

He slid down finding the cold floor beneath him, his body beginning to tremble as he tried to calm his shaking hands. It was all so overwhelming. He’d never been like this before.

He did all he could push away the pain in his chest, but instead, it surged through his entire being and consumed him. It was more than he could bare. He closed his eyes trying to evade the pain, but all he could see was Sena; a glimpse of her smile, their hug before she left; then her bruised body and her sunken eyes. But the image that pained him most, that kept playing over and over in his mind was that of her kissing Deidara.

That kiss would stay burned in his mind, like a brand. For she was still there, in his mind beckoning him, tormenting him, leaving him. As the tears built up in his eyes, threatening to spill he realised crying was something he had not experienced in a long time and he’d be damned if he did now.

He slammed a clenched fist against the wall, attempting physically to push away all the thoughts swimming in his mind, threatening to pull him under. As much as he wanted to let himself drown, to wallow in this feeling, another part of him wanted control, to be able to stop these emotions from consuming him.

*It was those eyes.* That’s what had given her away. Her deep, beautiful, troubled eyes. Beneath the sapphire, which hadn’t quite sparkled as they used to, revealing instead something dark, something he had never seen reflected in them before. What he would give at that moment to see her, to ask her but most of all to he thought about what he would give to save her.

The Hyūga pushed himself up off the ground and began pacing back and forth, shaking his head attempting to stop the thoughts. It was agony, pure agony to think of her, even if it was just her eyes. Those deep pools that had succumbed to a fate he wanted to absorb.

He looked down at his hands again, still shaking as he tried to focus, but all he noticed was the swelling and torn skin from hitting the wall. Groaning in frustration, he stopped pacing and walked to the bathroom. He turned the tap in the sink, cold water running into his hands before he splashed his face.

Looking up he saw his reflection in the mirror before looking away quickly and down toward hands rested on edges of the basin. He couldn’t even look at himself, not able to bear the feelings he betrayed in this moment of vulnerability. Cursing himself for allowing himself to succumb to his emotions, to appear so weak, unbecoming of a shinobi such as himself.
But no matter what he did he couldn’t suppress these feelings any longer; they had already begun to erupt from deep inside where they once hid. He clenched the sides of the basin, biting his lip as it quivered, eyes still threatening to spill the tears which continued to form.

Neji had finally given into Sena’s hold only to find now she was out of reach. He was too late. He realised that even though she wasn’t there she would never leave for she was a part of him now. In his every thought, every feeling, in all that he did, she would always be there.

The thoughts had flowed through his mind for months now, constantly growing over time, even when she wasn’t with him. At the time he had hesitated to accept them, denying they were there in first place, the thought of having any kind of affection toward her overwhelmed him. It felt almost like a weakness to lose his composure around her so quickly, for her to make him so nervous. All it took was one smile, and his thoughts slipped away to places unfamiliar making him feel things he couldn’t bear to feel.

All the times he avoided her touch while at the same time it was the only thing he craved. The bittersweet feeling he felt when she had hugged him, that night before she left. It was as if she knew exactly what he was thinking, giving him exactly what he needed. But the affection was too much to handle and as the tenderness overcame him so had the fear; expecting it all somehow to go wrong. Now the memory of her touch stayed on his skin, quickly slipping away just when he was beginning to let it sink in.

And that’s when the tears began to fall.

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Sena lay there naked, her body pressed against Deidara’s, skin finally cooling from the intimate act they had shared moments before. It was an act they had shared many times before but all of them were different in comparison to this one. This time there was an anger within Deidara that manifested itself through force and aggression. And this time it had made her feel dirty.

She couldn’t seem to shake the unease she felt with Deidara since the encounter with Neji. Something had changed, that was for sure but she couldn’t figure out whether it was just with him or also her.

Everything had started to feel wrong. The thoughts and feelings she had come to ignore caught up with her. Thoughts of Neji kept threatening to take over her mind and she had use all her strength to keep them away. She couldn’t let them take over, fearing what would happen if she did.

Observing the room her eyes caught sight of the bathroom across from the bed which they lay. Sitting up, turning away from Deidara she climbed off the mattress and walked toward it.

‘I’m going to shower,’ She mumbled not bothering to wait for a reply. It was not something she cared about, her mind and body growing tired of him altogether. She needed a break even if it was just for a few minutes.

When the door closed behind her, she heard herself exhale. It was heavy, carrying every single emotion she had been holding back and releasing it into the world. She turned the water on, the sound of the water hitting the tiled surface calmed her as she dropped her change of clothes into a pile on the floor.
The moment she stepped into the water the outside world vanished and she was left with only her thoughts. The image of Neji’s face had imprinted itself in her mind; the pain in his eyes when he saw her, the hurt when she took Deidara’s hand instead of his. Even when she wanted to run to him, to leave behind everything about this dreadful mission she knew she couldn’t. She had to protect him.

Please understand Neji, she thought, please know that I only did what I had to in order to save you.

Then everything she was holding back hit her at once. Tears building up and ready to spill she forced her eyes to close and pressed her face against the cool tiles allowing the water cascaded down her back. She wanted to wash away Deidara’s touch, manoeuvring to make sure the water hit every part of her body while she ran her hands in circular motions.

The image of Neji came into her mind again. The thought of hurting the person she cared for most caused her chest to ache. And how much pain she felt when she thought of all the things she had done, those she had left behind with promises she didn’t know she could keep was crippling.

And then she couldn’t fight it anymore, allowing the tears to spill, streaming down her face. Her body felt weak, beaten and torn, refusing to support her any longer. She let herself slide down the tiles till she found the floor, pressing her palm to her mouth to muffle the sobs. Her body shook as it released all the pain, all the fears, all the frustration she kept buried deep inside.

It was there Sena cried and released everything; cried for Neji, for her father, for home. The fact that she was stuck with a man she didn’t love or trust scared her. And that she had to complete two missions before she could think about returning home, returning to Neji. He was now the one thing that made sense after everything that had happened. The only thing that grounded her.
Almost

Chapter Summary

What happens to Sena and Deidara?

Chapter Notes

Sorry it took a little longer than usual to update but here we go! New chapter!

When Sena finished purging all of her emotions, she lifted herself up and rinsed her face under the water. After crying for what felt like hours, her eyes felt dry and irritated but she knew she needed to return to reality. It was time to get her emotions under control like a real shinobi and get on with the mission. Stepping out of the shower, she dried herself off with a towel and changed into her clean clothes.

She avoided the mirror, leaving it fogged over as she passed it, her reflection was not a sight she could stomach seeing. Still, her mind wondered how many new bruises Deidara had left across her body, joining the ones she already had. Her body had been given entirely to the cause, and it made her feel tainted, more so than before. As she glanced down at her wrists, she saw just a glimpse of how her beaten body must look, wincing as her fingertips traced the dark bruises.

The kunoichi barely recognised herself these days and seeing Neji just hours before had made her feel more lost than ever. Who knew how much more she had to endure before she got the information she needed.

When the kunoichi reached for the door knob a feeling of unease overcame her; she couldn’t sense Deidara’s chakra in the next room. In fact, every fibre in Sena’s soul screamed danger, but knowing there wasn’t anything she could do by staying in the bathroom, she turned it slowly. The door opened with a creak, she cautiously peered her head into the room, taking in the surroundings and details. Her gaze found the bed where the blond once lay, now empty and the sheets in a mess, tangled across the mattress, reminding her of an aftermath of battle.

Walking over toward the desks against the wall she noticed that they were covered in clay amongst other contraptions, which she assumed belonged to Deidara. Looking over her shoulder, she took in the details of the room she had missed during the tension that came with her arrival. The room was large, poorly lit due to the lack of windows and there was torches perched high on the walls above her. The large bed was situated against the wall, with various shelves, cupboards and desks thrown against the rest of the room in no particular order or layout. It looked lived in, but she wouldn’t call it a home.

Then her eyes caught the door, and again something within her told her to run, to get out why she still could and not worry about the mission. These thoughts took over her mind and left her frozen, stood in the middle of the room staring at the only exit. If she left, then she could go back home. No, she still had her first mission to complete. Her goal was so far beyond her reach that she could barely even see it’s completion. But she could leave here, leave the Akatsuki and Deidara all
behind and never look back.

Her mind made itself up in a matter of seconds. There was no telling how much more she could take until she broke completely and everything fell apart. Her body became unstuck with her decision and she took long strides toward the door reaching for the handle. Attempting to turn it and open it she was met with a resistance.

It was locked.

Trying again to force it, attempting to turn it and shake it open she realised there was something else blocking her exit. Boundary seals. She could sense the chakra, and she didn’t have to guess to know they were opened only from the other side of the door.

‘Shit,’ Sena muttered to no one in particular. It was ironic really, the one thing her clan had expertise in was the very thing keeping her trapped inside. Had she more time perhaps she could work out a loophole, weakness or anything that would allow her to escape. But there was one exit, her energy was low, and she had no idea when Deidara would be back. She needed another plan, one she could prepare quickly for.

Observing the door and analysing the layout of the room once more, she came up with an idea. Where the door rested against the wall there would be a big enough gap for her to hide behind when Deidara came back into the room. If all went according to plan, she would catch him off guard and be able to push him out of the way for her rush by. Perhaps she could knock him out, giving her more time to recall the way out. It wasn’t a perfect plan, but it was all she had. She felt as though she would lose her mind completely were she to stay there another second.

The kunoichi sat on the edge of the bed closest to the spot she needed to run if she heard him come up the hallway. There she sat, focusing on her surroundings as she sat on her hands to prevent them from shaking. This action, however, didn’t stop the deafening sound of her heart echoing in her ears.

Every sound, every bump, even her own breaths caused her to panic, to question what she was hearing. Still, she sat there, waiting, hoping Deidara would return soon. As she listened intently to the noises around her she lost track of how much time passed by when she finally heard footsteps approaching, echoing from the hallway. It took her a few moments to determine whether or not it was real before she jumped into position quickly. She heard them come to a halt in front of the door as she pressed her palm against her mouth and nose to quieten her breathing.

This was it. This was the moment she had been waiting for. She only had one chance to do this. She needed to escape.

Keeping her ear pressed against the crack between the door and the wall she heard someone shuffling about outside, taking a few moments before opening the door. Perhaps it was the process of getting the seals to allow them through.

Then she heard a click and the handle turn, opening the door slowly. Sena held her breath; palm stilled pressed against her mouth to stifle any noises that may slip. Deidara entered the room, tray in hand looking in the other direction, just as she hoped. Not wanting to get caught she let the door swing toward her, stopping it with her hand so she could still peak around and watch his movements.

‘Sen?’ Deidara called, looking from the bed to the bathroom which had the door still open. She mentally cursed herself for not closing it and give herself more time.
The kunoichi watched as he set the tray down on the bed and turn is head to give the room another look over. She jumped out of view when his gaze threatened to come in her direction. Closing her eyes shut tight she prayed he didn’t see her. At the same time, she noticed she could smell food discerning that’s why he brought the tray. She realised then how long it had been since she had eaten, but she pushed that thought aside and concentrated on the task at hand.

Once she heard his footsteps head in the opposite direction, calling her name again, she peered out from the cover of the door to see him heading toward the bathroom. This was it, the opportunity she was waiting for. Cautiously she pulled her body from behind the cover in one swift motion, allowing herself to become completely exposed. Slowly she took steps, one at a time until she was in the doorway and could see the hall, her chance at freedom. She lingered there for a moment looking down at the door handle when another idea formed.

Her fingertips reached down and felt the cool metal of the handle, before she pulled it shut, not bothering to muffle the noise. It was then she ran, down the hall, trying furiously to remember the way. She could only hope the seals were still active when she shut the door and would stall Deidara. Turning to look at every path she came across she attempted to figure out the way. But as she ran she realised that every hallway looked the same, and she hadn’t paid close enough attention when he had led her down there, distracted by his frightening mood.

The kunoichi cursed herself for not being more prepared; she had been trained to handle situations like this. Then she heard yelling coming from the direction she came from, worried it was probably Deidara coming after her she continued to move. Then she found a door she recognised, continuing to run and focused on escaping to keep her going.

That was until something hit her from behind, hard. And then everything went black.

— — —

When Sena woke, she was aware of three things. The first was that her entire body ached, and her head was spinning. The second was that she was back in the room she had left, ultimately failing in her escape attempt. And the third was that, once again, she was wrapped in Deidara’s arms.

As her eyes fluttered, attempting to stop the spinning sensation that caused her to feel nauseous, her eyes began to focus. She saw Deidara, looking down at her, his calm disposition seemingly returned as his sky blue eyes caught her gaze. She felt a wave of fear flow through her, her body tensing under his touch, watching as he frowned at her reaction.

His hand cupped her cheek affectionally, but even as he stroked his thumb across it, caressing it, something about him made her feel uneasy. She didn’t trust him.

‘Don’t move,’ Deidara whispered. ‘I don’t want you getting hurt again, hm.’

Sena blinked, keeping their gaze locked in and intense exchange. She was stuck now; he wouldn’t let her have another opportunity to leave again, this she knew.

‘What were you thinking?’ He asked, still maintaining his soft tone. She attempted to sit up, stopping halfway as pain shot through her head, lifting her hand to clutch it. His hand found her back to steady her, the other that cupped her cheek now fell to hold her side.

‘I was…’ Sena stopped, not knowing what to say or how to lie. ‘I was just—.'
Another pain shot through her, this time up her back causing her to wince at the sensation.

‘Hey,’ Deidara said pulling her close to him. ‘Be careful, I promised I would protect you, and by keeping you here for awhile, I can do that. It’s not safe out there, hm.’

He gestured to the door, before shifting to the side so she could lay down. Leaving his arms wrapped around her, he pulled her close, so she faced him, his fingertips tentatively stroking up and down her back. Leaning forward, he pressed a chaste kiss to her lips and then another to her chin. She wasn’t sure how to reciprocate, still unaware of why he was gentle towards her again, considering everything that had happened.

‘I won’t ever let you go.’ Deidara whispered, eyes locked onto hers. ‘You are mine.’ Sena nodded, when he paused, making it seem like a question rather than a statement. Reassurance had become a constant with him even when he seemed so sure of himself. She watched as his eyes fluttered closed.

‘You are my muse,’ He continued. ‘And I won’t ever leave you.’ His voice began to falter as though he would fall asleep at any moment. ‘I love you so much, Sen.’

Sena watched through lowered lashes as his body relaxed, but noticed his grip didn’t loosen. And just as his breathing steadied and she thought he had drifted off he spoke again, this time so softly she barely heard it all.

‘I’m so sorry they hurt you. I won’t let you get hurt again.’ Then he sighed and pulled her close again, burying his face in her neck. And it was then she knew she would never be able to free herself from his grasp.
Living A Lie

Chapter Summary

Sena's isolation.

Chapter Notes

ayyy two chapters in one day!

Time seemed to stand still for Sena when she was stuck in the room. She had no idea how long she had been there nor any indication of when she might leave. It was the kind of imprisonment that played tricks on her mind, that left her questioning her sanity with each passing moment.

The kunoichi wasn’t sure whether it was better or worse when Deidara was away for extended periods of time on missions. There were days she found herself wishing he would come back so that she had someone to talk to. Other times she shuddered at the thought and hoped he never returned unless it was to let her leave. Still, she found herself putting on her sweetest smile and tolerable persona when she was with him. Allowing him to do what he wanted, say what he need; whether it was complaining about Sasori or fucking her against every surface, she didn’t care. She took it all knowing that it was her only way out of there.

Every kiss, every touch, was just one step closer to freedom. At least this is what she told herself, constantly. It was the only way to get through it all. The only way she could return home. To go back to him.

Deidara’s attempts to make her time there comfortable were often short-lived. He added a mirror to one of the desks and shoved his art supplies down onto one; he bought her clothes and had Tobi bring her food. Although he was always clear that she couldn’t leave the room for her safety.

Today Sena sat at the vanity painting her nails with the black nail polish Deidara had left. It was trivial, but it was something to do, a task to take her mind off everything. With every stroke, she thought about the sky; missing how the sun shone, warming her skin, and at night the way the stars twinkled in a way that left her mesmerised. She missed stargazing the most and the memories that came with it.

The kunoichi found herself sitting at the vanity often, finding the bed only reminded her of the constant intimacy Deidara craved and standing anywhere became tedious after awhile. It became her safe place; one where, when Deidara was gone, she could release the seal on her scroll and write. And write she did, each day pouring her every thought and feeling into her words with the fear she would lose herself if she didn’t. It not only served the purpose of her mission but also the importance of her survival.

Documenting every conversation she had with Deidara became automatic alongside her conclusions and theories. She wrote of the impossible task that was her father, who constantly alluded her every move and how empty it made her. It always came back to one thing: her duty and
how she would fulfil it no matter what, even when she was trapped.

As the isolation dragged on the loneliness became an unkind company, always looming close by ready to pull her downward and cause her to drown. It was moments like these where she had one thing that kept her surfaced, one person she always thought of. And that person which she held close to her heart was Neji.

In the days where her only friends were silence and darkness, he was there in her mind reminding her of why she was doing this. In the nights when she suffered most she would dream of him, sometimes telling her it would be alright, other times just holding her in his embrace as they lay there. Even in the intimate moments when Deidara was on top of her, thrusting and grinding in the heat of the moment her mind still drifted toward Neji, wondering what it would be like to be with him this way.

When she thought of Neji, she wanted to see him again, to say goodbye the way that she had wanted. But she knew if she did then she would never have left the village in the first place and never would have said goodbye.

The kunoichi imagined his face, his voice, his touch but above all she thought of his love. She remembered feeling it every time he looked at her, smiled at her and how it set warm off feelings inside of her, though she wasn’t sure what it was at the time. And she realised that no matter how much she had grown to want his love, she knew she would never deserve it. Not after everything that had happened; not after all she had done. She was not worthy of his love.

But still, she wrote and thought about him. Sena knew in her heart that she still had courage because of Neji’s faith and knew she would be brave in continuing to do the things she was afraid to do because he would want her to.

Sena looked down at the scroll, and was hit with the question: what if she didn’t make it? The idea of her not making it back scared her. Not because she was afraid to die, but because she was afraid of never being able to tell Neji the truth. And so she decided she would write it, hoping that somehow even if she died the scroll would somehow end up in his hands.

For when I looked at you, my life made sense. She wrote. Even the bad things made sense. Because after all aren’t they necessary to make you possible?

And then she continued writing, taking solace in the fact that there would be some way for him to know how she felt.

Then she leaned back in her chair, stretching her arms and closed her eyes. She pictured the night sky, one she had not seen in the longest time, littered with sparkling stars. The two of them laying together, beneath their sky, in their own world.

Sena prayed Neji would find a way to forgive her.

________

Deidara fell down onto the bed, arms behind his head as he leaned against the headboard letting out a sigh. He had finally returned from his mission and had a moment to relax. Sena sat in front of the vanity, looking at her reflection as she applied make-up to her eyelids and lashes. He watched as she brought her face nearer to the mirror, placing a few drops of something onto her fingertips
before rubbing it over her lips. An oil perhaps? He decided he didn’t care and instead admired the shine it brought to them. And how much he had missed those lips.

She pulled the top from a crystal-like bottle which sat on the desk and poured the liquid between her fingers before running them through her hair. The bedroom started to smell sweet, bringing that heavenly scent that only came with her. Deidara closed his eyes, indulging in the scent he loved as he heard the crystal top push back into place.

‘How was the mission?’ Sena asked, cold and dispassionate, probably annoyed he had been gone so long without her. He opened his eyes again and caught her gaze in the mirror before she quickly looked away, returning to the task at hand.

‘It was long and boring, but we got it done, hm.’ Deidara sat up, adjusting his position for a better view to watch her but she just huffed in reply. He had missed her more than anything, and he wanted to tell her that since it was all he could think of when he was away. But he knew that he would have to coax out her softer side slowly; there was no pushing Sena.

She kept her back to him while combing her hair furiously. He noticed that the teeth of the comb were attached to a long, sharp handle that, if need be, could easily become a weapon. He smiled at this thought. Then watched as she shook her hair which, he found, had retained its picturesque, waves and curling disarray, just the way he liked it.

While she adjusted the buckle on her skirt, Deidara pushed himself off the bed and came behind her. She ignored him still, pulling a top over her head and standing up, eyes not leaving her reflection.

‘Fasten me up.’ She kept her back to him while pulling her raven hair out of the way.

He deliberately took a long time fastening her shirt, one hook at a time, enjoying the sight of her exposed skin, radiant in the flickering torch light. He pressed a kiss to her back and then another, leading a trail up toward her neck. When he reached her shoulder, he perched his chin there, placing his hands on her waist and pressing his body so it moulded into the groove of her back.

Their eyes met once again in the reflection in the mirror, but this time she didn’t look away; instead, she met his stare head on, daring him to ignore her. Her eyes narrowed expectantly, and he knew he would have to give her something more. He noticed the bags under her eyes, the sparkle behind her once vibrant eyes littered with different hues of blue seemed dark. It was time for him to do something about it; he was determined to bring that light back.

‘I found out some useful information while I was gone.’ Deidara murmured against her skin. She pulled away from his hold and walked over to the bed, sitting down with her arms crossed and waiting.

‘Oh.’ Sena’s tone was still cold, but he knew she would warm up again soon.

He nodded and walked toward her again, watching her reaction. She didn’t flinch nor tense when he approached which he took as a good sign. Cupping her chin in hand, he lifted it upwards, so she faced him. His hand-mouth nipped her chin, teasing like a soft kiss.

‘It’s about your father.’ He watched as her mouth twitched, and her eyes shone, betraying her curiosity — her need to know more. Deidara smiled, seeing stirrings of the old Sena return. ‘I know where he is going to be again, and I’m going to check it out, hm.’

Sena stood up and clutched his shirt tight between her fingers.
‘You have to let me come with you,’ She said, no attempt to hide her desperate tone. Deidara’s smile grew with this, knowing exactly how he could persuade her to come back as he gave her a quick kiss.

‘Of course, I will.’ He pressed his lips to hers again, this time deeper and questioning. She began to reciprocate, finding a slow rhythm against his before she suddenly pulled away.

‘We have to go then.’ Sena began to pull away when he clutched onto her waist, dragging her back. He chuckled at her eagerness.

‘We have a bit of time before we have to go.’ Deidara pulled her close, pressing his forehead against hers, their lips almost touching. ‘And I’ve missed you, hm.’ His hands slid up and down her sides slowly before he leaned down to kiss her again.

This time she reciprocated in full, flexing her mouth, sliding her tongue against his. He then hoisted her up, and she wrapped her legs around him, where he wasted no time grinding against her, realising just how much he missed her. And how much he needed her, right there and then. He was already hard just at the thought, the anticipation which had built over the duration of the mission releasing.

Deidara laid her down on the bed where she removed her pants while he removed, pushing them down to free his erection. He positioned himself above her giving her a needy kiss while slipping a hand down to rub her clit while the tongue teased her slit. Once he was satisfied she was wet enough for him, he angled at her entrance before burying himself deep inside her in one quick motion.

The feeling he got when he was inside her like this was one he never got over, and found himself craving it more in times he was away. And as he began to thrust hard and fast, he looked down at her, watching as she moved and reacted beneath his touch wondering how he would ever live without her now that she was everything to him.
Swan Song

Chapter Summary

Sena follows the trail of clues once again. How will she cope with Deidara now they are free of the constraints of the room once again?

Chapter Notes

This one is short forgive me! But hopefully you enjoy :))

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘What do you know?’ Sena asked, demanded, her foot placed on top of the man’s ribcage, applying a small amount of pressure. ‘Tell me now.’

‘No,’ the man spluttered, not bothering to try and remove her hold. ‘I know nothing.’

‘Then there’s no point in keeping you alive, hm.’ Deidara said, standing a few steps behind Sena.

It hadn’t taken long for them to track down the men who worked for her father. One she recognised as Kuro, the shorter man they had encountered the last time they had come close to finding him. He didn’t prove much of a match for Sena this time and took only moments for her to take him down, taking him under her heel. And his partner proved even less of a challenge, unable to dodge most of Deidara’s attacks.

It made her question whether they truly did work for her father or if they were just a simple means to an end; it just didn’t sit right. Either way, she didn’t care, she only wanted the information she desired, and after being locked away for such a long time, she was determined to get it by any means necessary.

‘Tell me what you know about my father.’ Sena’s tone was cold and she added more pressure against Kuro’s rib cage, causing the man to cough. This was followed by a choked laugh that made her skin crawl and impatience increase. She released her foot from him.

‘You have nothing to offer a dying man,’ he said, between laboured breaths as he clutched his chest.

Sena observed him through narrowed eyes, assessing the damage she had inflicted on his body during their fight. He would die, there was no question about that. However, he probably thought he was going to die quickly, which was something she could change. She was desperate to end her mission and was willing to bend her morals to achieve this goal. Hadn’t that been what she was doing this entire time — bending her morals?

‘I’ve broken your ribs; you notice how it’s harder to breathe?’ She crouched down beside him and pushed her palm against them again, watching as he winced and squirmed. Then she turned her gaze to his leg. ‘You’ll be lucky if you can stand let alone walk on that in its current condition.
And this little wound here,' Sena pressed against the hilt of kunai still embedded in his side causing him to cry out in pain.

‘This one here can be healed just enough to leave you on the brink of death for a few days.’ Sena continued. ‘And that’s if someone finds you. But I can guarantee that no one will find you because Deidara here is an explosives expert and he can toss you into a cave and seal you inside among the rubble. True, you won’t survive, but it will make your suffering long and agonising enough for you to regret every decision you have ever made in your miserable life that led you here today. So I will say it again; tell me what you know about my father.’

Kuro’s eyes widened, knowing full well that her threats were serious. He reached out and clutched her shirt, desperaty, bringing her close.

‘Don’t you touch her, hm!’ Deidara yelled, stepping forward but Sena gestured for him to retreat. He had hesitated, fists clenched before she gave him a reassuring nod.

‘This information,’ Kuro whispered. ‘It’s for your ears only.’

Sena nodded, looking back at Deidara to check his position and found his eyes were locked onto them, gaze unwavering. When she was satisfied he was standing at a far enough distance, she turned back to Kuro, waiting for him to speak.

‘Your father figured it out. He knows how to remove the curse seal.’ The man coughed and her eyes widened, mind starting to race.

‘What are you talking about?’ The kunoichi asked in disbelief.

‘There is another scroll, like a sister — a twin. That’s what is needed to complete the process. But he discovered he also needs the original scroll.’ The man winced and coughed again, this time more violently. ‘He needs the Goryō scroll, and he will come for it in three weeks. That’s when he thinks he will be prepared to slip in unnoticed, at nightfall.’

Sena just stared at him, unable to accept the information she was hearing. Attempting to process how easy it had suddenly become after all this time, unable to accept goal was finally within reach. It all seemed to easy, but when she looked at his expression she knew he was telling the truth or at least what he believed it to be.

‘And that’s all I know,’ he said. ‘Now please, put me out of this pain.’

Sena nodded activating her lightning style, watching as the chakra flowed through to her daggers. She pulled Kuro up, avoiding his eyes as she placed a hand on his shoulder to steady him. Then she brought her lips close to his ear.

‘Thank you,’ she whispered before plunging the dagger through him, feeling him tense against her and then hearing the air leave his body. ‘Be at peace.’

The kunoichi let go of him, watching as his body hit the ground with a soft thud, the dirt below swarming into a cloud of dust. Pushing herself up, eyes avoiding the body as she walked to the cliff edge, looking out at the horizon and the river below. There several black dots moved against the sky streaked with pink hues of the afternoon sun. Narrowing her eyes she saw them, birds, watching as they flew in an arrow-like formation, diving and flapping to adjust to the breeze. They reminded her of Neji and of home.

The Village. She knew she needed to return, not just because she wanted to but because it was part of her mission, her duty. It was where her father was going to be and her chance to find him. And
that meant her mission with Deidara would have to end. Finally.

The only problem was getting away from Deidara and the Akatsuki in a way where they would not follow her. Would not look for her. And she didn’t have much time to plan; it would have to be now while she was out in the open and not locked away.

It was then she heard Deidara call out to her.

‘Sen look out be—.’

But it was already too late. By the time Sena turned the enemy was already there, as if appearing out of nowhere, kunai at the ready. She didn’t even have a chance to react when it pierced her flesh.

Someone yelled, but she wasn’t sure who.

Shock paralysed her; her eyes widened as the air escaped her like a silent gasp. She looked down to where the kunai was now embedded into her lower abdomen, feeling her hands shake. The pain didn’t register at first, the adrenaline and shock taking hold completely.

_Had this whole thing been a trap?_

Everything began to move slowly, her mind still comprehending what was happening. She looked up and her eyes met Deidara’s, seeing his reflect the same fear she would not allow herself succumb to. He called out her name, but the sound was drowned out by her thoughts. She turned to her attacker, the one she had not sensed coming and mentally she cursed herself for being so careless.

_Why hadn’t she sensed his presence?_

The assailant’s hand still gripped the hilt of the kunai, upping the pressure each passing moment, burying it deeper inside her. An idea formed and looking from the blade back to Deidara he realised what it was. Pulling forth her own dagger at the ready behind her assailant, she watched the blond call out to her, pleading, begging.

‘Sen, don’t!’

But she didn’t listen. She wrapped an arm around her attacker and drove her dagger into his back, aiming for his spinal cord. She didn’t bother to see if she had hit the mark instead waited for the man to tense against her before stepping backwards, taking both of them over the cliff.

She heard Deidara calling after her, his distress was evident, but the words still didn’t register. Instead of focusing on his voice she closed her eyes and let herself fall, waiting to meet the water below. She held the man close as they did, hoping he would be enough to break the impact. A part of her did not care about surviving, realising then even if she did make it out of the river there was no telling how she would get anywhere with a deep wound.

And then they hit the water, his body slackening beneath her. Dead or perhaps just unconscious. Either way, he was eliminated as a threat. She let go and felt herself surface, coughing and spluttering water as the strong current pulled her away upriver. Sena pressed a palm to her side where the kunai had once been, attempting to stop the blood from flowing as she swam.

Explosions came from above, on top of the cliff where she had fallen from. She could only assume, hope even, that the attacker had not been alone and they were keeping Deidara occupied. This was her opportunity to escape, to leave him for good. And so she swam, following the river and the
She began to feel the effects of the stab wound, her blood loss evident as she began to feel faint, finding she could not swim any further. Instead, she let her body relax, her limbs floating and drifting atop the surface, letting the pull of the water take her. Her hand rested on her side pushing down harder against it in an attempt to stop the blood, the faint feeling as it took hold.

There she drifted, eyes fluttering as the cold water splashed and rocked her. The kunoichi’s body was thrown back and forth, but she barely felt it. She found peace knowing that whatever happened from her, at least she was free and it was her choice.

Sena strayed in and out of consciousness feeling her body numb against the surface of the cold, water rapids. Darkness took her, and everything began to fade leaving only her thoughts and memories.

*Was this the end?*

‘I’m sorry, Neji.’ She whispered. ‘Please forgive me.’

Then darkness took her, and she welcomed death.

*Maybe now she could be at peace.*

Chapter End Notes

*ohhhhh what's going to happen next?*
Dead Butterflies

Chapter Summary

The fate and life of Sena Matsura.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Everything was a blur.

Sena stuck in a dream-like slumber, a limbo haze between her thoughts and reality.

One moment she was aware of the water lapping against her.

The next she felt cold.

And then everything was numb.

Why couldn’t she just die?

Or was this death and it’s never ending torture?

How fitting.

‘Sena.’

She heard someone call her from afar, but she was stuck, dancing with death, watching as the light teased and the shadows consumed her. It felt like looking at the night sky, the specs of reality sparkling against the darkness of her mind.

Perhaps she had drowned….

Doomed to drift in the darkest depths forever starved of oxygen.

And then Sena saw it; a crack in the darkness, a bright light trying to get in. Without hesitation she reached out for it, wanting it to take her, she closed her eyes as the brightness blinded her.

She felt warm…

Her eyes fluttered open, her vision blurry and refused to focus. There was a dull ache reverberating through her body as her body shifted from side to side.

She was moving.

No, she was being carried.

The kunoichi tried to focus her eyes, to see who was taking her but all she saw was a shadowy figure. All she heard was a muffled noise. Her body was mostly numb, her conscious state fading quickly.
‘Sena,’ they called, and then everything faded.

The two siblings were peering through the crack in the door, watching their older brother and father speak. It was time to decide who their father would train to take over when he died or stepped down.

‘Do you think father will make Tsutomu the next Lord?’ Tadao asked.

Sena considered his question. They both were well aware of their brother's feelings towards leading their clan.

‘Hm. I don’t think father would make big brother do something he didn’t want to do.’

‘But I don’t want to be the next!’ Tadao whined.

‘Shh Tadao! They are going to hear yo—’

Then they both fell forward as the door swung open. The two young siblings looked up sheepishly to find their father and older brother looking down at them with kind smiles.

They were both so alike; both of them soft and understanding.

‘Well son,’ her father began, ‘it’s decided.’

‘Yes.’ Tsutomu nodded. ‘Looks like the next leader will be little Lady Matsura.’

Sena’s heart rate increased at her brother's words.

She drifted again.

She was at the training grounds, twelve years old, arguing with Jiro over another sparring match.

“You could master all nature types, and I would still find a way to beat you, Sena!”

‘Doubtful. You haven’t managed to land any blows since we started as a team!’

‘Yeah, well,’ Jiro stumbled over his words, ‘my water style is superior!’

‘Every other nature type I have, including fire is stronger so what does that matter, you idiot?’

Jiro grumbled and stormed off much to their sensei’s amusement as he watched them bicker. Sena gave him an innocent shrug though fully aware of her actions.

She awakened into another half-slumber, her body drifting in an out of consciousness. A figure loomed over her telling her to relax; that she was going to be alright. This time she heard it more clearly.

It was a deep voice — a man?

‘Sena.’ And he knew her name.

The shooting pain up her body caused her to groan.

She vaguely remembered the stab wound before it got lost with the images that took over her mind.

Where is she?
Who is he?

These questions plagued her thoughts while her body wriggled under the pain.

But soon it disappeared again. Her eyes returned closed, her mind taking refuge once again in a dreamlike state.

Neji.

Familiar emotions started building up in her heart at the thought of his name.

Guilt. Love. Sadness.

Then he was there, standing before her blinking eyes.

‘Neji?’

Sena felt a sudden urge to turn around and dump all the truth on the man standing before her.

‘Sena,’ he whispered. ‘You came back.’

Yes, she thought, I’ll always come back to you.

A hint of a smile in the corners of his mouth and before she knew it, she was walking forward and into his arms. He took a sharp intake of breath, and his body tensed when she wrapped her arms around his core. But then almost as quickly, she felt him relax, and his arms found her.

Safe.

That is the only word she could come up with.

She wanted to look Neji in the eye and tell him how deeply she’d fallen and how she never wanted to escape the comforting hold of his arms because they were the very thing that kept her grounded.

‘I’ve missed you,’ Sena whispered, tears of both joy and sorrow welling, threatening to spill with every word. He didn’t answer; instead, his hold on her tightened, allowing her to understand.

He always understood… didn’t he?

The kunoichi had wanted above all else to see him again, to say goodbye the way that she wanted. But now it had happened she never wanted to say goodbye. She never wanted to leave him.

But was this real?

A distant voice called to her again.

‘Sena.’

The voice was so faint that she wondered if she imagined it.

One of Neji’s hands slid up and down her back soothingly. She took a shaky breath, noting the subtle way her chest ached. Even here she couldn’t help but feel lonely.

‘I’m so sucked into this that I can’t see anything beyond you,’ Sena whispered into the safety of his chest, her forehead pressing firmly against the cloth of his shirt. ‘I wish none of it had ever happened. And the fact it did is my fault.’
Her arms tightened around his core afraid he would leave if she didn’t.

‘Are we doomed Neji?’ She asked, desperately. ‘To be stuck in this constant cycle we have found ourselves in. To almost be…’

_Almost._

That was their curse. Almost together; a stone throw from confessing, from opening up, from loving each other. Almost in love. _Almost._

‘Are we ever going to see each other again?’ She continued. ‘Will I ever get the chance to tell you?’

Then before she heard an answer, he was gone…

Maybe that itself was an answer.

‘Sena.’

Her eyes blinked again.

‘Hitomi Sensei?’ Sena asked, her mouth hanging open, certain she must have seemed ridiculous.

‘You’re late girl.’ He pulled a flask from his tattered coat pocket. She watched as he lifted it to his mouth taking a swig, not wincing in the slightest. ‘Well, come on don’t just stand there like a gaping fish and sit with an old friend.’

‘Friend?’ Sena asked, regaining her composure along with her mocking nature.

‘A slip of the tongue.’

‘As always.’

He gave her a rare smile, which she returned, watching as the warmth of the camp fire flickered in the reflection of his eyes. They sat in a comfortable silence, one they were accustomed to after years of training and travelling together.

It was one she missed dearly. And she missed Hitomi Sensei as much she missed her family, and her guilt for his fate was equally measured.

‘Am I dead?’ Sena asked.

‘Straight to the point as always.’ Hitomi replied, taking another swig. ‘Observe your surroundings like a real kunoichi and tell me what you see.’

He was as cryptic as ever, still carrying that philosophical way of answering questions that only led to more confusion. After all this time, even after he was dead and gone, he still insisted on teaching her a lesson.

What else could she have expected? So she did as he ordered and observed.

They were in a forest on the outskirts of the Land of Fire, in a small clearing. To their left stood a small cave entrance and to their right a small body of water lay, flowing down toward a river, overflowing from constant rain days before. The camp was set up in the open with a large fire, acting as bait. A tactic they used when…
'This is where it happened.' Sena suddenly felt so vulnerable, so fragile and instantly wanted to break down remembering that horrible day. ‘It’s the night before you…’

She couldn’t even finish the sentence. Hitomi’s eyes gave a knowing look. Of course, he wanted her to remember.

Guilt consumed her entirely as she replayed the events over in her mind.

‘F-father?’ Sena stuttered, her voice barely escaping.

She froze in a combination of sheer terror and disbelief.

Before her stood Osamu, his eyes a soulless black instead of their once sapphire blue; a twisted smile overtaking his once humble expression and his stance once calming was now tainted with dispassion and malcontent.

It had been almost two years since the fire. Two years since…

The nightmares still plagued her, the actions of her father taunting her constantly.

And now he stood before her again, like no time had passed and his descent further beneath the curse seals will, evident.

The kunoichi, still frozen, was unable to do what needed to be done. She was unable to set her father free. Unable to fulfil her mission. And above all, she was unable to move.

He took a step toward her.

‘This one again,’ her father spoke, twisted by the will of the seal. ‘You really are a nuisance.’

Sena didn't respond — couldn’t respond. She could only watch and wait.

Then she realised she had never choked in battle. Not once…until now.

Osamu raised his blade toward her.

‘Looks like I’ll have to put and end to your… interferences,’ he said.

Then before she could move or react, he had taken quick strides toward her, readying his attack. And still she couldn’t move, whether it was by choice was not clear to her anymore.

Sena closed her eyes, and for the first time in her life, she accepted death

...But it never came.

She heard someone move. Her heartbeat echoed.

Then the sound of the blade piercing flesh.

But she felt nothing.

Sena opened her eyes and gasped.

‘No,’ She whispered.

Hitomi stood facing her, blood dripping down his chin and the end of the blade exiting through his core.
What haunted her most, was the calmed expression his face bore. It made her eyes well.

‘I guess that takes care of this problem.’ She heard her father mutter before removing his blade, letting Hitomi’s body slump to the ground with a thud and a groan. A single tear rolled down her cheek; her eyes widened in disbelief.

Her father, seemingly unfazed by either of them, wiped his blade on his sleeve then swapped to clean the other side.

Then before she could blink he was in front of her, blade held against her throat, her chin firmly in his hand. He studied her carefully, and his head tilted to the side as his cold eyes stared unnerving her. And still, she couldn’t do anything to fight back.

‘Hm,’ he huffed.

Osamu let her go and retreated his blade. Then he disappeared in a flash, leaving her there, unharmed.

Sena fell to her knees, letting out a shaky breath.

Finally, she could move.

Then she remembered Hitomi, awakening to reality hearing his irregular breathing. She crawled over to where he fell, laying on his back, eyes watching her.

Hovering over Hitomi’s body as he struggled to breathe Sena assessed the large wound in his abdomen, trying not to flinch at the sight of it. She pressed her palms to the wound, attempting to channel medical ninjutsu but to no end. The blade had pierced vital organs.

‘It’s going to be alright,’ she said, the tears beginning to fall. ‘I can fix this.’

‘Girl…’ Hitomi began coughing, more blood splattering down his chin. ‘Look at me.’

‘No. I can fix this I just—’

‘It’s too late.’

‘No. Don’t say that I just need some more chakra; I just need a bit more power!’

‘I’m not going to make it. It’s alright.’

‘I can’t lose someone else…not again…it’s all my fault.’

‘Girl look at me.’

She shook her head, her body trembling uncontrollably as the tears streamed down her cheeks. She couldn’t do it again. She wasn’t strong enough.

‘Sena look at me!’

Their eyes met. Sena expected to see fear or anger, but instead, she found a calm and sorrow — not for himself but her. He gave a weak smile, his hand weakly fumbling for something in his pocket. She knew what he was looking for and helped him retrieve the small flask before bringing it to his lips. He took a sip before coughing again. More blood.

‘Sensei…’ Sena couldn’t formulate anything else.
‘Girl, listen to me,’ his breathing shallowed. ‘A-and don’t interrupt your sensei.’

She nodded, and he chuckled.

‘Picked a hell of a time to start listening to me. You were always s-so stubborn. Don’t let them change you.’ He coughed again, this time letting his eyes closed. ‘Pro...Promise me.’

‘I promise you.’

It was one of her worst memories. And that night, before it all unfolded, they had slept outside beneath the brightest moon she’d ever seen. The old sensei had said something about it bringing forth change, foretelling a coming of evil for each night would get darker and darker — allowing for shadows and spirits to seep into their world. She had scoffed at the time, accusing him of being drunk and decrepit.

If only she had known.

‘I’m sorry... I’m so sorry. If I—’

Hitomi cut her off with a raised hand.

‘Don’t you ever try to apologise for that.’ He was firm, but she heard the hint of compassion there too. ‘What transpired that day, happened because it had to. It was my choice — my time. And in no way your fault.’

Her eyes widened as she looked at him with uncertainty, too bewildered by his words and his sincerity.

‘Believe me, girl,’ he continued, ‘after everything I had done in my life, it had been a long time coming.’

She realised why they had always gotten along, more so than the rest of her teammates. Hitomi was not much different to her. Both of them had been bound by the cursed fate of their families and were consumed by a responsibility many others could never understand. She realised now after all this time; they had shared the same pain.

‘Thank you,’ she whispered, allowing the tears to spill because now they were not full of sadness but gratitude. ‘I’m glad you are my Sensei.’

‘Careful now girl, people would think you are turning soft.’ He gave her another knowing look, and they both laughed, a moment they hadn’t often shared but treasured most.

‘You never answered my question,’ Sena reminded as the laughter ceased.

‘Which question?’ He asked.

‘Am I dead?’

‘Do you feel dead?’

‘Not exactly. And that’s not really an answer.’

‘It wasn’t much of a question.’

‘Hey!’
‘It’s because you are asking the wrong questions.’

‘What should I be asking?’

‘Do you want to be dead?’

Sena considered this question carefully. Did she truly want to leave everything and everyone behind?

‘No.’ Sena finally answered before adding. ‘Is this real? Are you really here or is this just in my head?’

‘Does it feel real?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then doesn’t that make it as real as anything?’

‘But—’

‘Did talking with me help you decide?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then that’s all that should matter. Don’t get caught up in the rest of it.’

‘Hm.’

‘Sena!’

She heard the voice again, someone calling her name and it was getting louder.

‘Looks like our time together has ended.’ Hitomi stood, turning to leave before he stopped. ‘For whatever it’s worth, you were my best student.’

‘Careful Sensei, wouldn’t want people to think you’re getting soft.’

‘Hm.’ She could hear the smile in his voice. ‘Just make sure I don’t see you again for a long time. Go and live your life, move on from all of this.’

‘I promise I will. There’s just one last thing I have to finish first.’

‘Good. You are finally ready.’

‘Ready for what?’

Hitomi looked back and smiled, genuinely, like he knew something she didn’t, before taking a final swig. And then suddenly he was gone, and a part of Sena felt empty.

The darkness consumed her once again. But this time it led her to the light.

The kunoichi awoke, able to see clear as day, her eyes focusing on her surroundings. She lay beneath a tree, the sun breaking through the leaves. Her body held a dull ache, which worsened as she sat up. A familiar pain shot up her abdomen, causing her to groan.

Sena lifted her shirt, looking down to inspect her wound. It had been bandaged up and treated. Slowly she undid the bandages to check its progress and noticed it had been stitched up and it
wasn’t the neatest job she had seen. Perhaps they were in a hurry? They clearly only had basic medical training.

Then she remembered the man.

Who was he? Why did he help her? Where was he now?

Was he friend or foe?

She decided she was in no condition to risk finding out. Pulling herself up clutching the tree she knew she needed to leave.

It would be quicker and safer to move through the treetops; it would provide more cover. However she wasn’t sure she had the strength to do it, but she decided to try anyway.

Readying herself, she crouched on the ground, wincing at the strain on her wound her hand clutching it. Taking a deep breath, she mentally prepared. Then she jumped aiming for the lowest branch. But the pain was too much and she couldn’t get her footing to hold her above the branch and fell.

Landing on the ground with a groan, she let herself lay there for a moment. Then remembering the man again, she forced her body to get up. Her legs shook barely able to hold her up. A few moments of shaking later they decided they wouldn’t collapse. And so she began walking. She hoped she didn’t open the stitches.

Minutes along the path and the kunoichi realised where she was. It was the outskirts of Konoha. She was almost home.

And when the gates were in sight she paused, feeling light-headed. The kunoichi looked down at the hand which had been holding the wound. It was covered in blood. She looked down and noticed her shirt was too. The stitches must have opened.

Sena pressed her palm back into the wound and looked up toward the sky. It was a clear day, not a cloud in the sky. Birds were flying overhead, toward the direction of the village. She watched as the swooped and soared, ignoring the fact her body was beginning to feel weak.

Then she heard a familiar voice call, one she recognised all too well.

‘Sena?’

Chapter End Notes

Ohhhhhh guess who is there :) Thanks for reading!
Wandering Star

Chapter Summary

The fate of Sena Matsura.

Chapter Notes

here we go just under 4k of goodness!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘Sena?’

Neji froze, his eyes blinking furiously thinking he had wandered into a dream. But each time he opened his eyes again there she was, standing before him. Then their eyes met.

‘Neji. I must be hallucinating.’ Sena whispered, lifting her hand to examine it. ‘I must have lost a lot of…’

It was then he noticed the blood. Her torn clothes were covered in it both dried and fresh. He also noticed the way her eyes fluttered and her body swayed. He moved quickly to catch her in his arms as she fell.

‘Are you alright?’ He asked, catching her before she hit the ground.

‘Neji, is it really you?’ Sena asked.

‘Of course, it’s me,’ he replied. He couldn’t believe that she was truly there in his arms. ‘You came back to me.’

‘Always.’ Sena lifted her shaking hand to his face and caressed his cheek with her thumb before her expression changed. ‘Neji, I’m so sorry.’ The tears began to stream down her face across her burning cheeks. ‘I’m so sorry for—.’

‘No.’ Neji said quickly, his thumb gliding across to wipe away her tears. ‘Don’t.’ He closed his eyes briefly before adding, ‘You’re already forgiven.’

Sena gave a weak smile that warmed his heart until she groaned and her body shuddered in a fever like state.

‘We need to get you to the hospital.’ Neji lifted her up into his arms, bringing her close against his chest. He could feel her trembling beneath his grip.

‘No. Wait.’ Sena lifted a hand to his chest and caught his gaze. There was still determination there even after everything; he couldn’t help but admire it.

‘What is it?’ Neji watched as she ran her hand across her thigh. On contact, a seal appeared, which
she pressed her palm to before withdrawing it along with a scroll. ‘You have to make sure the Hokage gets this, promise me.’

Before Neji could take it, another hand reached from behind and took it. He turned to find Guy Sensei behind him, scroll in hand and a reassuring look on his face.

‘Don’t worry, I’ll make sure the Hokage gets this, you just worry about getting Sena to the hospital. I’ll have Lee accompany me, and Ten Ten shall go with you.’

Neji nodded, wasting no more time in lifting Sena making sure she was secure in his arms before heading into the village.

‘Neji…’ She whispered, groaning as she shifted in his arms. She clutched her wound with her hand while the other dropped loosely around his neck, losing strength every passing minute.

‘Don’t try and talk,’ Neji replied, his grip on her tightening. He couldn’t bear to look into her eyes, knowing he would betray his fears and anxieties in a heartbeat. ‘You’re going to be alright.’ He wasn’t sure whether he was saying it for her benefit or for his but either way it felt right.

‘Neji I’m not sure how long I can…hold on,’ Sena said, her voice soft and started to falter as she began to fade. It tugged at his heart to hear her this way, so gentle and calm, even in a moment such as this.

‘Hey just stay with me, Sena you’ll…’ Neji couldn’t even finish the sentence, the pain becoming too much to handle. He felt so helpless.

There they were together again still bounded by a deep understanding of only themselves, and the only thing he cared about was saving that bond. And as she lays there cradled in his arms, he knew in a single moment of pain and fear that if she died that would be the end. Because knowing he could lose her at any moment was truly unbearable.

‘Listen to me,’ she whispered, wincing slightly, her breathing laboured. ‘It’s alright if you don’t make it in time… i-it’s not your fault…I don’t blame you.’ She was fighting to stay conscious; he could practically feel her struggle, wanting desperately to shoulder it, to take away all of the pain. ‘I-I’m ready to die… if I must…,I’m just glad I got to see you again…to tell you.’

Neji felt his heart break.

No…

It was more like someone had ripped his heart out of his chest.

‘No, stop,’ he said, unable to say anything else as he heard his own voice waver.

She could slip away now just when he found the courage to hold on tight. He looked down at her, their gaze meeting with an intense moment of vulnerability. And when his breath caught just by looking into those striking yet gentle eyes, Neji understood how deeply he cared for her. There was her and only her, and that was all that mattered.

‘You have to understand…’ Sena was struggling. ‘I know what you’re thinking…feeling…Neji I-I…’

What is it, what are you trying to say? Neji silently begged.

It was then her head fell against his chest, eyes fluttering in a determined battle to stay open which
she eventually lost. He felt her grip loosen completely as the entire weight of her body dropped against him, no longer supported by her will.

He glanced down, observing her, knowing it could be the very last time. And he was afraid. He was more afraid than he had been in his entire life. But he had to put on a strong face for the sake of Sena. He couldn’t break down; he had to save her. But now that Sena was unconscious, the urge to break down became unbearably strong. He stopped, clenched his teeth and shut his eyes, breathing harshly.

Almost as quickly he opened them again and kept moving. Internally scolding himself for stopping, even for a second. With that Neji picked up his pace, praying he would make it in time. Hoping it would be enough to save her.

‘Neji,’’ Ten Ten called from behind him. He had all but forgotten she was there with him. ‘We are here.’

He looked up to see the doors of the hospital.

Everything happened so quickly.

One moment Sena was in his arms.

The next she was taken away by the medics behind closed doors.

Neji still couldn’t quite process what was happening. He couldn’t believe that Sena was standing there before him again only to disappear again just as quickly. And would she be alright? Would he see her again… Alive?

He sat in a chair against the wall of the room she was in, tensing every time he heard someone walking his direction. A familiar ache came to his chest as he looked down at his hands, covered in her blood, unable to stop them from shaking.

Those eyes. They were so full of pain.

*What have they done to her?*

He wiped his hands on his pants in a feeble attempt to get rid of the blood before slipping one into his pouch. His fingers brushed against the cool metal, finding what he needed immediately. Retrieving her headband, he ran it absentmindedly between his fingers, attempting to distract his hands from revealing the tremor running through him.

He was afraid.

Time seemed to stand still. If it weren’t for the clock on the wall, he wouldn’t have known hours passed. And then he couldn’t take it anymore, so he activated his Byakugan. The medics and doctors were still working on her frantically, Neji had to stop when he saw her, lifeless on the bed.

He just couldn’t bear to see her this way.

Then he heard footsteps again, eyes darting up to see Ten Ten.

‘Neji.’ She whispered, placing a hand on his shoulder. ‘Have you heard anything yet?’

He shook his head, unable to formulate words or sentences and his eyes cast downward back onto the headband. Feeling Ten Ten’s gaze burning into him he didn’t dare look back at her, fearing
what feelings he may reveal in such a moment of vulnerability. He heard her say something else, but it was muffled by his thoughts.

Neji was angry at himself for not pulling her out of the danger she was in when he had the chance all those weeks ago. Upset that he never found the courage to tell her how he felt when he had countless opportunities. But most of all it pained him to imagine that he never will get the chance to talk to her again, to apologise for everything he should have done but didn’t.

The image of Sena burned in his mind. From the depth of her sapphire eyes to her raven black hair falling beyond her shoulders, shining, reflecting light like stars against the night sky, coiling and waving with the smallest movement. It made him feel like he couldn’t live without her.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ten Ten sit beside him, feeling the warmth of her presence. He looked at her, catching her eye in a vulnerable stare, hoping it communicated how thankful he was to have her there knowing he couldn’t manage to say it aloud. She gave him a weak smile, knowingly.

He turned back toward the headband. It was the only thing that kept him anchored to reality and the only thing that stopped him from breaking; having a small piece of her.

All this time he had been trying so hard to hide everything he was really feeling from the one person who probably needed to know his true feelings the most…

‘I can’t lose her.’ Neji finished is thought out loud, feeling Ten Ten’s gaze on him again. She remained silent, allowing him to finish. ‘I never got the chance… the chance to tell her.’ He forced his eyes closed feeling a tremor reverberate throughout his body.

‘Tell her what, Neji?’ Ten Ten asked softly. He suspected she knew the answer already.

‘Ten Ten,’ Neji whispered. ‘I think I lo—‘ He stopped on hearing footsteps coming toward them.

He looked up to see Tsunade storming down the halls with Shizune and Sakura following her. She didn’t stop upon seeing him instead sped up and pushed through to the doors of the room where they were working on Sena.

‘The Hokage herself is here?’ Ten Ten whispered. ‘That must mean…’ She didn’t need to finish her thought, Neji guessed the same thing.

It meant things weren’t good.

‘Kakashi Hatake!’ Neji heard a woman yell. ‘You tell me what is going on and you tell me now!’

Neji turned to see Sena’s grandmother yelling at Kakashi, who was scratching the back of his neck sheepishly. The nurse accompanying her seemed to be distraught by the sudden outburst as she held her back steadily.

‘You were supposed to be with her, and now I find out she was wounded on a separate mission! A mission we weren’t even aware she had!’

‘Lady Miyu,’ Neji said, bowing toward her before Kakashi had a chance to answer.

‘Oh Neji.’ Her tone softened, meeting his gaze. ‘Have you heard anything?’

Neji shook his head. ‘I was the one who found Sena.’
Miyu gasped, bringing her wrinkled hand to her mouth, her eyes widened. ‘Tell me everything.’ She clutched his arm desperately.

‘I found her near the gate when she was still conscious. Her wounds were severe, and I brought her here immediately.’ Neji took a deep breath, his eye catching Kakashi’s. ‘That’s all I know.’

‘I see.’ She released her hold and took a step backwards, looking between him and Kakashi. ‘I will see what else I can find out.’ She went to leave taking a few steps before telling the nurse to stop before turning back. ‘Thank you.’

Neji nodded in response, feeling both guilty and undeserving. He wondered whether he should have mentioned the seal and scroll. It wasn’t that she didn’t deserve to know but not knowing what it contained, he decided it was best left out for now.

‘I came to find you,’ Kakashi said, directing Neji’s attention back toward him. ‘There is something you need to read.’ He held out a scroll toward him, which Neji recognised immediately.

‘But that’s…’ The very scroll Sena had tried to give him earlier.

‘Sena truly is a great kunoichi. She managed to write down everything that happened to her and escape, knowing the risk. Her priority was always to keep her village safe.’ Kakashi’s hand remained extended, offering the scroll but Neji just stared at it. ‘Here take it.’

‘Have you read it?’ Neji asked.

‘Yes.’ Kakashi withdrew his arm. ‘Myself and the Hokage are the only ones who have so far. She requested that you read it too.’

‘Why?’ Neji wondered if it was some cruel joke, the universe punishing him for not doing what he should have done.

‘If Sena makes it through this then she is going to need people to watch over her. We will be entrusted with that mission and knowing what happened to her will help us in ensuring her safety.’ Kakashi gestured down the hall. ‘Come with me.’

Neji hesitated at first, wondering whether he could handle what was written in the scroll. But then he realised that if knowing it meant her safety, he would read anything he was told. He turned to follow Kakashi down the hall and into an empty room.

Upon entry, Kakashi gestured for him to sit in the chair by the window and Neji complied. Then he once again offered Neji the scroll and this time he took it without hesitation.

‘Read it all now; we still have to give it the analysts to make sure we didn’t miss anything.’ Kakashi turned to walk away and stopped in the doorway. ‘You should know the other reason you were asked to read it.’

‘What is it?’ Neji asked.

‘There’s a lot written about you in there. Things she wanted you to read.’ Neji swallowed hard, feeling a wave of anxiety taking over. He held Kakashi’s gaze, clutching the scroll tight. ‘I’ll be outside to make sure no one disturbs you.’ Kakashi shut the door behind him, leaving Neji alone.

He undid the scroll and began reading.

At first, the logs were standard, facts about the mission, of her father and the infiltration. But that
changed very quickly.

*I feel dirty. I’m caught up in this mission and ready to do what I must by any means necessary…but at what cost? My body apparently.*

Neji took a sharp intake of breath. It was exactly what he was afraid of; reading the things he had imagined himself a thousand times since seeing her last. But he let out a shaky breath, remembering why he was doing it and read on.

*I gave myself to him. Willingly. And I don’t know what I more ashamed of: that it was for the mission or because a part of me wanted it. Even I can’t deny that I found myself attracted to him before I discovered the truth but now…I think somewhere deep inside I know I’ll never truly fall for him. How could I love someone like that?*

As Neji read on, he realised the toll on Sena’s mental state was evident. It was inevitable in undercover missions, the struggle to discern what is real and who to trust becomes a blurred line. It’s easy to fall into the deep end when one risks walking along the edge. There were parts that stood out more than others which tugged at his heart.

*I ache knowing that I could have prevented everything. I ache knowing that if I had then perhaps things wouldn’t be as they are now. But most of all I ache thinking about all the if’s and but’s that I get so caught up in it all, and I forget why I am doing this…*

...*I miss how I used to be. I was surrounded by, not ignorance exactly, but an innocence. I was only beginning to discover the world, and now I find myself knowing so much that it hurts. I hurt…*

*Intimacy. That is the one way I can maintain some sense of control, the way I can prevent his mood swings…his temperament is getting worse, and I have no more leads on my father…*

...*I had a flashback of my mother, finding her, screaming for her…that blade still haunts me…the seal still burns me…*

...*I saw the stars from Deidara’s bird tonight. It made me think of Neji.*

Neji felt his heart race.
...I remember when we used to watch the stars together. I wonder if he still thinks of me when he sees them. I always loved the stars; so far away and out of reach yet so beautiful.

They always reminded Neji of Sena.

He recalled one of their last training sessions together when she had tricked him by kissing his chin. He could swear she had meant to kiss his lips but was never sure. What he remembered most was the moment she pushed him onto his back and the way he hair fell around him like a curtain, disconnecting them from the rest of the world, surrounded by the scent of lilacs.

It was heaven.

...I was out for days. I ran into some not so friendly Akatsuki members who did not take kindly for being at their hideout...Itachi seemed to want to keep me alive following Kisame’s torture...perhaps it was because of my mother: an Uchiha...It is clear they are after people like Naruto, they jumped at the false information I gave them...

Neji had to force himself to read every word. Every torturous detail. For he knew it must have been much worse for her to live through it.

...I saw him. I saw Neji. And I knew I had to protect him from Sadao and then from Deidara...it broke my heart to hurt him but I had to keep him safe...

I remember staring at my body in the mirror the next day...bruises are more common than clear skin these days...I’ve grown accustomed to the pain...he finds a firm grip on my neck more and more, and sometimes I catch myself wishing I would stop breathing...

...Death always followed me. I know that now, I can sense it. Death always follows me and takes the ones I love. All the people who I was supposed to protect, who have got caught up in this mission, in my expedition of finding my father, I have lost...

...Something switches off inside me every time he touches me...his fingertips cut like knives against my skin...he breaks more everyday like he has to be constantly reassured that I’m his...

‘I’m yours,’ I’ll lie with every kiss, every touch, every thrust...How can I be his when I already know my heart belongs to another?
Another?

Could it be that she meant him?

Neji shook his head at the thought.

…I numb my mind now…sometimes I think of home, and sometimes I think of nothing, my brain shuts off completely. It's surreal…Sometimes I wonder how it would be with the one I loved…I think about Neji often.

Did that mean she thought of him…intimately?

Neji, where do I even begin?

The thing is I’m starting to suspect I might not make it out of here. And I don’t just mean this damned room. I mean this entire mission. In case that is true then I need to make sure you know how I feel…

Feel?

Could this be a confession? Is that why they wanted him to read the scroll?

Neji felt his stomach turn at the possibilities.

Instead of overthinking, he forced himself to continue reading.

…Firstly you need to know how sorry I am. You always had undying faith in me, even when I betrayed you. I need you to know that I only did it to save you. I couldn’t live with myself should anything happen to you. You were always the one person who was there for me. You are the reason I keep going, even now. For when I looked at you, my life made sense. Even the bad things made sense. Because after all aren’t they necessary to make you possible?

His grip tightened on the scroll, his hand shaking uncontrollably again.

He didn’t deserve such kinds words. She didn’t deserve the suffering.

…but the thing is Neji I never got the chance to thank you for everything. And I’m glad we were friends, but now I realise that it was something more. Perhaps we were friends first and were to be lovers second. But isn’t that what lovers are?
It’s something deep down I’ve always known, and I only regret that I have only come to realise it now. And I’m not sure if it was seeing you again or if it is the fact that I may never leave this place but I have to tell you. I care and have so much love for you.

Neji had to stop reading.

Every breath felt heavier than the last like her words crushed him. The ache in his chest manifested.

She loved him.

After all this time worrying about his feelings for her, he had completely missed hers toward him.

Sena had to make it now. She just had to. And Neji would tell her everything.

His eyes scanned down to see there was more written.

...Neji I know you better than I know myself. You tell yourself that no one would ever understand you, love you or accept you for who you are and all you’ve done. But this just isn’t the whole truth, is it? What you really fear is that one day someone will come along, see you and all the mistakes you have made and the man that you have become and want you anyway. So you keep them at arm’s length. You’ve kept me at arm’s length. Walls up and almost impenetrable because who would dare try and break down the walls of the Hyūga genius? You ultimately believe you do not deserve affection or love, but Neji, the truth is you deserve it the most.

Neji stood from his chair, rolling the scroll back up as he went for the door. A surge of adrenaline pumped through his body at the newly discovered information. He knew what happened to her now, and he was determined to see her through it all.

‘Do you understand now?’ Kakashi greeted him from the other side of the door. Neji nodded and returned the scroll before heading back down toward Sena’s room.

Yes, now Neji truly understood.

He understood that now there is only her; her at his side, here and now, and that is all that mattered; all that will ever matter. And where she was before, whom she was with, didn’t matter in the slightest because now she was with him and no one else. And he would be with her the entire way. That was all Neji could think about; for he always thought about her, all the time, remembering the sweet scent of her hair and the warmth of her body. And now he didn’t care who knew it.

Chapter End Notes

wooo a whole chapter of Neji pov, what did we think?
Neji waits for news on Sena at the hospital.

TW: mentions of blood and suicide

‘Kira?’ Neji said, standing up from his seat as she came through the doors. ‘How is she?’

‘Oh, Neji,’ Kira began, ‘I’m glad you’re here. We managed to stop the bleeding and heal her, but she was dangerously low on chakra on top of everything else. She’s not all clear, yet so we will be keeping her here and under observation.’

Neji let out a relieved sigh. She was alive that was the main thing.

‘You can go in and sit with her if you like.’ Kira said, not waiting for an answer as she led him inside. ‘I’m sure when she wakes she’ll want to see…’ she trailed off when he caught her eye. ‘It’ll be good she isn’t alone. I can’t even begin to imagine what happened to her.’

Neji didn’t say anything, internally noting that he knew exactly what happened to her. He nodded and took a seat next to Sena’s bed, eyes avoiding her body, not wanting Kira to suspect his vulnerability at that moment. He looked down at his hands, in an attempt to distract himself.

‘I’ve got to attend to some other patients, but I’ll come back to check on her soon, alright?’ Kira asked. Neji nodded, relieved he would be able to have some time alone to think and to make sure Sena was okay.

Kira walked to the door, pulling it shut behind her, and he let out a relieved sigh.

Then Neji looked at Sena, breathing softly like a ray of light peeping through the dark clouds surrounding his thoughts; he saw her like a white star twinkling in the night sky. The beauty of it tugged at his heart, and as he looked upon the one he loved, hope returned to him. He knew that in the end, she would always find a way back to him, as she had now because Kakashi was right — Sena could always handle herself. And in the small chance she couldn’t he would be there to protect her.

He activated his Byakugan, wanting to check her chakra flow for himself. Her chakra points lit up, like the stars in the night sky, working overtime through her system. Had she tried healing herself? Was she alone when she was attacked? Or was she attacked trying to flee?

Neji deactivated his Byakugan in a physical attempt to stop these questions spinning at the forefront of his mind. Still, he watched her, observing how her chest rose with every breath, the way her face twitched and the soft sounds she made that sounded almost like moans. Perhaps she
was dreaming? He just hoped she didn’t feel the pain; he wanted to spare her any more hurt.

There he sat, for what felt like hours, just watching and waiting. Then the door opened and emerged Sena’s grandmother and her nurse. Neji stood immediately, bowing his head curtly, before offering her his seat. She waved her hand in protest.

‘No, no dear, you stay seated.’ She gestured to the chair in the corner. ‘Aya bring one of those chairs over for me.’ She turned back toward him. ‘You’ve always had good manners. Very proper, I like that.’

He nodded, returning to his seat, and Miyu looked over her granddaughter, pushing her hair from her face. When Aya dragged the seat next to Neji, Miyu took a seat.

‘Thank you, Aya that will be all for now.’ She gestured toward the door where Aya promptly exited out.

There Neji and Miyu sat in silence, both their gazes locked on Sena. He could hear her struggled breathes next to him, whistling through her nostrils indicating her condition had not improved. He wondered how long she had which tugged a string in his chest, imagining Sena losing yet another family member so soon. He shifted in his seat, attempting to rid himself of such thoughts.

It was Miyu who eventually broke the silence.

‘When Sena was a girl,’ Miyu began, her eyes still fixed on her granddaughter. ‘She would challenge her brothers, head on without fear. Nothing would or could stop that child.’ Neji felt a warmth in his chest at these words, recalling when he first met Sena as a child, remembering how strong her presence was even then.

‘But oh how her grandfather doted on her,’ she continued. ‘Even when she was just a baby. I only had sons you see and here came this third grandchild; this fearless girl with such a keen understanding of people and the way they worked at such a young age. Knowing their weaknesses but instead made a choice to show them compassion. When she outshone Tadao she would bring him a flower as an apology. If she disobeyed Tsutomu she would insist on helping him for the rest of the day.’

Neji nodded, unsure he could find the words to speak, letting her continue without his interruption. He knew what she was saying meant a lot to her; it must have considering she had lost almost everyone else in her family. And Neji knew these words rang true because Sena was fearless and she did understand people. She even understood him, and for the longest time, it had made him afraid.

‘That’s why she accepted this,’ Miyu continued. ‘That’s why she took on all this alone. She feels responsible for her father, for her family, for her village. But in reality, it should have been me who took it all on.’

‘Would she have let you?’ Neji asked, knowing the answer already.

‘No, I don’t think she would have.’ She chuckled, and he nodded. There was no way Sena would risk losing another family member no matter what the personal cost to her was. It was who she was and what made her grow on him so quickly. The truth was, deep down, he knew he would give in to her presence sooner or later which is why he had avoided her for so long before. At least until she kept forcing her way into his thoughts.

Miyu let out a heavy sigh. ‘It all started with that damned seal…it should have been me not
Sayuri,’ She shook her head. ‘But never you mind that now, no use living in the past. What’s important is that she stays safe now.’

Neji’s eyes met hers, exchanging a silent yet knowing conversation between them. He lingered for a few moments before looking away, fearing what he might reveal in such an exchange.

‘You care an awful lot about my granddaughter, don’t you?’ Miyu was asking and telling all at once. Neji turned to her again, shocked by her blunt manner, not knowing how to respond. As before, all he could manage was a nod.

‘Why?’ She wasn’t accusing or harsh but rather soft and curious. His eyes widened and body tensed at the question.

He knew why. But he wasn’t sure whether he would be able to say it aloud to her right now. Miyu’s eyes studied him carefully; he felt the heat of her gaze as he tried to hide what he was feeling. Instead of averting his eyes, he met her stare head on, hoping it would be enough to satisfy her.

‘Ah, so that’s it.’ She nodded knowingly, and Neji could swear his heart missed a beat, fearing her next words. Then she turned back to face Sena. ‘I’m sure you are aware that the Matsura clan and the Hyūga clan were not always as close as they are now.’ She sighed. ‘But do you know what happened to make their alliance set?’

Neji shook his head. He knew it had something to do with his uncle and Sena’s father, but he never had the opportunity to ask. His father was long dead before he had even thought about it.

Miyu gestured toward Sena. ‘It was her father’s doing. Osamu, he saved your uncle, Hiashi.’ She shifted in her seat, adjusting her position. ‘And now you have saved Sena.’

For the first time in awhile, Neji thought about destiny. Whether or not he and Sena were meant to be or whether they had chosen each other. And he decided right there and then that it didn’t matter, as long as they were together.

———

Pain.

That was the last thing Sena could remember before diving back into the darkness she had come so accustomed to these past days. And there she remembered and she dreamed.

‘Tsutomu!’ Tadao whined to his older brother. ‘I can’t find Sena. It has been almost an hour; It’s not fair! Will you help me please?’

Tsutomu chuckled and ruffled his brother’s hair. ‘Now now Tadao, that would be considered cheating, would it not?’

‘I guess,’ he muttered, giving a small pout.

‘You should take this opportunity to practice those shinobi skills you always talk about mastering.’
‘But I have been practising! Come on, can’t you help me this once?’

Tsutomu sighed and gave his brother a gentle smile. ‘Fine I’ll give you a small clue.’ He closed his eyes for a few moments before opening them again. ‘You may find Sena downstairs. Check the kitchen,’ He said.

Tadao jumped, pulling him into a hug. ‘Thanks, big brother!’ He called, before running out of the room, the door slamming behind him. Tsutomu chuckled before turning to the cupboard against the wall of the study.

‘You can come out now,’ he said.

Sena slowly pushed open the door, a wide smile on her face as she looked up at her older brother.

‘Aren’t you clever evading your brother like that.’ Tsutomu sighed. ‘At least one of you is practising the techniques that I taught you.’

‘Why didn’t you tell him where I was big brother?’ She asked.

‘I was trying to be constructive.’

Sena looked at him, her brow furrowed. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean; how else is he going to learn to sense chakra if he isn’t forced to try. I was merely helping him along.’

‘Oh.’ Sena smiled at her brother, who gestured his arms for a hug. ‘Thanks, Tsutomu you’re the best! And do you want to know a secret?’ The young girl embraced her brother, feeling like a tiny doll in his arms. ‘You are my favourite brother.’

‘And you are my favourite sister.’

‘Tsutomu!’ Sena whined. ‘That’s not fair I’m your only sister.’

‘Exactly.’ He poked her nose. ‘And I wouldn’t trade you for any other.’

‘Hey!’ She scrunched up her nose and shook her head.

‘Come now; you can sit with me while I sort through these family documents.’

‘You mean I can help?’

‘Of course.’

‘Yay!’ Sena exclaimed as Tsutomu took a seat at the desk, gesturing for her to sit on his lap.

— — —

‘Neji?’ Kira called, opening the door, causing him to jump from his seat. He had fallen asleep again. It had been a few days, and Sena still hadn’t woken up. ‘You really ought to go home and rest.’ She said closing the door behind her.
‘I’m fine.’ Neji rubbed his neck, sore from where he had been lying on it. His eyes went instantly to Sena, checking to still she was still okay.

‘Don’t worry,’ Kira said, pulling Sena’s shirt up to check her bandages. ‘She will wake up soon.’ He nodded and stood, stretching out his limbs. Watching as she did her usual checks he had seen her perform for the past few days.

It had become a routine, he would sit and wait, and she would come and check on him. He figured this out the second day, learning that she only needed her bandages checked less often than she was coming. Perhaps she was just as worried as he was.

‘Here,’ Kira retrieved a bottle of water from her pocket. ‘I brought you this.’

Neji took it and placed it on the table beside him. ‘Thank you.’

‘No problem.’ Kira came beside him in front of the bed, eyes still on Sena. ‘You should go get something to eat; I can watch over her for awhile.’

‘No it’s alright. I’ll get something later.’

Kira sighed. ‘You know she would want you to take care of yourself and not waste away here.’ Neji nodded. ‘And imagine when she wakes up she will be ready with one of her heart filled speeches about how you shouldn’t to worry about her.’ A hint of a smile appeared on his lips. It had been a long time since he had come close to smiling.

It disappeared quickly however when the door opened, and Jiro entered the room. Suddenly Neji felt like he did not belong.

‘How is she?’ He asked embracing Kira in a hug. ‘I just got back and came as soon as I heard.’ Jiro looked at Neji over her shoulder and gave him a curt nod. Neji didn’t move just looked at him through narrowed eyes. It was like a team 5 reunion. One he wasn’t welcome in.

‘She’s alright,’ Kira replied. ‘Still waiting for her to wake.’ Jiro released her, turning to get a better look at Sena.

Neji tensed watching Jiro get closer, watching the concerned way he looked at her. It set an intense wave of envy through him, knowing how close they had always been and the unique bond which they had. He was aware that Sena and himself also shared a bond, but he had always been envious of how easily they fell into a comfortable rhythm in comparison. They talked, they fought, but they always remained close. It made Neji regret all the times he had pushed Sena away, especially those lost years he had ignored her completely.

Jiro reached for her hand, gently running his fingers over her skin and whispered something Neji couldn’t quite make out. He felt a tremor run through his body and a scowl come to his face. It took all of his willpower not to say anything, to stop himself from telling Jiro not to touch her that way.

When Jiro pulled away, Neji felt himself sigh, his body relaxing slightly. He held the scowl on his face the whole time he was there.

— — —
Sena choked as she cried, the pain overwhelming her as she realised what had happened to her mother. She tried to stand up, leaning on her hands. Her fingers touched something wet, and she looked down. She was leaning in a small pool of blood. Her mother’s. All her attempts to stop it from running down her wrists had failed.

’Sena, get up.’

Tsutomu was at her side, his tone gentle. Sena looked up at him, blinking a few times to shift the tears hindering her focus.

‘Brother,’ she whispered her voice shaky. ‘Mother she—.’

‘I know,’ he replied, pulling her into a tight hug, his hand running through her hair soothingly. ‘Shh, it’s going to be alright.’ Sena could swear she heard his voice crack, but it was muffled by her violent sobs.

‘Brother?’ Tadao stood timidly in the doorway.

‘Tadao,’ Tsutomu called. ‘Go and find father and grandmother right now.’

‘But—’

‘Don’t come in here, just do it!’ He commanded. The harsh tone of his voice caused Sena to tense, never before hearing his brother’s gentle disposition falter.

Tsutomu didn’t miss this change because soon after his hand came back to her hair. She felt his body tremble like he too was crying but when she looked up all she saw was his pained expression, hidden behind a forced smile. There were no tears. He was a strong shinobi after all.

‘What are we going to do without her?’ Sena asked, burying her face into his chest. ‘I-I want mother.’ Her words were muffled, but he heard them. Swiftly, he grabbed her hand, pulling her out of the room and into the hall. Away from their mother.

‘I’m with you, Sena.’ He knelt in front of her, one hand holding hers while the other cupped her cheek. His touch was cold but soothing. ‘I’m not going anywhere. None of us will leave, alright?’

Sena nodded, still stifling. ‘D-do you promise?’

‘I promise,’ Tsutomu replied without hesitation, another gentle smile appearing.

‘I saw …’ she whispered, closing her eyes, ‘she was crying…I saw…the blood…then this mark—.’

‘I know.’

‘I saw her before … I saw ho—.’

‘Nevermore. You will never see that again I promise. And if you dream about it ever then I will give you the force to push those nightmares away no matter what. That is why I am here; for you Sena. And starting today, I am going to do a better job of protecting you.’

She was exhausted and couldn’t find the words to reply so instead she settled for a nod.

‘Sena. Tsutomu?’ They turned to see their father standing behind them, a timid Tadao clinging to his sleeve.

‘Father,’ Tsutomu began. ‘The worst has happened.’
Neji shivered, feeling something cool brush against his skin, stirring a little from his half-somnolent state. He moaned softly and shifted his head, feeling the fabric of the sheets against his cheek. There he blinked his eyes open, glazed over in his sleepy state, taking in his surroundings. For a moment he had expected to wake up in the comfort of his bed but then he remembered he was still in the hospital; still waiting.

‘Neji?’ Came a hoarse voice. He blinked, once, twice and by the third, he realised whose voice it was. His eyes widened as he turned to where Sena was.

‘Sena?’ He asked, softly and in disbelief. She gave him a warm smile, eyes still fluttering in her groggy state. ‘You're awake.’

‘Hey, yes.’ She whispered, fingers stroking his arm. He looked down to see her hand, realising it must have been the cool sensation he had felt that woke him up. ‘You look tired.’

“You should see yourself,” Neji replied, placing his hand on hers, ignoring the nerves building inside of him. She laughed, before giving him another smile. Even in a hospital bed, after suffering so much, her smile was radiant.

‘I don’t think I can stomach that right now.’ Sena hummed thoughtfully then took in a deep breath. ‘How long was I out?’

‘A few days.’

‘Days?’ She pushed herself into a seated position groaning as she stretched her wounded core. ‘That guy must have really done a number on me huh?’ Neji felt his grip tighten on her hand.

‘Who did that to you?’ He asked.

‘Doesn’t matter,’ Sena shrugged. ‘He’s dead now.’ Neji let himself relax at that.

‘Wait,’ she said, eyes widening. ‘A few days you said? That means I’ve lost more time.’ She pulled herself from his grip, ripping the blanket off and swinging her legs over the bed.

‘What are you doing?’ Neji stood in front attempting to block her path.

‘I need to go to the Hokage right now.’ Sena tried to push by him, but she was still weak, legs wobbling as she fell against him. Instantly his hands found her waist steadying her, so she didn’t fall any further.

‘Why? What is going on?’ He asked, eyes locking with hers, seeing a hint of fear reflected in beneath the hues of blue. How he had missed those eyes.

‘It’s my father,’ Sena began. ‘He is coming to the village.’
Sena is discharged from the hospital.

Sena pulled a clean shirt over her head then buckled up her backpack which sat on the bed. She was getting released, after everything she would finally be able to go home not only to visit but to stay. Well, that is if things went the way they were supposed to when her father come to the village. There was so much time recovering and relaying information in the hospital that Sena felt as though they were running out of time to prepare.

A knock on the door interrupted her train of thought.

‘Come in.’ She looked toward the opened door, to see Neji emerge, his usual neutral expression upon his face, with eyes that penetrated even her masked front. The kunoichi gave him a weak smile, feeling exhausted both mentally and physically although she had not done anything to exert herself. It seemed she was still recovering from the interrogation.

‘Are you ready?’ Neji asked, walking to stand at her side. Sena hummed in reply and nodded, lifting her pack by the strap toward her shoulder. Before she could swing it over her shoulder, it was halted by his hand. Sena went to protest, to ask what he was doing, but he had already taken it from her and swung it over his own. A warmth bloomed within her chest at the action, and she couldn’t help but think about how much she had missed him.

‘Let’s go.’ Neji headed toward the door, gesturing for the kunoichi to follow. When she left the room, she was met with two more familiar faces, Kakashi and Jiro.

‘Guess the Hokage isn’t fooling around when it comes to protection then.’ Sena muttered, unable to stop herself from chuckling. It seemed ridiculous enough that she needed three shinobi guards on her while they figured out the danger she was in but to have such high ranking ones guarding her just seemed overkill. She didn’t complain though, thankful that Neji happened to be one of them.

‘Come on Matsura,’ Jiro called with a smug look on his face. ‘Thought it would take a lot more to take you down for good.’

‘Who said I was down for good?’ Sena folded her arms and shook her head, a smile spread across her lips. ‘Besides I can still take you on.’ Jiro just scoffed, smirk unyielding as he turned. She turned to Neji, her smile fading as she realised just how tense he had become with his jaw clenched, hand gripping so tight to the strap of her backpack it caused his knuckles to whiten.

What was going on with him?

‘Time to go,’ Kakashi said, catching her eye. She nodded, placing a hand on Neji’s arm, causing him to flinch a little. Their gaze met and she saw something within him that reflected anger and then it was gone replaced with something else. She couldn’t quite discern what it was, brushing it off with a small smile. He blinked a few times, then turned to walk after the others through the hospital, with her following.
When they exited the kunoichi looked up toward the sky observing the pink and orange hues the afternoon sun spread across the horizon. It was the third time she had seen the sky since she had left the hideout, the first since she had been admitted to the hospital. She wondered whether she would be awake long enough to see the stars. How she had missed them.

As they walked through Konoha, Jiro and Sena walked side by side with the other two following at a slight distance. She had wanted to ask Neji why he had been so uneasy but she figured he wouldn’t tell her anyway, not with the others around at least. She found she didn’t have the energy for much conversation and instead listened to Jiro talk about some important missions he had completed.

The more she nodded, the more she wanted the conversation to end. Not because she didn’t enjoy listening to what Jiro had to say, but rather she felt like the more she concentrated on his words, the more prone she was to pass out. Inoichi had warned her about the side effects for the next few hours, but she never imagined feeling so weak. All her focus had been on healing the past few days, so her body was still in recovery mode, and on top of everything else, her head had a dull ache.

They continued walking through the village, but when Sena turned to walk toward the Matsura compound, Jiro grabbed her wrist and shook his head. ‘Not that way Matsura, you think we are going to be that obvious when we have no idea who is after you?’

‘You mean if there is someone after me.’ Sena sighed, annoyed she still wouldn’t be able to return home. ‘Fine where are we going then?’ The devious smile that spread across his lips made her feel uneasy. ‘What’s with that look?’

‘Nothing.’ Jiro shrugged, wrapping an arm around her shoulder while looking to where Neji and Kakashi stood and then back toward her. ‘I’m just glad I was the one who got to tell you.’ Sena looked down to where his arm draped across her shoulder, raising her brow.

‘Well, are you going to tell me?’ She pushed his arm off, receiving a chuckle from him.

‘You are staying at your boyfriend's place.’ He pointed his thumb behind him in Neji’s direction. ‘Aren’t you lucky.’

‘Boyfriend?’ Sena questioned, brows still raised. ‘Hm.’ She shrugged refusing to give him the reaction he wanted; there was no way she would give in to Neji so easily. ‘Well then let’s go.’ Jiro sighed but complied, causing Sena to hope he had dropped the teasing. They walked a few metres in silence before he brought it up again, probably hoping to coax a reaction he wanted.

‘Come on you can’t tell me you guys aren’t sweet on each other.’ He gave her a childish pout. ‘It’s as obvious as it is sickening. Just admit it!’

‘Hm.’ Sena didn’t even flinch at his accusation. ‘Speaking of sweet and sickening, have you told Kira you love her yet?’

Her retaliation caused Jiro to stop in his tracks, his eyes widening and cheeks burning a bright red. ‘I-I have no idea what you’re talking about.’ He scoffed melodramatically.

Sena laughed watching the way his hands shook, and mouth twitched. He turned his head forward and huffed, continuing to walk but at a faster pace. She had struck a nerve, one she knew the extent of all too well. Jiro had been in love with Kira as long as she could remember and the doctor was none the wiser. It was quite amusing, but she couldn’t help but feel guilty sometimes for bringing it up to avoid talking about Neji. It wasn’t as though she didn’t want to talk about him; it was just the
uncertainty of their relationship and where they both stood, stopped her.

As they walked, Sena’s pace slowed, but Jiro kept going. Her eyes started to become blurry as she blinked furiously to try and get them to focus while the world seemed to spin around her. Pressing her fingers to her temples, she massaged them carefully as she walked, the dull ache becoming more of a nuisance.

‘Hey slow down would you— ahh!’ Sena stopped completely, pain shooting through her skull as she clutched her head. Someone was at her side already; hand softly pressed to her back while the other gripped her arm to support her. She didn’t need to look to know it was Neji.

‘Are you alright?’ He asked, his tone gentle and laced with concern. The pain receded into a tolerable ache and her eyes adjusted back after a few seconds. She lifted her head, her eyes catching his. For a moment she forgot about the pain, the world spinning, the past, and only saw the affection reflected in Neji’s eyes. And suddenly all she wanted was for him to wrap his arms around her.

‘I’m fine.’ Sena pulled away, blinking a few times. ‘It’s just one of the side effects.’ Neji nodded, knowing exactly what she was referring too. He had been there, after all, to escort her to the intelligence unit. ‘Let’s keep going.’ He released her hold so she could walk on.

As Sena walked, she couldn’t help but feel a warm tingle on her arm from where Neji had held her.

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When they finally reached their destination, Neji moved forward to open the door with Jiro and Sena behind him. Kakashi was still trailing further behind, keeping his focus on their surroundings. As he shifted the key toward the lock, Neji listened to the conversation behind him.

‘Well, this is where I leave you.’ Jiro said, making an exaggerated yawning sound.

‘Are you not coming inside?’ Sena asked. Neji couldn’t help but wonder if it was curiosity or disappointment in her voice. The thought of the latter made his body tense, his grip on the handle tightening. He just wanted Jiro to leave. He couldn’t bear to watch the way they interacted and contacted anymore; it filled him with envy and irritation to the point he could no longer concentrate.

‘No, unfortunately, I’m due for another mission.’ Jiro replied, and Neji felt himself exhale a breath. ‘Kakashi and Neji can handle it from here; I was just the escorting party.’ He opened the door turning back to face them.

‘Oh,’ Sena said, embracing Jiro for a short hug before pulling away. Neji felt his skin grow hot as he watched the sight. ‘Thank you, stay safe alright?’ Jiro nodded.

‘Same to you.’ Jiro took a few steps away before turning back to wave. Neji groaned internally, wanting him to hurry up and leave. He couldn’t take it anymore. Then finally Sena’s old teammate leapt away and was gone.

The Hyūga stepped aside to let her enter before Kakashi approached him. He gave a curt nod, icha icha book in one hand, the other buried inside his pocket.
‘I’m going to patrol out here, keeping an eye out for anything suspicious,’ Kakashi said, dipping his book slightly. ‘You keep an eye on her inside, alright?’

‘I will.’ Neji turned to follow Sena into the house when he felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned his head back slightly to look at Kakashi’s hand.

‘Listen,’ he began. ‘What she has been through, that is a lot for anyone to deal with so keep in mind that she is bound to experience some…side effects. Just remember she is still the kunoichi we know.’

‘I know who she is.’ Neji brushed off his hand and walked inside.

When he entered, he walked toward his room, opening the door to see Sena sitting on his bed, her head resting in her hands. A blush spread across his face as suddenly every intimate moment and thought he had ever had came to the forefront of his mind as if to punish him. Many times he had dreamed of her leaning over him, caressing him, right there in his bed making him feel ashamed. He never acted upon it though… at least most of the time he didn’t and on the rare occasions he did, it was never in his bed…he shook the thoughts away.

‘You can rest here,’ Neji said, walking toward his closet and opening it. ‘I’ll take the floor.’

‘I can’t let you do that.’ He could feel her gaze on him causing heat to rise to his cheeks again. ‘You take the bed; I’ll sleep on the floor.’

‘No.’ He retrieved a shirt and pair of shorts from the cupboard and turned back to face her. ‘That would be ridiculous. You need proper rest to recover.’ Sena groaned, before swinging her legs onto the bed and leaning against the pillows.

‘Fine.’ She rubbed her temples. ‘We could at least compromise and share the bed, it’s big enough after all, and I don’t mind.’ Neji froze, feeling his heart skip a beat. Had he just heard her correctly in suggesting they share the bed?

‘It’s alright, really.’ Sena said catching his eye. ‘I trust you.’ But Neji didn’t trust himself. Not with the possibility of having one of the dreams he had been dreaming more frequently, not to mention the problem he had come to deal with every morning following said dreams. He couldn’t let that happen. It would be embarrassing, not to mention it would be entirely inappropriate.

‘No,’ he reiterated. ‘It wouldn’t be proper.’ He handed her the clothes hoping she got the message to drop the subject. She cocked her brow and gestured toward the clothes questioningly.

‘Bathroom is through there.’ Neji pointed toward the door across the room, watching as she stood up and disappeared behind it.

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During the night Sena awoke from a nightmare screaming, kicking off the blankets in a feverish state. Her bangs stuck to her sweaty forehead, her heart thumping against her chest as the images of the dream circulated. She was panting, and as a sickening feeling built up in her stomach, she jumped off the bed onto shaking legs and ran to the bathroom.

She heard Neji call after her, but she shut the door and locked it in one swift motion. Then she fell
to her knees, bending over the toilet and let herself be sick. Her stomach twisted and her chest clenched at the sensation as she tried to fight off the images which haunted her. These dreams had been terrorising her since she had escaped.

In the nightmare, she was back in that place, in the room where Deidara had kept her under lock and key. It played on a loop, tormenting her, with every escape ending with her right back to where she started. The thought of his touch on her skin again made her shudder, her hands trembling as flashing memories of past nights spent with him, nickering in her mind like a candle sat by an open window on a windy evening.

Sena closed her eyes, aware of her shallow breathing and the rapid beating of her heart. She was having a panic attack, and she needed to calm down. Taking a deep yet shaky breath, she closed her eyes and tried to focus on something, but the memories she tried to keep at bay kept flooding her mind.

Then she heard the forced twisting of the doorknob followed by a furious knocking on the door.

‘Sena?’ It was Neji. ‘Let me in, please?’

She couldn’t bring herself to answer as she looked down at her shaking hands, tingling sensations shooting up her arms. The kunoichi forced herself to concentrate on the lines there, hoping it would be enough. Then she thought of something else to do.

‘Not yet,’ she replied. ‘Please, just…keep talking to me. I-I just need a minute.’

‘Are you alright?’ He asked.

‘Yes.’

‘Are you lying?’

‘Just tell me something.’

‘Tell you what?’

‘Anything… please.’

‘Sena I…’ He stopped, and she heard something thud against the door. It sounded like he was leaning against it. She crawled across the cool tiles, pressing her palm against the door when she reached it. Her breathing had calmed a little already, and she knew what she needed to focus on now.

‘I’m sorry,’ she whispered, tears streaming down her burning cheeks. ‘I missed you.’ Sena heard him slide down the door onto the ground, letting out a soft sigh.

‘I know,’ Neji murmured. ‘I…’ He trailed off like he couldn’t complete his sentence.

‘It’s alright.’ She didn’t need him to say anything, just knowing he was there was enough even if she was tragic falling apart this way. She didn’t want him to see her this way, so shaken up but she also realised that he was the only one she trusted to see her this way. She had faith he wouldn’t turn his back on her no matter what.

They sat there in silence for awhile, neither of them moving. The only sound was the faint breathing she heard through the door mixed with her thoughts. And for the first time in a long time, she felt safe.
'Neji are you there?' She asked.

'I'm here,' he assured her.

'Will you stay?'

'Yes.' His answer came without hesitation or sign of regret, which calmed her. She let her hand rest against the wood, wondering if he was doing the same. They had always been connected — of that she was sure.

Neji leaned back against the door feeling entirely helpless toward the entire situation. Even knowing everything that happened to her, there was nothing he could do to help or take her pain away. Every time he thought of something to say it would end up just catching in his throat. He cursed himself for being so useless.

His mind wandered back to when Sena had gone to the Hokage. How willing she was to walk there even though she was wounded all for the sake of her village. It reminded him of all the reasons he had fallen for her in the first place. He fell in love with her courage, her sincerity, and her ability to shift the feelings in others. And it was these things he had come to believe in, have faith in, even if the whole world indulged in ignorance, unaware of who she truly was and what she had done. Because the rest of the world didn’t matter to him, he loved her, and that was everything.

It was why, when she had volunteered herself to go to the interrogation and intelligence division to make sure there was nothing left hidden away in her memory she had not divulged, he had wanted to stop her but didn’t. It was because he loved her that he suffered through her agonising screams while she relived every horrible moment of her time away again, even though it was torture. It was why he had insisted when told she would not be able to return home while they determined her situation, that she would stay at his home. He couldn’t stand the thought of losing her again nor could he stand in to stop these things when she asked him not to. Their faith in each other was the force that bound them together, like the foundations of a house, they were the pillars that kept their connection strong. He would trust in her even if it pained him to do so.

Neji then thought of Kakashi, wondering why he had cared this much about her. It wasn’t that he questioned the person Sena was but rather the person Kakashi was. He had never been able to place the Copy Ninja, forever alluded by him. He never revealed to Neji why he decided to join the mission to look after her. He had never really associated with her before nor did he have a responsibility to her. He threw himself willingly into her cause which he surely did not fully understand, simply because it was the right thing to do. It almost made Neji feel guilty for accusing him of being the reason she had infiltrated the Akatsuki.

Then he heard shuffling from behind the door, drawing his focus back to reality and away from his thoughts. He stood, shifting away in case she wanted to open it. This entire time he had wanted to use his Byakugan to see what was going on, even now the temptation was strong, but he felt it would be a violation of her privacy so he couldn’t bring himself to do it. Instead, he waited for her to come to him when she was ready.

Sena opened the bathroom door, slowly, to reveal herself to him after what felt like a lifetime apart. He noticed her hand trembling as it clasped the side for stability. Her eyes, those beautiful and
once carefree eyes were bloodshot but still held a flicker of innocence. Neji looked at her, wanting to take away her pain, wanting to remove all of the evils this world had bestowed upon her.

‘Sena…’ He took a step toward her.

‘Don’t say anything, please.’ She closed her eyes and looked away, biting her trembling lip.

Then she let go of the door and took a few quick steps before letting herself crash into his arms. There she buried her face into his chest brushing her cheek against the cloth of his shirt. It was an emotional embrace, full of vulnerability and need. Caresses. Comforting touches. Him, her. Chills as her cool skin pressed against his heated body. And there was impatience too. He wasn’t sure what for exactly, but he knew it was there. He touched the small of her back as he closed his arms around her shaking body.

The touch of her bare skin, where her shirt had ridden up beneath his palm, sweet and cold, electrifying his fingers. Neji wanted to tell her how much he loved her, how he would do anything make her feel safe but he knew it was not the time for such words. It would turn the situation into something else, and he wasn’t sure either of them could deal with that.

Instead, he continued to hold her, his thoughts shouting, singing, whistling around his mind like a distant whirlwind. Breaths and Heartbeats echoed; candle light flickered before their eyes; the scent of lilac enveloped them. And as much as he didn’t want to admit it, he never wanted to let her go.

A soft moan from Sena; raven waves tickling his arm; trembling bodies entwined; his tight embrace. She moved her face from his chest to look up at him; black lashes, damp, blinking; a soft sigh. A question asked, and an answer was given.

Then silence. An eternity of silence.
Sena awoke early, the dawn light barely breaking through the gaps in the blinds of Neji’s bedroom window. She blinked a few times, her eyes adjusting to reality, noting the features of the room. It occurred to her that she had never actually seen his room before, in fact, she was probably one of the few if not the only person who had. It made her smile. Then she remembered her nightmares. There were times when her dreams seemed so vivid, so much greater than what was to be found when Sena awoke and began life again. Outside the busy streets of Konoha and the feeling of endless routine, of trying to stay alive were diminished making her seem altogether lost. There in her dreams, she would stretch out her hand toward the moonlit skies, to the seemingly endless galaxies, and before long she would gaze back upon the world, immersed in a new reality. One without the restraints of the past. But now she became lost, trapped between four suffocatingly close walls, illuminated by the flicker of torchlight, without any possibility of escape. There was no one around to help her. Not one person. The emptiest of feelings. Even death became useless in a nightmare.

Now reality moved her the way her dreams used to, and in the early stages of her life, it occurred to her that everything she saw; the roaming creatures, the trees and water, the stars above, were clearer than she could ever recall. As if, all imperfections and lacklustre qualities had vanished...No, not even like that. The flaws had never existed, and never would from that point onwards.

She rolled over to her side to see where Neji was sleeping on the floor. He looked so peaceful as she watched his chest rising and falling with every breath; his forehead now without his hitai-ate seeming so exposed. There the curse mark that had haunted him for so long laid, reminding her of the first time she had seen it. Their marks had haunted them both since they were children. But as she looked at him now she felt that she finally had found what she’d searched all these years for; he was her anchor, the very thing that kept her grounded in this world.

Carefully she pulled the blanket from her, swung her legs over the bed and approached Neji. He didn’t wake when she kneeled next to him, taking in the rare sight in front of her. He was a quiet sleeper, the usual frown on his face was non-existent, instead replaced with a softness — one he had come to show her more often. It made her not want to wake him, to let him sleep since she had disturbed him during the night. But it was morning, and he would probably be more annoyed knowing she let him sleep late.

Sena leaned over him, careful not to startle him, letting her palm gently caress his warm cheek. He had always been warm. Her skin always seemed so cold in comparison. She let her thumb glide across his cheek, the sensation sending sparks through her fingertips.

‘Neji,’ she whispered, placing her other hand on his shoulder. ‘It’s time to wake up.’ She gave him...
a gentle shake, her other palm still touching him affectionately. He stirred a little, releasing a soft moan before pushing the side of his face further into her touch as if he ached for it.

Sena bit her lip to stop herself from chuckling, seeing him in such a vulnerable yet pleasing position. She watched as his eyes fluttered open, taking in a deep breath as he came back to reality. She smiled at him, her fingertips gently brushing against his skin. He looked up at her through half-lidded eyes, a hint of a smile evident in the corner of his mouth.

‘Good morning,’ she said. ‘I’m sorry to wake you.’ He let out a soft moan again, closing his eyes for a few seconds before opening them again.

‘It’s fine,’ he murmured still in a sleepy state. ‘Your hand… is cold.’

‘Sorry.’ She withdrew her hand and sat back.

‘No,’ Neji said suddenly at the lack of contact. Then his eyes widened as if realising just now the situation they were in and what he had said. He cleared his throat. ‘It’s fine.’ He sat up and pulled the blankets off him, then stood up and walked to the wardrobe. He grabbed a clean change of clothes and hurried off the bathroom mumbling something that sounded like ‘shower.’

Sena giggled, watching a very flustered Neji close the door behind him. Then she heard a knock on the window, from where the outside door to the balcony lay. She stood up and walked over, pulling back the curtain to find Kakashi standing there, giving a small wave upon seeing her and slid open the door.

‘Good morning,’ he said casually.

‘Morning,’ she replied.

‘I just got word from the Hokage that you can go home today.’ He tucked his hands deep into his pockets. Sena frowned, uncertain whether or not this meant all her information checked out, and she was clear

‘That was a quick change of heart; I thought it was too dangerous for me to be in a place so obvious?’

‘It is, however, there is apparently a new addition to the situation that changes things.’

‘What new addition?’

‘That is for us to find out when we get there, so get ready, and we shall go.’

— — —

When Sena and Neji arrived at the Matsura compound, Kakashi said his goodbyes, informing them he would patrol in the evenings while Neji took care of her during the day. She still had no idea who or what the new addition to the situation was and annoyed that she was consistently kept out of the loop ever since she had returned. Even Jiro had known she was staying at Neji’s before she had a clue. It was becoming bothersome just existing in this situation.

They moved through the compound where they were greeted by Saio who bowed upon entry. Sena
found herself smiling at the familiar face.

‘Lady Sena,’ he rose from his bow. ‘I’m glad you have returned safely.’

‘Saio,’ she nodded back. ‘It’s good to see you again. Tell me, where is my grandmother?’

‘Lady Miyu went with some others to purchase food for this evening, in anticipation of your return.’

‘She is subtle as ever,’ Sena muttered, smile still present on her lips. She turned to Neji and caught his gaze. ‘Looks like it’s time to find out what awaits us.’ He nodded, following her as Saio led them toward the main household.

Upon entry the kunoichi paused and took a deep breath, taking in the aroma of her new home. It wasn’t the one she had grown up in, that had burned to ground years ago, but her grandmother made the interior almost identical. She wasn’t sure if it was for her benefit or not but was grateful nonetheless. All the memories it triggered were soothing, unlike those of her nightmares. It made her miss her brothers and her mother. But it was the impending arrival of her father that circulated in her mind.

Then she felt a hand on her shoulder and turned to see Neji standing there, brow furrowed in concern. Instead of explaining she gave him a small smile then turned and continued walking inside, finding a seat in the kitchen. There Neji and Saio joined her.

‘I’ll make tea,’ Saio began shuffling around the kitchen.

‘There is no need, really Saio.’ Sena said. ‘You do too much for us already.’

‘As it is my duty, Lady Sena.’ He gave her a warm smile before filling the pot with water.

‘There is supposed to be something waiting for us here,’ Neji said. ‘Something from the Hokage?’

‘Yes, that’s right,’ Sena added. ‘What is it?’

‘Right well,’ Saio began. ‘The thing I must warn you about is—.’

‘The thing he is trying to warn you about,’ came a familiar voice, ‘is me.’ Sena didn’t have to turn to know who it was nor did it take long for the anger to surge inside her, making her blood boil. Before she even thought twice about it, she grabbed a kunai from her pouch, shot up and pressed the blade against the man’s throat. His sapphire blue eyes were starring back at her.

Neji was behind her instantly, his Byakugan activated and his palm stretched ready. ‘What is going on here? Who is this man?’ He asked. Sena’s eyes narrowed at the man, applying more pressure to the blade.

‘Don’t worry she is mad but she won’t actually kill me,’ the man said, making her jaw clench. ‘We are family after all.’

‘Family?’ Neji asked, and Sena could feel him withdraw.

‘Don’t act like family means anything to you.’ She spat, unyielding her stance. ‘And don’t act as though you care now when you abandoned us the first chance you got. Isn’t that right Uncle Kyou?’

‘You are jumping to conclusions to a story you don’t fully understand.’
'I don’t care for your story. I know the truth which is you were supposed to be with grandfather when he died, it was your responsibility to receive the curse seal, not my mother’s but instead you ran. And because of your selfish choice she died! And now my father, your brother, is inflicted with the same darkness, the same fate!'

Kyou’s expression darkened, all evidence of his smirk disappeared. ‘Sena—’

‘Don’t Sena me, don’t you dare! I’m not a naive child anymore.’ She pushed the kunai harder. ‘You are the reason Tsutomu and Tadao died, the reason our home burned to the ground and you expect me to think that just because you have a different view on what happened, I’ll change my mind about hating you!?’

‘Sena.’ This time it was Neji who spoke her name. She turned back to face him, tears threatening to spill from her eyes and her cheeks burning with anger. Her expression softened when she was the concern on his face.

‘Neji, he’s the reason…’ she trailed off when he nodded.

‘I know, but the Hokage sent him for a reason.’ He took a step toward her. ‘I’m not saying you should trust him but listen. Be logical; he might have information on your father.’

Sena took a deep breath and then released it as she closed her eyes to mull over the situation. Every fibre of her soul screamed not to trust him, to cut him down where he stood, but another, more reasonable voice told her to listen to Neji. He was right; her uncle could have information on her father that could determine his fate.

‘Very well.’ She withdrew her blade, but her scowl remained. ‘You may talk, but that is all.’ She walked back toward Neji, both taking a seat at the table. Her uncle followed, and Saio, whom she had almost forgotten was there, poured the tea. There was a heavy silence in the air, one thick with tension.

‘Well, you wanted to tell your version of things.’ Sena tried to sound composed, but the anger was too much to handle. ‘So, speak.’ Kyou let out a heavy sigh.

‘Very well, I guess I better jump right into it then, since you clearly don’t trust me.’ It caused Sena to scoff. Of course, she didn’t trust him. How could she?

‘First I think it’s best to address the crimes you have charged me with.’ Kyou began. ‘Then I’ll explain why I have come and perhaps then you will understand.’ Sena narrowed her eyes, but it did not deter him. ‘You are right, I was supposed to be the one who received the curse mark, not Sayuri and the only reason I was not there was no other reason than bad timing.’

‘You blame bad timing for your mistakes?’ Sena rolled her eyes.

‘Sena.’ All Neji had said was her name, but she knew there was a silent scolding in there somewhere. She sighed and nodded, gesturing for Kyou to continue.

‘I’m not saying it was an excuse, but yes that is what happened. I had been called in by the Hokage himself, and I could not refuse not even if my father was on his deathbed. The village depended on it. So Sayuri volunteered to look after him and awaited my return. Unfortunately by the time I got back I was too late.’

Yes, he was too late. Sena remembered her uncle and father fighting that day; she was so young at the time she didn’t really understand what was going on. When she asked Tsutomu, he merely sighed and told her that Uncle Kyou did something careless which resulted in their mother getting
hurt. Tadao and Sena eavesdropped on the another argument between them later, and that was when she had first discovered the curse seal.

‘Then why did you run?’ Sena asked, trying to determine the truth of the story.

‘Your father was heartbroken. He blamed himself, and then he blamed me. And he wasn’t wrong to do so either, but it wasn’t as if I intended it to happen.’ Kyou paused to pour himself some tea then slid the pot over toward Sena. ‘There was a time when your father would have sacrificed everything for our clan, but then he met you mother and…’

‘Don’t talk about her. My mother did nothing wrong.’

‘That’s not what I was trying to insinuate, but very well I’ll leave that topic for now.’ He lifted the teacup and blew the steam away before taking a sip. Their eyes were locked in an intense stare each of them daring the other to look away. Neither of them caved. ‘But back to the story. Your father couldn’t bear to look at me anymore and your grandmother, a lovely woman my dear mother is, cast me aside for her favourite son. Again I was a second rate to Osamu, and I decided there was nothing useful I could do here. Not when I was so despised. So I went to the Hokage and requested a mission, one which would let me go away for awhile.’

‘And so you ran,’ Sena added.

‘Yes, I ran. For the sake of my village, for the good of my family and myself. I ran.’ Kyou took another sip, while Sena poured herself a cup, taking on board what her uncle had told her so far. She still couldn’t figure out why he was bothering to tell her this, why he had returned now. Then she felt something, a chakra signature she had felt before but she wasn’t sure where. The tremor had been present since her uncle had arrived, but she had been so angry she didn’t notice it properly.

‘Why have you come here?’ She asked. ‘Why now?’

‘I was summoned.’ Kyou replied. ‘I am still a leaf shinobi after all, and when the Lady Hokage calls, then I come running. It is usually the way it works.’

‘So you heard,’ Neji observed.

‘Yes, I heard that my dear brother had announced his return at last.’

‘It wasn’t just because you were summoned.’ Sena eyed him carefully. ‘You came back of your own volition.’

‘Hm. Just like your mother.’ Kyou leaned back in his chair ignoring the dirty look she gave him. ‘Nothing got passed her either. Not even my Genjutsu could trick her. She was an Uchiha after all.’ Sena frowned at him referring to her mother as an Uchiha. They had disowned her the moment they learned she was marrying Osamu and from that moment on she became a Matsura.

‘So why have you come back?’ Neji asked. ‘You have failed to answer the question.’

‘I came back to help. Sena, you need my help for when Osamu returns. You can’t do it alone.’

‘Why should I trust you?’

‘Because I’ve done more for this clan than you think you know.’

Then suddenly it clicked. The chakra signature, the Genjutsu, being away from the village. It all fit
together so conveniently Sena cursed herself for not realising it in the first place.

‘It was you, all of the things in the past months which I couldn’t explain. It was all you.’

Neji looked at her for clarification, and Kyou just sat there neither admitting nor denying it.

‘The Genjutsu in the scroll, at the Goryō shrine it was you.’ She elaborated. ‘How could you be so cruel? You made me relive my worst memory.’

‘It was supposed to be a warning. Do you have any idea what kind of danger you were in there? With an Akatsuki member no less!’

‘A warning for what? My mother was already dead!’

‘Yes and if you had kept looking mindlessly through the artefacts in that tomb then you would have been too!’

‘Why couldn’t you just tell me, instead of messing with my head.’

‘You were on your infiltration mission; it would have compromised you. Don’t forget he was there too.’

Deidara. Her body shuddered just at the thought of him. And as mad as she was she couldn’t help but find logic and reason in her uncle's words; even if she didn’t want to admit it out loud. She was so caught up in her anger toward him.

‘Fine. But tell me this.’ Sena continued. ‘It was you who saved me wasn’t it?’

Kyou met her stare head on, his mouth flinching, giving away his answer.

‘Hm.’ She leaned back with her arms crossed. ‘You never were one for medical ninjutsu; the stitch job should have easily tipped me off.’ Kyou didn’t answer, and Sena sighed. ‘Why did you chose to save me then? I mean surely you had countless opportunities before. It wasn’t the first time I was wounded so why then?’ It was her uncle's turn to sigh.

‘Because you are my family, a precious reminder of who my brother once was.’ He paused to look down at his hands. ‘And this was serious. You would have died had I not intervened, Sena. I couldn’t let you sacrifice yourself.’

‘It was my choice to make.’ The moment the words left her mouth she felt Neji’s eyes on her. Not exactly a truth but she said it anyway.

‘Would you rather I’d left you?’ Kyou asked. ‘To flow down the stream in a pool of your own blood and die?’ Sena felt Neji tense next to her, his grip tightening on the table.

‘No,’ she replied. ‘But I would also rather have my family alive. I guess we don’t all get what we want.’

‘Then we finally agree on something.’

‘I guess so.’

Sena took the time to consider what her uncle had just told her, sipping her tea slowly as she did. He had been the person to bring such chaos into her life whether it was intentional or not. But he had also saved her life, more than once with all things considered. She couldn’t ignore that fact. And there was still one thing that wasn’t clear.
'When you saved me,’ Sena began, not looking up from her tea. ‘You disappeared, you didn’t want me to know it was you but now you have come back and told me everything. Why change tactics now?’

‘You have to understand that it was not only my obligation to follow you but my mission. I was ordered to keep you safe from harm and watch over you, never revealing myself to anyone. Now my mission has changed. I am to keep you, the clan and the village safe. I changed tactics, as you called it so that I can help you take on your father.’

‘I see.’ She looked up at him again. ‘And how are you going to do that?’

‘Train with me. We will utilise our abilities together to come up with a solid battle plan to take on your father.’

She took another moment to consider this. If she were to take on her father on her own in her current condition then she would surely lose, this she had known since she had woken up in the hospital. But she had been ignoring that fact though for she had no way to alter it…until now that is.

‘Fine,’ Sena accepted. ‘But I have one request.’

‘I’m all ears.’

‘It’s just us, you and me, no-one else. Our family is responsible for this mess, and I won’t have anyone else get involved for our sake. There have been too many casualties already.’

Kyou smiled and stroked his chin, seeming to consider her words until finally, he responded. ‘Agreed.’

Chapter End Notes

Oh boy I’ve been keeping this plot reveal under wraps for so long it finally feels good to develop this story further! And I love writing these cute little Sena/Neji moments! Ahhhh! ^_^ Hope you enjoyed reading!
There is a voice of reason which reveals itself in a time of moral dilemma. Sometimes it was easy for Neji to listen to it and other times he found it was drowned out by the images of his dreams. This was one of the mornings in which the latter took hold of him.

*The way her hair fell down her shoulders, slowly, one strand at first, and then all at once, cascading down like a waterfall...the gentle touch of her fingertips gliding down his chest...the way she laid beneath him, legs spread...him grinding against her...hearing her moan his name...the friction, the maddening friction...*

Neji let out a soft moan, cheek pressed against his pillow, rolling his hips to feel the sweet friction coupled with the still vivid imagery of the dream. This action alone caused him to wake fully from his half-slumbered state, the morning sunlight, which broke through the blinds, shining onto him. His body tangled in the black sheet; he was usually a still sleeper, but in the night he had stirred, rolled from his back and onto his stomach, an arm resting underneath it while the other propped underneath the pillow. He stretched, letting out a groan as the lower half of his body involuntarily dragged itself against the mattress once again causing the same pleasurable friction he had felt moments before, while his fingers grazed over his warm cheeks then upward to rub his eyes. He scrunched up his features realising once again he had another questionable dream. His eyelids fluttered, and he blinked slowly. Then, resisting the temptation to grind his body again, he turned and settled, his back against the wall as he sat upright on the bed.

The Hyūga sat there, fisting the sheets with a stunned expression as he looked down at his problem then quickly pinned his gaze to something in the left corner of the room. He frowned, thinking the situation over in his head. The want to give in to his urges was there, finding himself considering giving in to them. He contented himself by fixing his hair free from the loose ponytail. His hair spilled down from the elastic and over his shoulders. There was heat around him, unsure if it was from the humidity in the air or the intensity of his arousal at that moment. His neck was all prickly from sweat. He rubbed it, pushing the sticking hair out of the way before his fingers glided down over his chest and abdomen, a dangerous destination in their path. They paused when reaching his waistband, the need for release consuming him, the waging battle in his mind as he began, consciously, to decide the next course of action.

*The image of her back arching up, allowing her pelvis to meet his while he hovered over her, imprinted itself on his mind.*

A hitch in his breath as he slowly dragged his fingertips along the lower hem of his sleeping shirt,
pushing it up to show off more skin and there he paused.

_The touch of her soft, cool skin, electrifying his body._

Neji shuddered when his fingers rubbed over the front of his pants, the action sending shock waves of pleasure pumping through his body with the simple touch. Quickly he retracted his hand, deciding right then and there he was not going to act on this urge. He would not think about Sena and instead take a cold shower to settle these feelings.

At the decision he stood up, ignoring the fact that his pillow, which Sena had slept on some days before, still held a faint scent of lilac; he didn’t bother to grab a clean change of clothes on the way to the bathroom. Wasting no time he shut the door, turned on the cold water and began stripping. First came his shirt, exposing his heated skin to the crisp morning air, making his body shiver which only added to the arousal. He could feel the heat, of course; still nestled flush against the restricting fabric of his boxers. He hooked his fingers beneath the waistband of his boxers and pants, pushing them down, becoming flustered as they caught on his now hard member. He tried to ignore the way it felt, the small amount of pleasure it brought, he really did. And when finally he was free of the confinements of clothing, he reached into the shower, hand hovering in front of the hot water tap, internally debating once again whether or not he should follow through with his desires.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, trying his best to ignore the voice inside him which screamed for release until he couldn’t take it anymore. Opening his eyes he closed the distance between his hand and hot water tap, giving it a swift turn. He waited a few seconds already ashamed of himself while at the same time relieved he didn’t have to fight it anymore. Stepping beneath the warm stream, he let the water cascade over him, the water droplets teasing his skin and covering his body. He balled his fists at first, a feeble attempt to change his mind and forget about the need, but he knew there was no going back now. Just the thought of accepting it, performing such an act he shamed himself for, was enough to tip him over the edge of acceptance.

Slowly, Neji moved his right hand downward, fingers gliding over himself, already hard and sensitive. His breath hitched at the sensation, the image of being entangled with Sena refusing to leave his mind, and as he moved his hand along his length the friction was just so good, the initial hesitation in his touch dissolved. His fingertips began to press down feverishly on the base, rubbing their way up to the head, adding more pressure. The inextinguishable fire that burned within him—for her—was there in every motion and he didn’t even need to see it, to feel it was there. Neji could go through the same objections and hesitations he had when he first realised he was attracted to Sena, but now they were refuted easily, and he was done telling lies. His eagerness, the lust, was an involuntary betrayal of his mind for what he felt for her.

_Her. Sena._ Just the thought of her was enough to drive him mad. The way she was above him, wanting, needing his touch, stroking his cheek with one and the growing bulge in his pants with the other. _He gave a firm stroke up toward the head, tightening his grip as he did._ It had strangely resembled the way she had woken him up when she had stayed, the way her cool hands felt satisfying against his heated cheeks; her gentle smile; he had thought he was in another dream, daring himself to indulge in it. Waking up to her and that sweet scent was an intoxicating experience, one he wouldn’t mind repeating. _His speed increased, feeling his release build up quickly._

_He hunched forward, shoulders curving inward as he can felt a wave of shivers crash over his heated skin._ The thought of her eyes staring up at him through dark lashes as she kissed slowly down his chest, so full of emotion, full of need. _His free hand glided gently up his chest along the sensitive areas causing him to let out a soft moan._ Those sapphire pools he had come to explore
frequently, swimming through the depths, finding that they too held a sparkle, like the stars in the night sky. Then his thoughts shifted to the way she touched him, grinding against each other with her unique combination of gentleness and determination. *His eyes half-lidded, mouth hanging open exuding moans, once silent now forcing their way out with each stroke of his hand.* The way she held his hips when she was beneath him, eyes never leaving his while they rocked their bodies together seemed so vivid and real.

‘Sena.’ It came out in a whine, while his fingers gripped his length, pumping faster and harder, the pleasure maddening mixed with the feeling of warm water streaming down his body. It’s all too much, and he couldn’t silence himself any longer, the moans increasing, his body trembling in anticipation. ‘Sena—ahh.’ He let it slip out again, no longer caring if anyone heard him, too enveloped in the immense pleasure he was feeling. He pushed his thumb firmly against his sensitive skin and across the slit, grunting as he felt the slickness of the pre-cum.

Now he imagined her hand in place of his own, the way her cool skin and electrifying touch would feel along his heated length; her grip gentle yet firm, teasing yet determined. And that was all it took to push him over the edge completely. He threw his head down, shoulders pushing forward with his whole body tensing as he reached orgasm. He let out one long moan varying in pitch as he released himself, his free hand leaning against the wall for support. His body shuddered violently then relaxed as the waves of pleasure shooting through him settled.

Nothing but the sound of crashing water and the sound of his panting could be heard. After taking a few moments for his mind to clear and his body to recover he pushed himself from the wall and washed clean beneath the stream of water. And as he lathered his body with soap in the hopes it would wipe away the act he had just committed, and he once again returned to the internal conflict plaguing him. But even though his thoughts were clouded with regret and embarrassment he couldn’t help but wonder, somewhere in the back of his mind, what it would be like to be with her in reality.

— — —

‘Good morning,’ Sena said seeing Neji upon entering the kitchen. ‘You are here early.’ She bypassed him to get to the cupboard behind, pulling out teacups ready to make the warm beverage.

‘I thought you would want to be up early to train again.’ The reply came out in a whisper, and he was so close behind her it sent shivers up her spine. ‘Besides, it is my mission to keep you safe.’

‘Right.’ Sena bit her lip, stopping a coy smile appearing as she turned back to face him. ‘Your mission.’ She gave him a knowing glance. ‘Here I thought you just couldn’t get enough of my company.’

‘Stop insinuating.’ He frowned, but she could swear she also saw a hint of a blush on his cheeks. ‘That’s not what I meant, and you know it.’ His arms folded on instinct, a standard deflecting mechanism Neji used when he was uncomfortable or just plain annoyed. He had a lot of mannerisms and Sena took pride in knowing them all, but she would never tell him.

‘Missed you too, Neji.’ Sena brushed his arm as she passed him, feeling a tingle in her shoulder after doing so. She always felt an empowering sense of adrenaline around him, and she wasn’t sure if it was because of their connection or just a coincidence. After a few moments, he grunted in reply.
The kunoichi continued her tea preparations, making a double lot, not needing to ask the Hyūga if he wanted any — she knew he would. The two things he could never say no to — her and tea. She tried not to use this to her advantage, but sometimes she couldn’t resist. There was something about seeing someone so serious and intelligent lose their focus and composure over things so trivial that made her laugh. Sometimes she wanted to count all the times she made him blush, but she realised that would just lead to more thoughts she didn’t have the opportunity to deal with, yet.

Settling the two cups of steaming tea on the table and took a seat, with Neji opposite her. She slid over one of them, and he nodded in thanks. Then they sat in silence, indulging in each others company and sipping their tea, finally away from the outside world and away from responsibilities. They shared these moments often over the few days they had spent together, and she was more than thankful. It was her favourite part of the day, being able to have alone time with him. She was sure he had felt the same. Neji was someone who appreciated quiet and calm over everything else. It was an endearing trait.

‘I have something for you.’ Neji broke the silence, leaning back to fish something out of his pouch. Sena sat there and watched, waiting to see what he was referring too. She hoped it wasn’t actually something he had bought; she had always felt guilty when others gave her gifts, she didn’t feel she deserved them. That’s why she always settled for food as something to repay her by.

Her thoughts were interrupted when he placed a black piece of cloth with a rectangle piece of metal attached to it, onto the table. It was her hitai-ate, the one thing she had entrusted to his care all those months ago. The silence between them suddenly felt heavy, her eyes transfixed on the leaf symbol, momentarily taking the weight of all they felt for each other at once. It was an exchange without words, one which spoke honestly as their eyes met. She felt a warmth flow through her, knowing what she wanted to express but unsure of the words to say.

‘You kept it safe for me?’ It was more of a question than a statement, but the hint of vulnerability was made clear to both of them. His brow furrowed a little at her words as if it was ridiculous that she even needed to ask.

‘Of course, I did.’ He shifted a little on his seat. ‘I did what you asked of me.’ The words were simple enough, but the meaning behind them struck Sena to her core. She was naive for even questioning him, he would always do what she asked, and she knew it.

‘Thank you.’ The words came out in a whisper, wavering when she got to the ‘you.’ His expression softened immediately, his intense gaze still caught in hers. Slowly she reached out to take the band off the table, feeling the cool metal in her hands. She had forgotten all about her hitai-ate when she returned, and now it suddenly meant everything to her again.

‘Training,’ Sena said abruptly, trying to chase away the overwhelming emotions she was feeling. ‘We should get going.’ She rose from the chair taking the barely touched cups of tea to the bench.

‘Right,’ Neji replied, with an almost questioning tone. He was concerned by her uncharacteristic brush off, she was sure, but she didn’t want to talk about her feelings. She had other priorities to tend to first.

‘I’m sorry you can’t be apart of it.’ Sena muttered, to him as much as the kitchen sink. ‘I wish I could make your mission more enjoyable.’

‘It’s fine.’ She heard him stand behind her, the squeak of the chair against the floor echoing. ‘Lady Hinata will be there to train with me.’ Sena smiled at the respect he now showed for his cousin, and she was also happy he would have something to do, instead of just checking perimeters to pass the time.
Sena just wanted the whole thing to be over.

— — —

‘Don’t exert yourself!’ Kyou called from the other side of the training grounds. ‘Work on seeing through the Genjutsu. You need to discern between it and your target, that’s the only way you can fight with an advantage. Otherwise, you’ll just get swept up in it like the rest.’

‘I know,’ Sena muttered clutching her side where her barely healed wound lay. The botched stitches had been removed, and the wound sealed when she was at the hospital, but the slight tenderness was still present when she trained. It was tolerable, but she wished it didn’t have such a hindrance on her abilities. She worked on steadying her breathing, taking a sip of water from her bottle.

Her uncle walked toward her, his expression once firm now softening as if realising what shape she was in. They both knew she was pushing herself more than she ought to, but neither of them mentioned it because it wouldn’t change anything. Her father was coming, and there wasn’t anything they could do but stop him. So they trained daily, improving their techniques and plans, moving toward something that might actually take him down. Sena was impressed with the progress they had made already, considering there was still an underlying tension between them. It had taken a few days for his version of events to sink into her understanding, and she still had reservations, but she also didn’t have a lot of options.

‘Let’s take a break,’ Kyou said, joining her. He took a seat on a log, letting out a heavy sigh as he took a drink from his own bottle. It reminded Sena of Hitomi Sensei and his flask full of spirits. The thought dwindled when she realised this was her uncle, one she should be mad at yet finding herself growing a tolerance to him.

‘I’m fine to keep going.’ Sena placed her hand on her hip, attempting to stand tall despite the strain.

‘You might be, but I’m getting old now and need to rest.’ He gave her a smile, coaxing her to join him on the log. She took up the offer reluctantly, sitting a little further from him than necessary. Instead of meeting his gaze she looked off into the distance where Neji and Hinata were training. It wasn’t often they trained outside of the Hyūga compound together, and Sena knew it was because of her they were. She wasn’t sure whether to feel honoured or guilty in causing it. Either way, she was glad to have Neji close by; it made her feel safe.

‘We need to talk about the kid,’ Kyou said, gesturing toward Neji.

‘Why?’ Sena asked half-heartedly.

‘You know why.’ Her uncle wasn’t one for sugarcoating in the best of times, in fact, she was sure he took pride in being blunt. Often she saw the same likeness in herself which made her bitter. She didn’t reply this time. Instead, she huffed, betraying her answer.

‘We’ve all got a weakness.’ Kyou began. ‘I can tell just by looking at you both that yours are each other.’

‘He’s not a weakness.’ She frowned, looking back at him.

‘No?’ His brows raised, questioningly. ‘Tell me again how you ended up trapped in an Akatsuki
'Hm.' Sena groaned, that scroll once had served as her saviour, but now it merely haunted her. ‘I should never have agreed to let you read it.’

‘You know you made the right choice in doing so.’ He shifted up the log closer to her and dropped his voice. ‘I’m not saying weaknesses are a bad thing especially when they can be used to our advantage.’ Sena shot him a look. ‘Don’t jump to conclusions, just hear me out.’

‘I’m not going to use him.’ Sena looked away again, toward Neji, watching as he blocked on of Hinata’s blows. ‘I told you I want to keep him out of it. It will just be you and me.’

‘And you said the same thing to the Hokage, and she ordered you to take other shinobi as back up.’ He was right; she didn’t want anyone else to help because she couldn’t bear if there were casualties.

‘I’ll only use them when necessary, no need to bring them into the actual fight.’

‘What about the kid?’ This question caused her to bite her lip; she didn’t wish to discuss Neji with her uncle of all people.

‘What about him?’ Sena shot him a glare. ‘He will remain at his own compound.’ Kyou chuckled leaning back in exaggeration.

‘You and I both know that won’t happen.’

‘He will stay if I ask him to.’

‘Do you really believe that he’s going to let you go into the belly of the beast alone?’

Sena hesitated, knowing full well Neji normally would do what she asked, but in this circumstance, she wasn’t sure. No, it wasn’t that, it was that she didn’t want to admit how much he cared for her because that meant he was a risk. Sena honestly didn’t want him to get hurt for her sake. Especially since she had hurt him enough already. She took a deep breath.

‘No.’ Just saying the word aloud made her sigh.

‘Then we need to come up with a plan,’ Her uncle replied.

‘Fine.’ Sena didn’t wish to discuss this now, not with Neji so nearby. ‘Tonight we will come up with a plan and only a plan that keeps him alive and safe.’

‘Agreed. Now tell me,’ Kyou beckoned. ‘What will the Lady of the Matsura clan do now she is involved with a Hyūga?’

‘You just want me to say the words you’ve been waiting to hear since you came, don’t you? You expect me to pass the leadership on to you and be on my way.’

‘On the contrary, I’ve always despised leadership.’ He shot her a knowing look as if to prove his point.

‘Now that’s a lie.’ Sena scoffed, knowing full well he had despised living in his brother’s shadow as the second son.

‘Only half of one.’ Kyou admitted.
'Hm.’ She wasn’t convinced in the slightest, but she let it go.

‘Sena, you will have to make a choice eventually.’ Her uncle’s tone seemed sincere, even laced with concern. ‘It’s inevitable at this point.’

‘I know.’ And oh did she ever. But she would have to survive this first, that was her priority. Then she would deal with her feelings and all to come afterwards.
Sena comes face to face with her father.

oh boy my longest chapter yet, 6.5k here we go!

A bolt of lightning flashed across the dark sky and illuminated the bedroom. Today was the day her Osamu was due to arrive and Sena had spent dragging hours mentally preparing herself for the inevitable battle. After all the years she had spent hunting down her father, this was the moment she had been waiting for, she would finally free her father from the fate she had unwillingly bestowed upon him.

The guilt had eaten away at Sena for so long. She felt she didn’t deserve to be rid of the guilt. It would stay with her forever as a subtle ache, serving as a reminder of all the wrong she had done and would never do again. Never again would she let anyone sacrifice themselves for her benefit. Never again would she act so carelessly.

Sena leant against her vanity, chin resting in her hand while her mind drifted from thought to thought. The details of their plan to what would become of her following this evening pushed to the forefront of her mind. She sighed, feeling a heaviness in her chest. Her eyes cast downward to the photo frames on her table. She had no idea how her grandmother had salvaged them from the fire but she was grateful she had.

There were several pictures creating a jagged array of Sena's past. Ones of her family: Tsutomu giving her a piggyback while Tadao pouted beside them, one of her alongside her mother not long after she was born and another with her friends. She had even managed to pull Neji into that group photo despite his protests. She was glad for that.

There was one photo that hadn’t been recovered. It was one of Sena and Neji where he actually managed to smile. It had been when all of the rookies were hanging out after a mission and Sena had teased Neji about something she couldn’t quite remember. She could still recall the warm feelings that had flowed through her upon seeing him smile. She wasn’t even sure who took the photo.

Another flash of lightning lit up the room. Sena turned to the window, listening to the rumble of thunder. The storm was approaching and it wouldn’t be long until it hit. To Sena it seemed fitting, an impending storm both literally and metaphorically; the idea of it all was serving the grand scale of events that had led up to that moment.

With another sigh Sena turned her attention back toward her vanity and the mirror in front of her. Returning to the village had allowed her to feel more like the old Sena, the one she had been before
her life got twisted inside out. Now looking in the mirror, she found she hardly recognised herself. The bags under her eyes, a result of tossing and turning in the night, were dark and heavy. It had been weeks since she had a decent nights sleep.

A knock at the door pulled her from the daydreamed state.

‘Come in.’ Sena called, moving her eyes to the door.

Kyou emerged, hesitating for a moment in the doorway before entering the room with a serious expression on his face.

‘It’s time,’ he said, softly. ‘The evacuation is almost complete and the shinobi are arriving.’

Sena nodded and took a deep breath. The hand that had been holding her chin dropped alongside the other as she pushed herself up from the chair. Sena reached for her hitai-ate and tied it securely around her waist.

It was time.

Sena turned to face her uncle and nodded. As she left the room and walked down the stairs, a wave of unease overcome her. She tried her best to ignore it and press on toward the main courtyard. When she opened the front door the cool wind and the static in the air gave her chills.

As Sena stood on the steps of her home, she watched as the last of her clan exited the gates into the village. Their destination being the Hyūga clan. And as they exited, shinobi of all ranks entered, filling the courtyard and waiting for their orders.

Following them were three familiar faces of the Hyūga clan. Lord Hiashi, Lady Hinata and Neji. Sena’s heart sped up at the sight of them, momentarily pulled from her concentration. She watched as they approached, Hiashi gesturing for them to stop as he continued toward her alone. She then gestured for her uncle to do the same and move away. Hiashi took his last step toward her, bowing his head slightly and she returned the gesture.

‘Lord Hiashi.’ Sena greeted him.

There was a thick layer of tension in the air filled with uncertainty and propriety. It was always the way with the two clans, an unknown way to act with older generations in light of a new alliance. It wasn’t new to the likes of Sena or Neji, but it was still fresh to those older such as Hiashi, even if he was one of the instruments of the unity.

‘Lady Sena.’

There was something was intimidating about him but it was never enough to scare Sena. In fact, it did the opposite, sending a surge of adrenaline through her along with a need to prove herself to him. She wanted to be worthy of her father’s reputation, the one he had before the incident.

‘I want to thank you again for taking in my people, even with the alliance I want you to know it was never your obligation to do it.’ Sena bowed her head again in appreciation.

It was true, she half expected him to object, but then she remembered the reason for the alliance in the first place. Her father had saved Hiashi’s life.

‘Hm.’ He nodded. ‘The Matsura clan have aided the Hyūga many times in the past, and we will not be indebted to another clan.’
Sena had to force herself not to smile; she had been expecting this.

‘I am assuming you have a plan?’

‘I have one.’ Sena assured, watching the uncertain look in his eye which beckoned elaboration. ‘Once he enters the compound, those who have chosen to remain behind will seal us in. Then I’ll take care of the rest.’

‘I hope you know what you are doing.’ He gave her a stern look but she met his gaze head on. ‘I do.’

‘And what happens if you do not make it out of this?’

‘I will make it.’

He gave her another stern look as if to critic her plan. But she did have a backup; furthermore, she had planned down to the smallest detail. However, should could not simply tell him.

‘Theoretically, should I not survive, then it will be up to my uncle to finish it.’

‘And should he fail? What then?’

‘That’s why the other shinobi are here.’ She gestured to those standing a distance away, talking amongst themselves. ‘The Hokage herself appointed them.’

‘Hm.’ Hiashi didn’t look convinced but he was done questioning her.

‘I won’t allow it get that far,’ Sena added for good measure. He simply stared at her, his eyes narrowing then widening again as if realising something he hadn’t before. Then he nodded, accepting her at her word.

‘Very well.’ Hiashi turned to the side but lingered for a moment, not turning away completely. He looked down, concentrating on the earth below, before looking up again toward her. ‘Your father was my ally once; I daresay even a friend. He is the reason our two clans united, and now it is up to you to protect that ideal.’

Sena’s breath hitched at hearing these words. Osamu had always respected Hiashi greatly and now here he was showing her the same respect.

‘I understand.’ Sena nodded, then watched as he walked back toward Hinata and Neji.

Sena’s eyes caught Neji’s. Even with the distance between them their gaze communicated intense emotions that made her stomach flutter. She knew he was going to walk over to her before he even took his first step. And she realised then it was time to set everything in motion. When the Hyūga reached her, the kunoichi prepared herself though she had been expecting this moment since Kyou had discussed this situation with her.

‘Are you ready?’ Neji asked, eyes not leaving hers even for a second.

‘As ready as I can be,’ Sena replied, deciding to betray at least that much honesty.

She didn’t like keeping things from him as much as she hated when he kept secrets from her. But it all served a purpose for it would guarantee their safety. His eyes cast downward suddenly and on instinct she reached out to place her hand on his arm.
‘Neji—’

‘I’m staying with you.’ He lifted his eyes to hers again allowing her to see the determination burning within them. It made her breath catch just looking at them, seeing all the emotions he usually held back from her manifest in but one glance.

‘Neji,’ she began again, letting her hand glide up and down his arm. ‘I can’t have you here.’

‘What are you trying to say?’ Neji scowled, pulling his arm away. ‘Do you think I can’t be of help to you?’

‘That’s not what I meant.’ She took a deep breath and regathered her thoughts. ‘I can’t have you there because I can’t risk you getting hurt.’

His expression softened.

‘And this is something I need to do myself. Please understand.’

He studied her through curious eyes, then sighed as if accepting her words.

‘I…’ Neji began, hesitating slightly.

She had never known him to hesitate, but this week alone he had done it many times. She wondered what he was keeping from her.

‘I won’t lose you.’ He whispered, so quietly she had to pause to make sure she heard him correctly.

The words were simple enough, but the meaning behind them ran deeper than she wanted to admit. His eyes met hers again, the determination still present alongside his affection.

‘I almost did once, and I refuse to let it happen again.’

A small smile appeared across her lips. ‘I promise, you won’t lose me.’

‘I want to make sure,’ He still didn’t back down, ‘Please, let me help you.’

Sena cursed his stubbornness.

‘You are helping me.’ She assured him. ‘Protecting my clan from harm, making sure people stay out of the way, that is helping me. It means more to me than you realise.’ It meant everything to her, knowing how much he cared even when he couldn’t quite put it into words; she simply saw it. She could only hope he understood her now.

‘Please, go before it’s too late.’ Sena turned to walk back to the house when she felt something grab her wrist. It caused her to stop, feeling the familiar warmth of Neji’s touch on her skin, daring to indulge in it for a time before she turned her head back to face him.

‘Neji?’ It came out in a breathless whisper, as she saw the intensity in his gaze.

‘Just promise me you will be alright.’ His tone was steady, but his eyes reflected his desperation, his feelings of hopelessness, which tugged at her heart.

She didn’t want him to feel this way, but there was nothing she could do except do as he wished.

‘I promise.’ Sena tried to keep her voice from wavering but the moment got the better of her. It seemed to be enough though because after a lingering stare, Neji released her.
Sena turned and walked away.

‘Goodbye,’ she whispered, ‘I’m sorry.’

Sena walked into her house to the kitchen and paused, allowing herself a few minutes before she went back outside. She took a shaky breath, hearing another rumble of thunder, louder than the ones before. Then she felt a cool hand on her shoulder, causing her to turn and come face to face with her grandmother.

‘What are you doing here?’ Sena asked, half shocked and half annoyed. ‘You were supposed to leave with the others!’

It was very like her grandmother to pull something like this, to ignore the wishes of those around her and do what she wanted. There were times it amused Sena but it was not one of those times.

‘It is my responsibility to be here.’ Her grandmother gave her a smile. ‘Osamu is coming for the scroll, he will search the house first and I will be here to greet him.’

Sena’s eyes widened, but she knew better than to argue with the old woman.

‘Besides, I have to make sure the rest of the the scrolls in our care don’t fall into the wrong hands.’

‘I see.’ Sena took a deep breath, relaxing again. ‘Why didn’t you just ask uncle to take care of them, I would have you safe and away from this.’

Lady Miyu chuckled.

‘That son of mine has never really had his priorities straight.’

‘Are you so sure of that?’ She asked, finally sympathising with Kyou. ‘I used to think so too, but now I’m not sure.’ Admitting it wasn’t something she wanted to do but something inside her told her she should. Perhaps all his wrongdoings really were just mishaps and poorly timed events.

‘Ah, I see,’ Her grandmother mused, ‘Charisma can influence even the most defiant hearts. It was the case for both my sons but Kyou always had such a cunningness underlying his, it doesn’t always bode well to trust him.’

Sena’s eyes widened at that, uncertain of what to say.

‘Don’t get me wrong petal, I love my sons but the curse of the Matsura clan is not something to be taken lightly.’

The kunoichi sighed. ‘So we really are cursed,’ she muttered before catching her grandmother’s gaze. ‘I guess it is time to break this curse then.’ The determination inside her returned.

‘Yes,’ her grandmother agreed. ‘I think it is time.’ Sena nodded and headed back toward the front door, chancing one glance back at her before she left.

Her grandmother gave her a warm smile.

‘Stay safe,’ Sena whispered, exiting back into the courtyard to another flash of lightning, ‘I’ll tell the shinobi to spread out across the clan grounds.’

Each step Neji took back toward the Hyūga clan felt heavier than the last. There were too many
thoughts passing through his mind and an uneasy feeling in his stomach which wouldn’t allow him to focus. There was something inside of him telling him to turn around and go back, a voice screaming at him to keep her safe. But he knew it couldn’t do that, he didn’t want to go back on his word, he had said he would stay out of it and protect Sena’s clan.

Neji had spent the every minute imagining himself turning around and running back to her, not caring how angry she would be. At least he could make sure she was safe which was the only thing he cared about in the world. Nothing would make sense if he lost her and there was something inside that told him it was a very real possibility. It wasn’t that he doubted her ability nor her intellect in the situation, but the fact remained; Osamu Matsura had already killed his other children under the influence of the curse seal. There was no guarantee he wouldn’t do the same to his third.

Neji knew all too well the power the curse seal had over a person. He had seen it with his own eyes, years ago when it started to torture Sena. The curse seal had tormented her for longer than he realised and he mentally had kicked himself for being so caught up with his only issues to see it. Sena had always been blunt yet kind to him, even when he didn’t particularly treat her the way he ought to have. He realised now that he probably treated her the worst because she was the one who made him want to care most even if he hadn’t understood it at the time. Not that it was any excuse. When he finally began to work through the bitterness he held toward the main branch and realised the errors he had made, thanks to Naruto, he had started to feel the guilt of what he had done.

He had pushed her away and treated her awfully in their youth and the closer they became again the more he felt he deserved to be punished. Sena had caught him off guard when she visited him in the med bay during the exams, even more so when she told him she was glad the ‘real’ him was back. The second time she surprised him was when she had shown him her curse seal. It followed the chūnin exams and when they had celebrated the restoration of the village.

That night it had thrown him completely when she sought him out. He had wanted to be left alone away from the rest of the clan, still uncertain where he stood. That was when Sena found him and convinced him to participate in the festival. Or in her words, “Help him live a little.” Then when he had another talk with Hiashi, it coaxed her to make sure he was alright. He couldn’t understand at the time why she had cared so much and was certain he was undeserving of such kindness. But then she revealed her secret and he realised finally that he wasn’t alone anymore.

The memories Sena had provided filled with feelings of happiness. The fear of losing that shook him to the core. After all these years of punishing himself for how he treated her felt as though he didn’t deserve her dissolved now he accepted his feelings. He still didn’t feel deserving of her affections but now he didn’t care about him; he cared about her, about keeping her safe and making her happy. That was his goal now and he wasn’t about to let it slip away.

Neji pushed himself off the wall which he was leaning and started walking, manoeuvring through the groups of people huddled around. He needed to get away from everyone to think more and to distract himself. Hearing a rumble of thunder caused him to stop in his tracks and look at the sky. There were no stars, the sparkling lights hidden away behind thick storm clouds which threatened to spill rain at any moment. It wasn't seem like a good sign.

‘Neji?’ Came a timid voice.

He turned to find Hinata standing behind him, a look of concern splashed across her face.

‘Is everything alright?’

‘Fine.’ He nodded reassuringly but they both knew he was lying.
She looked at him through blinking eyes, tilting her head slightly as if to study him. He felt guilty for lying but he couldn’t bring himself to unburden all he was thinking onto her. It wouldn’t be fair for him to do so. He was supposed to protect her, not the other way around.

Neji looked up toward the sky again, contemplating his next steps while Hinata stood there as silent company. He knew she wouldn’t leave his side now, not when she was worried about him, so he let his mind drift and his heart race. It felt like he was running out of time. With the rain that would come and the outcome of events he wasn’t about to sit back and let them unfold willingly.

His gaze snapped from the sky back to Hinata.

‘I have to go back,’ He said firmly, ‘I cannot just sit here and wait any longer.’

She nodded, accepting his word as expected.

Neji leapt off into the distance, wasting no time to make his way back to the Matsura compound. What he hadn’t expected was Hinata to have followed him. He didn’t want to put her in harm's way but he didn’t want to risk spending time arguing with her either. She had become stubborn in her beliefs and he could only thank Naruto for that. In fact, he had to thank him for a lot of things. For if he hadn’t changed Neji’s outlook on life he probably wouldn’t be heading toward Sena right now. And he didn’t want to dare think about a world where he wasn’t doing just that.

Sena looked up toward the dark sky, mind wandering from Neji to her family and then to her father. All the events of the last few years had led her to this moment, but now it was here she wasn't sure how she felt about it. The last time she had come face to face with her father she had choked and Hitomi Sensei had paid the price. She knew she would not allow that happen again not matter what. But still, she had to ask herself, when the time came could she do what needed to be done?

A drop of rain hit her cheek, pulling her from thoughts and back into the presence. This drop was followed by another and then another until eventually, it began showering. The storm had finally arrived and as another bolt of lightning flashed across the sky, Sena was suddenly aware of a familiar chakra signature present inside her house. No, it was on top of the house.

Her gaze snapped toward the roof, eyes squinting through the rain to find a silhouette of a person standing there. They took a step forward into the light, and she realised then who it was. Her father.

The kunoichi’s eyes widened, reaching for her chakra daggers as she took a step backwards. It was time for the plan to begin, she only hoped her uncle would play his part accordingly. It was now or never.

‘Hello my dear,’ Osamu called before jumping down in front of her. ‘It has been awhile.’ He took a step toward her, a cunning smile spread across his lips and his eyes that all to familiar black.

Sena had to remind herself it was the curse seal, not her father, taking a deep breath as she raised her daggers.

‘What? No greeting for your father? Now, now I must have taught you better than that.’ He began to circle her, and she made sure to keep in time with his movements waiting for any inkling of an attack, not bothering to reply. ‘Fine,’ He whispered. ‘You know what I’ve come for so be a good girl and tell your father where the scroll is.’
Sena’s jaw clenched, a rage burning inside her growing with every passing moment.

‘You are not my father.’ She spat, taking a step backwards as he did forward.

His smile didn’t falter. Instead, it became more twisted as he eyed her knowingly.

‘Ahh I see, so it’s you who has what I seek.’ Osamu took another step toward her but this time she didn’t flinch and instead stood tall.

Her grip tightened ever so slightly on the hilt of her dagger, and she could feel the rain begin to pour harder. It would make it harder to see, but perhaps she could use that to her advantage.

‘Hand it over or your father will punish you.’

‘Stop pretending you are him, you’re merely using him for your own devices.’ Sena snarled, watching him through narrowed eyes.

‘I was exactly what you needed once.’ He said, taking another step closer, so they almost were face to face. ‘What, you don’t recognise your old friend, Sena? You don’t remember the power you began to crave after I showed you what we could accomplish together. I could have given you everything you wanted.’

Her breath caught in her throat as she stared into the black void of his eyes.

‘If you believe that then there truly is no saving you.’ Sena lifted her dagger.

‘Oh, I do believe that,’ he began, ‘but I believe in the other places more, the worlds behind the gateways of the soul. The secrets people hold inside. Of course, I know one of those places pretty well. You might say it’s where I was tossed away when you cast me out.’

‘So it’s this game again?’ She lifted her head to challenge his gaze.

‘I thought you liked games.’ He laughed maliciously.

‘Am I meant to care for your fate. Perhaps you fashion yourself an entity once fallen, something that deserves sympathy.’

‘Oh no, my child, that is how you fashion me.’

‘How pitiable you are hiding away in the guise of others. If your goal is to have me surrender, simply give the scroll to you then I’m sorry you will fail.’

‘I will kill you. Choke the life out of your wretched body, send shocks through your organs and seize up the heart to slowly have you die in drawn out minutes.’

‘You can try.’ Sena whispered, looking toward the gates behind her, ‘Now!’ She screamed gesturing her dagger in the air.

Osamu grabbed her by the throat, choking her enough to hurt but not to stop her breathing.

At first, her eyes widened in shock, but then she let out strangled laugh.

‘You won’t do it, will you? You still need me to find the scroll, or you would have killed me already.’ She looked up to see the barrier slowly making its way up around them like a dome. ‘How many years have we been doing this dance?’
'You can't resist me forever, my dear.' He said loosening his grip.

'Perhaps not.' She wrapped her fingers around his wrist. 'But I can resist you now.'

'Say I kill them? Everyone in this damned clan and the others out there, everyone you hold dear.'

He smirked. 'Just like I did your precious sensei.'

'No, I won’t let anyone else die for me.' Her grip on his wrist tightened. 'Besides you won’t be able to get near them anyway.' She gestured to the completed barrier seal above them before ripping his hand from her throat.

Osamu was quick to react, pulling his blade from its sheath in a matter of seconds before plunging it through her chest.

Instead of gasping out or crying out in pain the Sena before him melted away into nothing, disappearing entirely.

'Behind you.' Sena whispered, attempting to strike him.

He turned quickly, in time to counter and the sound of metal against metal clanging echoed into the night.

'hm.' Osamu mused. ‘Some sort of clone?’

Sena smirked, glad the plan hadn’t been given away yet and continued to strike as many blows as she could. He blocked all of them, before changing tactics and jumping on the offence. Attempting to catch her off guard no doubt. She played along, continuing to play the part of defence, waiting for the opportune moment to present itself so they could finally unfold their plan. She just prayed she could continue to see through the Genjutsu.

—

Neji found himself arriving back at the Matsura compound too late. The barrier seal was already up, so he contented himself by jumping near one of the four sign casters near the entry way, hearing the sound of metal clashing in a battle which had already begun. He felt his stomach turn, watching Sena and her father fight. There was nothing he could do now but watch, and he wasn’t sure whether or not is was more torturous than the waiting had been.

'How long ago did this start?' Neji asked, recognising the man as Saio. He didn’t shift to look up at him, instead focusing on keeping the barrier up, his hands held together in the appropriate sign.

'Not long,' Saio answered. 'There was some talk first, but ultimately any sign of negotiation was put to rest once the blades were drawn.'

'There was never a chance of negotiation with that curse seal.' Neji observed eyes fixed on Sena’s movements, heart racing at the thought of her getting hurt. Then he heard someone jump beside him. Hinata.

'What do we do now?' She asked, shifting to observe the scene in front of them.

'There’s nothing we can do except wait.' Neji wanted to give a more hopeful reply, but he was a realist at heart. And even though it pained him to be blunt, the idea of false hope pained him more. He had faith Sena knew what she was doing, but he didn’t trust the effects of that curse seal on her father. That was what concerned him most, the unpredictability of it all.
Neji continued to watch the fight. Osamu went to strike Sena, slashing his blade across but she ducked in the nick of time and came back with a right hook. He grabbed her wrist attempting to subdue her but she took control, shifting her position beneath to use his body weight against him. It was a move she had used on Neji before. But at the last second, Osamu let go, jumping back to put some distance between them.

‘Tell me what you want with the scroll, right now,’ Sena called, raising her dagger as she stepped toward him, ‘No more evasions and no more games.’

‘But you are so good at playing along.’ Osamu replied as she jumped forward to strike him. He moved out of the way and then he was caught in the grasp of Sena, a different one.

There were now two of her but she never usually fought with clones. Neji frowned, confused as to why all of a sudden she would use this tactic when she barely practiced with it. Perhaps this was some of the training she and her uncle did all those days spent preparing. They were so secretive about the whole idea he had to admit he had felt irritated. He had kept his mouth shut for her sake.

‘Another clone?’ Osamu observed, the initial shock disappearing and his sly smile returning. ‘Interesting how much you have changed since our union was broken. I wonder what else you will bring out to play?’

‘Enough!’ The Sena in front extended her arm toward him, dagger inches from his face. ‘Tell me what you plan now!’ The Sena behind clutched him around the neck, tightening her grip.

Neji felt his body tense, his jaw clenching in anticipation. She was too close for comfort.

‘Why, to be free of course.’ Then suddenly Osamu’s hands came together wielding signs. ‘Lightning style, shock form!’ He called, allowing his body to become a beacon of lightning and causing the Sena behind him to disappear. The remaining one leapt back, wielding her own hand signs in the air as she did. Neji knew immediately it was her boundless storm technique which was the only one that would be able to match, if not defeat, her father’s lightning style.

It almost seemed pointless having them both wield lightning techniques but that would determine whose was more powerful. He found himself praying it was her. He couldn’t bear the thought of it, not when he was so close to the situation only to be trapped by the barrier in front.

Sena and Osamu circled each other for awhile, daring the other to make the first move while their lightning jutsu crackled alongside the storm above them. It didn’t seem real, the amount of electricity in the air and it looked surreal, almost beautiful. It was Osamu who made the first move, lunging toward her with immense speed and power, he could tell by the way the streams pulsated out of his palm. He didn’t even need his Byakugan to see it.

She dodged her father’s attempt, spinning quickly to try and strike his back with her own jutsu. But instead of missing, she succeeded landing a strong blow to his back sending him flying into the wall of a nearby house and her in the opposite direction, sliding and bouncing across the ground. Neji’s eyes widened, his body tensing again. Had she done it? No that would have been too easy. His eyes darted to her father’s body, watching as he struggled to rise, his body swaying and his lightning no longer active. It seemed Sena was strong, at least strong enough to cancel out the other jutsu with her hit, but not enough to take him down with it.

The urge to smirk, to allow himself to feel proud of her took over Neji, but he knew the battle wasn’t over yet. He cast his eyes back to Sena, who was no longer surging with electricity but instead bent over and breathing heavily. It seemed the ability had taken its toll on her after all.
The Hyūga balled his fists in frustration, wanting, no needing this fight to be over. He just couldn’t take the unknown anymore.

The two opponents staggered, toward each other, neither of them possessing their weapons anymore. It had come down to a battle of the fists, both of them clearly spent on chakra. And what a sight they were, covered in scratches and bruises and their clothes a mess. He watched as Sena spat, blood coating the concrete beneath her.

‘Tell me,’ Sena said in a hoarse voice, ‘What do you plan on doing, should you be released?’

Osamu laughed, coughing and wincing.

‘I want to live of course,’ He began, spreading his arms wide, ‘To rule, looking at a black, scorched world like the one your ancestors help create, before such a word as peace was uttered. To topple the Kage off their mortal thrones and rule as the immortal I am in their stead. Everlasting, my child, as I should have been the first time around.’

‘Hm.’ Sena frowned. ‘Sorry but this little fantasy of yours is going to remain just that. A fantasy.’ She raised her palms, beckoning him to attack to which he complied.

‘We shall see about that.’ He replied, swinging his right arm toward her.

She dodged, landing her right hook on his cheek, channelling all of her strength behind it. But it was in vain because at the same time he had struck her abdomen, sending them both to their knees. He pushed her onto her back attempting to hit again but she shifted her head and kneed him in the stomach before rolling him onto his back. The kunoichi leaned back, readying her fist, lowering it slightly before he grabbed the cloth of her shirt and threw her to the side.

Neji watched as she rolled, eyes still fixed, unable to tear himself away from the sight of her beaten body. It reminded him all too well of the time he had let her go with the Akatsuki even after seeing the state of her. He had never truly forgiven himself for doing that, for being so weak. He heard Hinata gasp next to him as Sena fell, after struggling to get to her knees.

The Hyūga quickly glanced at his cousin before movement caught the corner of his eye. There he turned to find a crowd of people gathering behind him, and just as he was about to protest and tell them to leave he realised it was people from her clan. The ones he was supposed to be protecting. And as he looked upon their faces he realised that they were there for her, they were here because of Sena, their leader. He couldn’t help but feel a sense of pride for her.

Then he was distracted by the sounds before him, realising that the battle was not yet over. Neji saw the two facing each other again, exhausted and on their knees.

They were so close by now. he found himself wishing the barrier wasn’t there to the point he even considered knocking out Saio. He crushed that thought immediately, imagining Sena’s horrified reaction.

‘Come on Sena,’ Osamu said placing his hand on her shoulder for support. ‘Let us end this, give me the scroll, and I shall consider letting you live.’ He lifted his other fist in an attempt to strike but she stopped it with her own, fingers tightly gripping it and holding it steady.

‘You can't tempt me,’ She frowned, ‘You may have taken over my body once but never again for my soul is my own. And I will never give up the scroll.’

‘Is there not one thing you seek, one desire you hold above all others?’ Osamu’s words were coated with malice. ‘Oh yes, now I remember. There is a deep longing in you. An old dream that sits there...
eating its way into your heart and mind in your most vulnerable moments the times you allow
yourself to let yourself feel. You try to deny it, push it away, but it sits there waiting, ever wanting.
I remember I was there stuffed inside you mind alongside it.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’ Sena spat.

Neji watched as she loosened her hold on Osamu’s fist. It was a dangerous game to be playing, one
wrong move could cost Sena her life.

‘Give me a chance to show you what I can give you.’ He said his arm extended toward her slowly,
cupping her chin.

‘No.’ she replied, remaining still.

‘You are not the least bit curious?’ His grip was firm, to the point Neji could see the indents of his
fingertips on her skin. ‘To know what it is to be free of pain. To be loved, simply for who you are.
Is that not the make of all you shinobi, to want normality? You live by orders, kill who you must
and lose those you love most in the process. Look at what happened to your family because you
denied my power. I’ve seen your struggles, my dear, let me show you what I can give you.’

‘Never.’ She reiterated.

‘Pity,’ Osamu said, retracting his hand from her chin, ‘I guess I will just have to take it from you
the hard way then.’

Then before Neji could blink, Osamu picked up his blade which lay next to him and pierced it
through Sena’s chest. And there Neji felt his heart shatter as he fell to his knees.

Chapter End Notes

        dun, duN, DUUUUUUUN!
An Impossible Task

Chapter Summary

The continuation of Osamu's and Sena's final stand.

Chapter Notes

oh boy okay sorry I posting this a good week after that last cliff hanger but here we go!

Also I may have listened to Hurt - Johnny Cash on repeat while writing this.

Enjoy all the angst!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Everything stopped.

Every thought, every stirring emotion inside came to a crashing halt.

Neji was frozen in a daze lingering between disbelief and reality.

One moment Sena was there talking, fighting, breathing and the next the blade struck her.

There was a cool, static feeling in the air. And then everything was numb.

As his knees hit the ground and his eyes searched the scene in front of him, they focused on the chokutō blades entry point following along to where it exited. His gaze lingered over the blood running down Sena’s chin.

Neither of them moved.

As much as he wanted to look away, he simply couldn’t. Instead, his core shook, sending a tremor down toward his arms, hanging lifeless by his sides. He couldn’t move, the shock was too much even to bring himself back to his feet. The only thing he could register was the disbelief, a moment where he wanted to pinch himself just to see whether or not he was dreaming. Then when he realised he wasn’t he felt his eyes sting, threatening to spill with tears, but even they couldn’t seem to move.

His heart was broken; like someone had stolen the shards from his chest and there was nothing he could do to stop it. He opened his mouth, the agony slowly taking hold but the only sound that passed his lips was a rush of air. It was then he noticed the ripple in the barrier, a sign it was weakening.

How could he have let this happen? Why didn’t he come sooner? How could he live without her?

The questions circled his mind and tore at his emotions. All he could focus on was the pain, a
familiar sting he still wasn’t quite accustomed too. There was no getting used to the prospect of losing the one he loved most.

Neji watched as Osamu let go of the hilt before pushing himself to his feet and wiping his bloodied chin onto his sleeve. There was a twisted smirk still sprawled on his face that reignited a wave of anger inside Neji, causing his body to shake. He wanted to kill him, now.

‘Foolish girl,’ Osamu said, taking a step backwards. ‘You really are a nuisance.’ A forced laugh came from his lips as Sena slumped forward, the blood pooling beneath her. ‘Now give me the scroll.’ He extended his hand toward her, the other brushing off the dust from the debris on his shirt. Neji felt his heart race, the rage inside of him building.

‘Come now, be a good girl and…’ Osamu took a step back; his smirk wiped clean from his face as the Sena before him, began to fade into nothing along with the chokutō and the blood. ‘What is this?’ He exclaimed, his eyes blinking furiously as he searched the ground where Sena once sat.

‘Behind you,’ came a familiar voice, causing his gaze to snap back. There, right before his eyes stood Sena, unscathed and standing tall, chokutō in hand and a determined look on her face. Neji felt a weight lift from his chest, and relief flood through him as his eyes fixed onto where she stood.

There he looked over her raven hair, vibrant eyes and the hitai-ate he had come to know so well, tied around her waist. He pushed himself to his feet and activated his Byakugan to be sure she was really there and alive. Sure enough, her chakra points lit up like fireworks, one after the other, causing him to exhale a breath he had been holding. He hadn’t lost her.

Then before Osamu had the chance to speak or move she leapt into the air, a cry leaving her lips and chokutō raised. She reached him within seconds, driving the blade through his chest, and Neji knew the battle was over. But he also knew the consequences of being close to one who died with the curse seal. Something had to be done.

The barrier started to ripple more frequently, and Neji heard Saio groan and collapse to his knees beside him, causing the entire force field to retract then disappear. Anyone could get inside now, but as he turned his head from side to side, watching the stunned expressions of the people surrounding, he knew no one would dare move until she gave the order. She was their leader now.

Turning his attention back to the scene in front of him, Neji watched as Sena clutched Osamu’s shoulder, her other hand still firmly gripping the hilt of the blade. He knew the stance but what he was not accustomed to was the expression on her face mirroring that of a goddess, one of vengeance, destruction and death. And although he had always known she was a fierce kunoichi, he had never seen such rage and fury marking her face for as long as he’d known her. It was terrifying, mesmerising and ravishing all at once and he found he could not look away.

Neji turned his head toward Hinata, eyes never tearing from view. ‘Be ready,’ he said.

Sena was breathing heavily; the efforts to repel the Genjutsu used against her father and the battle had taken most of her chakra and strength. She looked up to see Osamu’s eyes widen, and although they were black, she could still see the terror reflected in them. His mouth hung open, blood slowly
seeping out and dripping down his chin. She had struck a vital spot.

Slowly, she retracted, pulling her body away from him and letting her hand drop from both his shoulder and the hilt. Without her support he fell to his knees, a rush of air leaving his body as he slumped over as the Genjutsu of her once did. Their plan so far had worked, but she wasn’t going to let her guard down until she was sure. A part of her was numb, free of emotion and the guilt of driving a sword through her father’s chest while the other was riddled with disbelief. It all seemed like a dream she was merely floating through instead of living it.

A strangled groan followed by a cough came from Osamu as drops of blood splattered across the ground. His breathing was laboured, every movement she knew would be a struggle yet all she could do was watch and wait, knowing deep down that the entity controlling her father would be suffering as well. She chanced a glance upward, noticing the barrier had disappeared, and she didn’t need to look to know Neji was close by just as her uncle had predicted. She didn’t dare look at him though; she couldn’t lose focus now.

The kunoichi knelt down in front of her father, examining him for any sign of attack before shifting closer. It seemed the curse seal cared more about living than her dying. She reached out feeling the hilt of the blade loosely with her fingertips before tightening her grip. Then when she began to pull a hand gripped hers causing her to freeze.

‘Sena.’ Her father whispered, all sense of twisted nature and manipulation gone from his voice. ‘My child.’ He looked up, causing her breath to hitch as she saw the black pools fade into a white splashed with sapphire.

‘Father?’ Sena replied, feeling her voice shake and the tears build up in her eyes before she could stop them. Osamu offered her a kind smile, thawing the icy persona she used as her kunoichi mask, feeling the once numb emotions, explode and flow through her. It had been over two years since she has seen her father’s eyes, his true ones.

‘Sena,’ he repeated, lifting his hand from hers to brush a loose strand of her hair behind her ear, a gesture he had done many times when she was a child. ‘You’ve grown to be so much…like her.’ Her mother, Sayuri. She felt herself laugh, her lip trembling as it spread into a smile.

‘What? Beautiful you mean?’ She tried to sound light-hearted, but her voice wavered betraying the sorrow in her heart. She saw her uncle approach in her peripheral vision but didn’t bother to look at him.

‘Yes.’ Osamu agreed. ‘Fearless and strong too.’ Sena bit her lip attempting to stop the whimper she knew was threatening to escape as the tears began to stream down her cheeks. After all this time searching, waiting, being away from those she loved until now and she finally got to speak with her father again.

‘Father I—’

‘No.’ He cut her off before coughing again. ‘There will be time for talk later.’ Sena nodded, tears still falling. ‘You have to seal the curse mark back into the scroll before it’s too late.’

‘But how? It’s supposed to be impossible!’ Sena tried to get her emotions under control but to no end. It seemed too good to be true after all this time, to be able to rid her family of the wretched curse their ancestor bestowed upon them. She only wished she could have saved her mother and the rest of her family.

‘I explain, so listen very carefully.’ He gestured down toward his pouch. ‘In there, take the scroll
out.’ She did as commanded, carefully retrieving the scroll and placing it on the ground. ‘Now open it so you can read the inscription.’ Sena unrolled the scroll, fingers tracing over the page.

Her eyes returned to meet her father’s. ‘What now?’ She asked, voice now determined and no longer wavering, finally getting a hold of her emotions. He smiled at her again, filling her with the faith she could do what needed to be done. Even now, a teenager, all she wanted was to make her father proud.

‘The other scroll, the original one.’ Osamu continued, ‘you need to open it just above to where blank circle in order to reseal it there.’ Sena retrieved the scroll from her pouch and placed it accordingly. ‘Now you can complete the process.’ She looked up with a questioning glance, causing him to chuckle then cough again. ‘Remember what I taught you about sealing and retrieving objects in scrolls?’ She nodded. ‘It’s much the same. Retrieve the artefact from the first and then you—’ he coughed this time with more blood. ‘And then you place it on the second and seal it. Understand?’

‘Let me heal you first,’ Sena insisted, readying her hands against her father’s chest just above where the blade was still embedded.

‘No, there isn’t time.’ Osamu placed a hand on Sena’s wrist redirecting it back down toward the scroll. ‘You have to start now before it’s too late and the seal transfers again.’ She looked her father in the eye noting the spark of determination reflected, one she wanted to mirror. After a moment’s hesitation, she nodded, cutting a small incision in her thumb before swiping it over the first scroll and channelling her chakra.

It was then as she concentrated all of her willpower that she realised just how low on energy she was, but she pushed aside those thoughts and continued. Pulling the artefact from the first scroll, a metal circle with the lighting bolt symbol of her clan she then positioned it on the second scroll. She knew that it had been the easy part and the hard part was still to come. Taking a shaky breath, she positioned her hands above the scroll and began the process.

Sena could feel the energy draining from her, but she refused to break her focus or sever the connection between her chakra and the scroll. She forced herself to take a deep breath and close her eyes in an attempt to channel away any and all distractions. Her focal range became so narrow and intense that all she could hear was their laboured breathing and her heart beat echoing. Time seemed to slow down just as she began to lose control.

Then she heard her father cry out in pain, causing her eyes to open. He was hunched over, panting and clutching his side where Sena knew the curse mark laid. The sight of her father in pain, the very pain she knew all too well, shook her to the core. Her hands started to tremble, the sweat began to pour down her forehead, and her body felt weak. She was running out of chakra, and at this rate, she wouldn’t be able to complete the seal.

‘Father,’ Sena spoke weakly. ‘Hol…hold on.’ She felt herself swaying slightly but she didn’t dare move her hands from their position. Her head started to move back on its own, unable to keep her body steady any longer but before she went too far something stopped her from falling. She felt the warmth of someone’s body press against her back and an arm around her side, hand gripping her tight. Blinking her tired eyes, she opened them completely to stare up at her saviour.

Sena exhaled, her sapphire eyes meeting white with lavender hues, glad she was safe in Neji’s hold. Their eyes lingered for a moment, expressions neutral but their gaze communicated everything. There he steadied her, pushing her back forward so she could complete the task at hand. She hunched over still exhausted and unsure how she would ever complete the sealing process.
‘Let us help you,’ Neji said placing his hands on top of hers. There she noticed Hinata on the other side of her, placing her hands on top of Neji’s.

‘I’ll channel some of my chakra too,’ Hinata added, giving Sena a weak smile. Sena stared at her in awe, both shaken and grateful that they would give her this kind of help. Though she knew she shouldn’t be, Hinata had a kind heart, and Neji was well Neji. It stirred up emotions so deep she could hardly keep the tears threatening to spill at bay.

‘Thank you,’ Sena whispered turning her attention back toward their hands and focusing their chakra. The sensation was warm, feeling their chakra combine in a single task in such a way. Were it any other situation she may have commented on it, but this was far too important.

The combined efforts caused her to feel a difference, noting that the struggles of her father probably meant it was working, since the curse seal was fighting back. It didn’t make it any easier though, Sena struggled with all her might not to stop and comfort him, to take away the pain. Then, as if he heard her silent plea, she saw her uncle Kyou approach behind Osamu.

‘Easy now brother,’ Kyou said, placing his hands on his brother’s shoulders. ‘Let me take your mind off the pain.’ Osamu stopped shaking and groaning, slumping downward as if in a daze.

Sena’s eyes caught Kyou’s, causing him to nod at her. She returned the gesture and focused everything she had on sealing the curse seal for good. Completing this was her way of honouring her family. Her mind wandered to her mother, taken from her when she was so young; her brothers who deserved to live their lives fully and finally her grandmother who she couldn’t sense any longer. It was just Sena and Kyou, and it was up to them to end the cycle of torment that had plagued the Matsura clan for far too long.

They were so close she could feel it. Channelling everything she had Sena closed her eyes and completed the seal. Her body trembled feeling the link break as the process finished. She exhaled, feeling a weight lift from her shoulders and that Neji’s still on top of hers. Turning to face him with a weak smile, she heard Hinata shuffle and move away from behind her. He looked at her with a curious expression, opening his mouth as if about to say something before a groan cut him off. Her attention snapped back to her father, feeling Neji also retreat from her space.

‘Father!’ Sena called as Osamu slumped against her, Kyou releasing him from the Genjutsu placed upon him retaking a step back. ‘You are going to be alright now.’ He coughed and winced as Sena lifted him, so he was facing her, eyes half-lidded. ‘Here,’ she placed her palms against his chest again. ‘Let me help you.’

‘No,’ Osamu said, voice hoarse and strained. ‘There’s no use.’ Her eyes widened, gripping her father's shoulders to keep him steady.

‘Don’t say that!’ She squeezed her eyes closed. Images of Hitomi’s death alongside her brothers and mothers flashing through her mind. ‘I can’t bear to lose anyone else.’ This time there weren’t tears brewing in her eyes, but instead, anger ignited deep inside her. She was so tired of the people she loved dying without anything for her to do to stop it.

‘It’s alright, Sena.’ Osamu gave her a weak smile, lifting his bloodied hand to her cheek, fingertips gliding across. ‘Listen to me. What you and I were involved with... the things we saw...the things I did. There may not be a chance for me to come back from that, but for you there is. I know you will do things better than I did...be a better leader than I was.’ Sena reached up and clasped his hand in hers, lip trembling.
‘I’m sorry father,’ Sena began, her eyes cast downward. ‘I wish none of this ever happened. I wish there had been another way.’ Osamu cupped her chin in his hand pulling her gaze back to his. And as she searched his eyes she did not find disappointment but a warmth that resembled affection.

‘Don’t be sorry, for you would not be who are if it happened differently.’ Her father’s hand dropped, his conscious state seemingly fading. ‘Sena, I’m so proud of you.’ His head fell, gesturing toward the still embedded blade. ‘You can pull this out now. It’s time.’

‘But you’ll die.’ Sena hadn’t meant for it to sound so childish as though keeping it there the blade she struck through him, would somehow keep him safe.

‘Yes, and you shall live regardless.’ Osamu let out a strained breath. ‘My time is up, please do this for me.’ She nodded after hesitating for a moment, curling her fingers along the hilt before taking a deep breath and pulling it out. He groaned, swaying slightly and she angled the blade away from him.

‘Father!?’ Sena cupped his cheek in an attempt to keep him conscious. ‘Stay with me.’ Her voice croaked. ‘Please, don’t leave me.’ She begged.

Osamu’s eyelids began to flutter, a content smile on his face. ‘You really do…look like…your m-mother.’ With that his eyes closed, his head sank forward, and his body fell back against the ground before Sena had the chance to stop him. Her hands still clutching the chokutō began to tremble as a paradoxical feeling of numbness and sensitivity overcame her.

There Sena stood frozen, unable to speak, unable to move, barely even registering that the rain had stopped or the sound of the people who slowly began to approach. An overwhelming sense of loneliness clouded her thoughts, realisation finally setting in that she had killed her father; that it was likely, her father killed her grandmother and now she, an orphaned teenager was the leader of her clan. The responsibility, however, didn’t scare her but the prospect of living with guilt did. It terrified her beyond belief.

A shuffling in front of her caught her attention, as Sena averted her gaze to find Kyou approaching. Their eyes met, both communicating uncertain feelings of doubt and sorrow but also an understanding, for no one knew how long their family had suffered aside from them. Then he nodded toward the people surrounding, causing her to realise that it wasn’t just strangers but rather people of the Matsura clan. Her breath caught at the sight, staring at them in disbelief as they stood before her. Uncertain of their intent she turned to her uncle shooting him a questioning glance.

‘Don’t worry they won’t bite,’ he replied. ‘They are simply looking onto their saviour.’

‘Saviour?’ Sena asked, brow furrowed.

‘You think the clan secret stayed in the main family after all these years?’ Kyou asked, and she realised that after the occurrence with her house burning down that perhaps people had caught on. Turning back toward them she wasn’t quite prepared for what she saw.

The entirety of the crowd had their heads bowed. Her eyes widened even more than she thought possible, instinctively taking a step backwards. There was no way she deserved this, especially after her fault in everything that had happened. Correcting her own mistakes, if one could even call it that, was no call for such respect. No, she was entirely undeserving. She could not find the words to say such a thing, feeling as though expressing such an opinion would disrespect her people yet she knew that she had to say something.

‘The curse that the Matsura clan has endured,’ Sena began, ‘will no longer endanger you.’ She
found her confidence, finally understanding that these words were for them, not for her. ‘I promise you that as long as I am here, in honour of my father and family, there will cease to be suffering at the hands of the main house. Everything we do will be for the benefit of all. You are free to return to your homes.’ She gave a swift bow to the people before her, unsure of what else to do or say.

There she felt Neji stand beside her, watching as the people murmured amongst themselves before walking away toward their homes. She observed them, shuffling and dawdling, noticing the tears in some of the older generations eyes in passing. It tugged at her heart to know her father, one of the best leaders she knew, was now gone.

‘Sena,’ Kyou said, turning to face her. ‘We succeeded, it is finished.’ Sena kept her eyes fixed and her body still. She could feel both Kyou and Neji staring at her so intensely she burned beneath their gaze.

‘No,’ she finally replied. ‘This is just the beginning.’ Her grip had tightened on the chokutō blade before she turned back to face her home. She took a deep breath knowing everything was about to change whether she wanted it to or not. There she chanced a glance back at Neji who was already looking. She allowed herself to linger in their usual trance for a moment before pulling away and walking toward her home. Then she bit her lip, hand tingling as she reached for the door handle, knowing it was the last time she would allow herself to get caught up his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Fear not there shall be more soon!
The funeral for Osamu and Miyu was held a few days after the events of that horrible night. Out of respect for the clan and the suffering they had undergone, which had been out of their control, Sena’s father was given an honourable burial; his actions while under the influence of the seal acknowledged, were not held accountable. Sena, the heiress to the Matsura, now took on the role as the head of the clan alongside her uncle.

Throughout the entire ceremony, Neji had his eyes fixed on Sena, wishing above all else that he could stand at her side and comfort her. He imagined standing beside her, even dared to imagine holding her hand and taking her in his arms but that did not come to pass. In fact, he stood a few people away from her, feeling the furthest he had been in his entire life, more so than when he had pushed her away. Beside her instead was Saio and Kyou, all three of them looking out at the memorial stone with expressions of sorrow.

The one thing that Neji noticed was the fact that Sena did not cry. It wasn’t exactly unreasonable since she had shed many tears the night Osamu had died but what did concern him was the look on her face. The bags under her eyes and the way her body arched indicated sorrow, but the cold expression on her face seemed darker than any emotion she had conveyed before. And throughout the entirety of the funeral, he couldn’t let it go.

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The walk back to the Matsura compound was made in silence, the heaviness of the day taking its toll on both Sena and her uncle. It was strange how close they had become in the passing week considering her first instinct on his initial return was to press a blade to his throat, but that was before she knew the whole story. Like a naive child, she had charged into battle head on not even thinking of the repercussions, believing that the killing of one would somehow vanish the atrocities of the past. She did not intend on finding out that the worst part of the aftermath was realising the horrors one inflicts on themselves cut far deeper than that of any other.
The kunoichi had never felt weaker than she did attending the funeral and after was no different. It was true, that the choices she had made and those she had met during her mission changed her, so profoundly that she was not the same afterwards, but she had not intended on feeling so empty upon completing her mission. She had not understood that from the day her father burnt their home to ground—no it was before even that—perhaps her mother’s death or the day she came into this world, she was set on a path destined to end one way. And that ending always twisted with guilt, misdirection and ignorance causing her to miss how she was before; when she was surrounded by innocence, just beginning to know the world instead of finding herself knowing too much that it hurt.

‘Are you sure you didn’t want to stay?’ Kyou asked, shooting her a sideways glance. Sena shook her head, not in the mood for exchanging words. Verbal responses had lost their charm since the event, and she grew irritated by conversations, preferring the company of her own thoughts. There were only so many condolences she could handle. No one else would be able to understand what she was going through but that didn’t stop Kyou from pressing the matter further for he was one of the few who didn’t fear her wrath, much to her annoyance.

‘Not even to talk to the kid?’ Her uncle’s need to pry knew no bounds. ‘I’m sure he would have just wanted to make sure you were alright.’ That was the final straw; she knew he wouldn’t stop now if she did not say something.

‘Well, I’m not alright.’ Sena muttered. ‘Nor do I deserve to be but that’s my burden to bear not his.’ Her pace quickened, growing along with her irritation. There was no way he was going to let that slide, but she couldn’t help herself, bitterness came easily to her of late.

‘Sena.’ Kyou called, trying to keep up with her. ‘Stop, wait.’ She ignored him and walked right on through the gates of the compound, heading for their home. Before she reached it, however, a hand grabbed her shoulder, spun her around bringing her face-to-face with a very serious Kyou. ‘Listen to me,’ he began as she tried to pull away. ‘Stop trying to walk away and just listen, for a minute okay?’ It was more of an order than a question, and she responded by just staring blankly at him. He sighed.

‘I know it’s hard and I know you are hurting which is why you are acting like this.’ His grip on her shoulders tightened, and she realised she had never seen him this concerned before. ‘What you did—what we did—you can obsess and obsess over how things went, what you did wrong or could have done differently, but there’s no changing how it ended.’ He hunched over, keeping their eyes level. ‘You cannot always control what happens in this world. Life takes us on different paths… It’s not up to us to evaluate or judge them, but merely embrace them and make our choices as they come. Our choices are our own, that which we have to live with, but you cannot let them eat you alive Sena, you cannot carry the guilt of this life alone because that’s not really living; it’s merely existing.’ She closed her eyes, her uncle’s words triggering a memory of her mother.

‘Even the most experienced shinobi harbours chaos within them. It is within us all. Just as there is both Good and Bad, in the end, it is our actions that define who we are.’

Sena took a deep breath, allowing herself a moment to recover instead of getting caught up in the memory. As much as she did not want to admit it, she knew her uncle was right, but she couldn’t accept his words just yet. There was a fury blazing inside of her which needed to burn down thoughts and feelings before she could douse the flames. It would take time, if at all before she could forgive herself for the choices she had made.
There she opened her eyes again, meeting the sapphire reflected which only served as a reminder of her father’s eyes. They were the same as hers, and such a painful fact was the reason she could barely look at herself in the mirror. It was too much to handle. Pulling herself from his grasp, she turned back toward the house without a word and headed inside, up the stairs and into her room, shutting the door behind her.

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It was a paradox yearning for someone she did not have nor deserve. It was an exquisite form of longing that Sena found could send her high yet keep her grounded; leave her breathless but full of life; soothe her all while having the power to destroy her. But she also knew that once a person is broken in a certain way, they could never be fixed, and she was broken and undeserving of the person she loved most.

She sat at her vanity, removed the earrings she wore for the funeral, pulled the pins from her hair, allowing the waves to be free down her back and wiped away her makeup. There she sat staring at her reflection in the mirror, a ghost-like version of herself staring back. Her sunken eyes bore bags heavier than she’d had before, her hair no longer shone, now neglected by the one who once took so much pride in it. Looking like her mother once was a gift, but now it felt like a curse. But not as much so as her eyes, the same eyes she saw the life drain out of now looked back at her in pain.

Turning away from the mirror she stood and began to shed her clothes. The first to go was the kimono, simple, black and suitable for a funeral. Untying the knot at the back she opened the garment, letting it slide across her shoulders and then down her arms, falling down to her feet. Next were her undergarments, unhooking the bra then pushing down her panties, she observed herself once again in the mirror. She had lost a substantial amount of weight, making her seem almost sickly, something she would have to rectify soon. As she observed her scar littered skin her gaze searched her body, eyes stopping once they reached her latest wound. Her finger gliding over the braised skin she quickly retracted her hand upon feeling the bump.

Unable to look at herself any longer she walked to the bathroom, turned on the taps and waited for the water to adjust accordingly. While she waited arm outstretched, her mind, for the first time since the night with her father, wandered to things she had distracted herself from thinking. Now there were no funerals to plan, people to meet or events to attend — no escape. In all that time she hadn’t shed a single tear but now was her breaking point.

Ignoring the ache in her chest, she stepped beneath the stream, water crashing down on and around as she lifted her head and closed her eyes. The warmth was soothing against her skin, but it didn’t take away the pain she felt inside. Slowly, she brought her head down running her fingers over her eyelids and down her cheeks, stopping to cover her mouth. Her body shook, her hand muffling a whimper as all the emotions she was trying to push down, crept up to the surface and spilt out.

The tears that had built up streamed down her cheeks, forcing her eyes to close as she pressed her back against the tiles and slid downward. The feeling crippled her, and knowing she would not be able to fight it anymore, allowed herself to cry and whimper and wish for it all to go away. She didn’t feel like Sena anymore. Instead, she was a shell of the person she once was, undeserving of love and affection. This was her punishment, and she could not escape it.
It had been days since the funeral and Neji hadn’t seen Sena once. He had tried to on several occasions but she always refused to see him, or anyone else that he knew. One of the days he had gotten desperate enough to ask Ten Ten to go instead, but to no end. Sena probably had guessed the real reason she was there anyway. What hurt Neji the most was the fact he still had no idea why she was pushing him away. He needed to find out; he had spent too many sleepless nights pondering reasons and possibilities.

The first time he had tried to visit the kunoichi was the day after the funeral, still concerned she had avoided him at the ceremony and left without so much as an acknowledgement. It was Kyou who answered the door, and even though he tried to get her to see him, she insisted she was too busy. Upon leaving, they stepped outside where Sena’s uncle urged Neji to keep coming back, assuring him that she would agree to see him eventually, which is exactly what he did.

This time he tried to visit during the evening but failed again. He stood at the entrance to the compound looking up toward the main house, wondering once again why Sena had turned him away. Perhaps it was something he had done? No, more likely she was struggling to deal with everything that had happened including her new responsibilities.

‘Trying to see her too, huh?’ The familiar voice made Neji tense, his eyes narrowing when he saw Jiro standing beside him. He wasn’t sure whether it was jealousy, that Jiro could be granted entry when he was turned away so many times, or whether it was plain frustration but either way he couldn’t stand to look at him. Without a word of reply he turned from the fellow shinobi and began to walk away.

‘Wait, Neji,’ Jiro called. The Hyūga stopped upon hearing footsteps follow him but he still did not turn, figuring his halt was courtesy enough. It wasn’t long before Jiro caught up with him. ‘I need to talk to you.’

‘About what?’ Neji closed his eyes, impatient and his tone heavy with bitterness. He loathed the relationship between Jiro and Sena and seeing the shinobi there at this point when his own bond with her was unclear only unsettled him further. Physically he wasn’t intimidated by him, but Neji found himself helpless against the emotional history between the teammates. No shinobi ability could break that.

‘About her of course.’ He waited for a reply but when Neji did not comply he clarified. ‘I want to—no you need me to—talk about Sena.’ The Hyūga felt his heart rate increase but still did not say a word, wondering just why exactly he thought he needed to talk about it. Jiro sighed. ‘You are just as stubborn as her,’ he muttered. ‘But fine, you don’t have to talk anyway just listen because I’m going to do what she has done countless times for us which is to do the right thing.’ Neji turned his head slightly, indicating that he had his attention.

Jiro exhaled a shaky breath before continuing. ‘She was always there for us, unconditionally, not for her own benefit but simply because it was the right thing to do. And Kami, I was horrible to her for a time just because I was jealous of her abilities and she still prompted me to be a better person. But this isn’t about me. It’s about her as much as it is about you.’ This caught Neji’s attention, finding his body turned to the side, his gazes now on Jiro without narrowed eyes. ‘She needs help our help, or we will lose her forever, and I think you’re the only one who can get through to her. It’s all up to you. Decide whether she’s worth fighting for or letting go. You love her right?’ He stared at Jiro, they both knew he did. ‘Well, then maybe this time it’s not about what she needs to prove to you but what you need to prove to her.’
Neji was frozen on the spot, paralysed by Jiro’s words. He was right of course, annoyingly so, but he did need to be the one to prove himself to her. Sena had already shown how far she was willing to go, what she would risk just for him, now it was his turn. He needed to guide her into the light as she had done for him, many times over. Jiro let him process everything for a moment then turned to leave. After taking a few steps though he stopped.

‘Hey, Neji.’ The Hyūga hummed in response. ‘Personally, I think she could do a lot better but it’s not up to me how she feels. So I’m only saying this once, and I’m saying it for her. Sena loves you and no one else, not even me. For her, there is only you, and I’m sure you feel the same about her.’

Jiro turned his head back and caught his eye. ‘So do us both a favour and tell her, alright?’

‘I can’t.’ Neji cast his eyes downward.

‘Don’t tell me you’re still in denial.’

‘You misunderstand.’ He raised his gaze to meet Jiro. ‘She refuses to see me. I haven’t been able to speak to her since that night.’ That wasn’t the whole truth. A part of him was still afraid of confessing that which left him so vulnerable to the person he cared for most. There was more to it though. It made him secretly thankful he could put off telling her due to her avoiding him but that idea also made him feel more guilty.

‘Leave it to me.’ Jiro replied ‘I will figure out something, you just be ready to do your part.’ There he turned and walked back toward the Matsura compound and beyond the gates, leaving Neji behind to contemplate their conversation.

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Sena sat at the desk of the study, chin in hand while she read over the last of the documents that sat on the daily pile. Changes were to be made, buildings to be constructed with the growing population and as the newly appointed leader, she was to oversee all these new additions. Still, as she signed her name on the dotted line, she couldn’t help but remain feeling empty, as though something was missing. When she had first found out, years ago that she would be the heiress to the Matsura clan, she was excited wanting to make her family proud. But they were gone now, and the prospect of leadership just didn’t feel the same doing it alone. Sure, her uncle was there to help her, but their relationship still held estranged feelings even if she did trust him now. It just wasn’t the same bond she shared with her siblings or parents. It was distant.

Her uncle had made a point of taking on certain roles as her guardian that did not escape her notice. The same could also be said of Saio. Kyou had grown tired of her snapping at him, so he resorted to subtly checking up on her under the guise of bringing her paperwork or asking her strict business questions. He even made a point of setting up meetings with her daily, conveniently at lunch time. She tolerated it because he never brought up the topic of her father or Neji anymore. Saio she couldn’t bring herself to snap at. Instead she resorted to avoid him when possible, unable to control the wave of guilt that drowned her in his presence. Cups of tea still managed to find their way to her side, and somehow she never went without a meal thanks to his ingenuity. She was glad in a way that he catered to her horrible way of dealing with everything so kindly.

There at her desk, pen in hand, she went about twirling it absentmindedly while her mind wandered to other things. Distant thoughts and feelings she didn’t dare linger on during the day. Something about the night dragged up certain emotions beyond her control, and instead of trying to push them
away she entertained them a little before moving on. Sena found herself missing who she used to be months, even years before. A time where there were so much promise and hope.

A bang against the window startled her from her thoughts, her gaze falling onto the glass behind her. There she saw Jiro, a sheepish smile on his lips the other hand waving cowardly. The kunoichi sighed, pushing herself up from the chair to open the window and grant him access. With a strong pull, the window opened, and Jiro jumped into the room.

‘What are doing here?’ Sena asked, shutting it again. ‘Have you not heard of a door?’ She turned to him arms crossed and brows raised. She was surprised, but she wasn’t really as annoyed as she was making out, for she was glad for the interruption to those dangerous thoughts.

‘You never answer, what is a guy to do?’ Jiro shrugged nonchalantly taking a turn of the room. Sena sighed, watching as he observed the books and displays on show.

‘I’ve been busy.’ She sat back down in the desk chair, rubbing her eyes. ‘New responsibilities and all that.’ She knew he deserved a better explanation, perhaps even an apology but she was too emotionally drained to muster one. He glanced over at her before his attention went back to the book in front of him.

‘Hm.’ He mused thoughtfully, pulling the novel from its confines on the shelf and opened it up. There he flicked through a few pages, smiling to himself before snapping it closed and putting it back. His attention turned back toward her. ‘Don’t let me stop you from your…important duties.’ There was a teasing tone in his voice.

‘Actually, I just finished for the night,’ she said, hesitating for a moment before pushing the document back toward the pile. Jiro’s brows raised.

‘Good,’ he began, taking a seat opposite her across the desk. ‘That means you have time to talk to your old friend.’ He shot her a devious smirk, leading her to believe he was up to something. Jiro never did have a very good poker face, she could read him like a book.

‘Alright, what do you wish to talk about?’ Sena sat back in her chair, allowing herself to relax slightly. She hadn’t realised how tense she had been until now. Jiro shifted, retrieving something from his pocket.

‘Hm. Oh did I say talk? I meant I came here to drink.’ He found what he was looking for, retracting his hand and placing a silver flask onto the desk in front of her. ‘Let’s have a drink, and if talking comes, then it comes. If not then at least we can indulge in the company of spirits.’ He took the flask in hand again, popping the top and taking a swig. Much to Sena’s amusement, he coughed a little, the alcohol most likely burning his throat.

‘Hopeless,’ she muttered, folding her arms.

‘Go on, your turn then.’ Jiro slid the open flask across the desk, a coaxing smile spreading. ‘I’d like to see you do better.’

‘Must you make everything a competition?’ Sena asked, an unimpressed look on her face. It was so like Jiro to turn everything into a game, especially to defuse a situation. Never really worked in his favour though, not with her anyway.

‘With you, yes.’ He gestured to the flask once again before sitting back. ‘Now come on let’s see who the better shot is.’ She sighed, caving into his ways.

‘Fine.’ Sena snatched the flask from the desk and shot him a look. ‘Just don’t cry when I win
alright?’ She lifted the flask to her lips, took a breath and downed a mouthful. The alcohol burned her throat slightly, but she would be damned if she coughed. Instead, she removed the flask from her lips and took a sharp intake of breath. ‘Wow,’ she said regaining her composure. ‘Looks like I win.’

‘Yeah, yeah. I know you are the prodigy.’ The smirk was still on his lips. ‘Now why don’t you take another, we will say this one is in honour of Hitomi Sensei.’ Sena nodded, bringing the cool metal back toward her before stopping.

‘Well, if it’s for Hitomi Sensei then why don’t we have something better.’ She placed the flask back on the table and opened the bottom drawer of the desk. Jiro shot her a questioning look, but she merely smiled, concentrating on her hand finding what she sought. ‘Ah, here we go.’ She retrieved a large bottle, half full and placed it on the table.

‘Uncle?’ Jiro asked.

‘Grandmother,’ Sena corrected. They both eyed each other before bursting out in laughter, a sensation she had all but forgotten in her isolation. It felt nice, comforting even. After it had died down, Sena retrieved two shot glasses from the drawer and placed them beside the bottle.

‘Alright then,’ Jiro began, pouring them a shot each. ‘For Hitomi Sensei.’ He raised his glass to her, and she mimicked the action.

‘Hitomi Sensei.’ Their glasses clinked and they both downed the shots. Sena felt a warmth blooming within her from the alcohol, causing her body to shiver at the sensation; and before she could blink Jiro was pouring two more.

As time passed and the alcohol had reached a significantly low level, Jiro began to prod Sena to talk more. They had toasted to their sensei, to her passed on relatives, even to past lovers, hardly anyone else remained. Pouring yet another two shots, he cast his eyes down averting her gaze.

‘Who should we honour with our drinking next?’ His tone had lost its whimsical charm and now turned more serious. The real reason he had come would surely reveal itself to her soon. Even though she was starting to feel tingle sensations throughout her body, her guard was still up.

‘Perhaps Kira?’ Sena asked with a coy smile.

‘Or even Neji?’ Jiro responded all too quickly, causing her smile to fade a little. She sat back in her chair and sighed.

‘That was your plan hm?’ Sena asked, although she wasn’t annoyed but more exhausted. ‘To get me liquored up and ask me about him?’ His eyes met hers, and she did not miss the subtle sorrow reflected in them. He pitied her that was evident, even if he wouldn’t say it out loud.

‘There was no plan really,’ Jiro confessed. ‘I just thought someone needed to give you permission to let loose after everything. And not just offer their sympathies, you know?’ Sena nodded. She had almost forgotten that Jiro had lost his father too, so he knew a little of what she was going through, the difference remained though — he had not killed his. She let out a heavy sigh.

‘Sometimes,’ Sena began, ‘I feel the past and the future pressing so hard on each other that there’s no room for the present at all.’ She snatched the shot off the desk and downed it before Jiro could blink.

‘Hm.’ Jiro contemplated. ‘I understand what you mean but have you considered that maybe you avoid the present because you feel you don’t deserve to live in it?’
‘No.’ Sena replied. ‘I know I don’t deserve too.’ Her gaze fell onto the shot glass she was still holding, fiddling with it between her fingers. Jiro didn’t reply, just looked at her waiting for her to continue. Sena took a deep breath. ‘In the day all I can think about is what I can do to make the clan better, to honour my family’s memory and be a strong leader. And then at night—’ She stopped, reaching out her glass and nodded to the bottle. He understood immediately, pouring her another shot before she chucked it back and slammed it onto the table. ‘At night all I can think about is the past. Everything I had to go through to get here, and for what? To be left alone.’ She bit her lip, attempting to keep her emotions in check but the alcohol mixed with the vulnerability of the moment got the better of her.

‘Nightmares?’ Jiro asked, giving her a knowing look. She nodded, unable to formulate the words to admit it. Each night she relived it all. Her family, Hitomi, Deidara, then finally her father and she would wake in a fevered frenzy, wishing she could just end it all. It was too much to take. ‘I get them too.’ The honesty pulled Sena from her thoughts and gave him a shocked look. ‘I always did, honestly. And I hate to say, you grow accustomed to them but apart of you never really gets used to them. But you do find ways to deal, you know?’ She nodded again.

‘I wake up most nights after a few hours and can’t get back to sleep.’ She recalled the first night it happened, where she woke up screaming causing her uncle to burst into the room. ‘I usually get up and go for a walk to clear my head. Most of the time I end up at the training grounds, as if on instinct, and train to make my body tired so I can at least attempt to sleep again.’

‘Does it ever work?’

‘Not really.’

‘How often do you go for these walks?’

‘Every night.’

‘Hm.’ Jiro began to twirl the shot glass with his finger. ‘The life of a shinobi huh?’

‘I’ll be honest; it’s not much of a life.’

‘It can be if you let it.’ This caught Sena’s attention, her eyes meeting Jiro as he continued. ‘But the fact of the matter is there’s no living with a killing. Right or wrong, justified or not it’s a brand, one that sticks. And no matter how strong or capable you are there’s no going back. We just have to live our lives as always because in the end, that’s all we really can do.’

‘Those are surprisingly wise words,’ Sena said, brows raised. Jiro chuckled, before leaning forward elbows on the desk, chin in hand.

‘I’d like to say I’m smart when I need to be but, to be honest, they aren’t my words.’

‘Oh?’

‘Hitomi.’

‘Of course.’

‘Doesn’t mean I don’t believe in them though because I do.’ Jiro sighed and sank back into his chair. ‘You need to stop pushing us away. Especially Neji.’ Her mouth twitched at the mention of his name which did not go unnoticed. ‘Can I ask you something though?’ Sena nodded albeit reluctantly. ‘You love him don’t you?’
‘Do you love Kira?’ She asked quickly.

‘Yes.’ He answered just as quickly not hesitating for a second. ‘So?’

‘You wouldn’t understand.’ Sena tried to brush him off.

‘Then explain.’

‘It’s complicated.’

‘I’m sure you’ll dumb it down for me.’ Jiro made it clear he was not backing down anytime soon. Sena sighed, letting herself slump into her chair. She looked up, blowing her bangs out of her eyes before meeting his gaze.

‘We were made for each other,’ she whispered. ‘But in the cruelest way possible because none of it can happen. We have to remain apart so as not to hurt each other: destined for each other, made for each other, but the one who decided such a fate failed to take into account that everyone around me in this shinobi world dies. And I refuse to let that happen again.’ With that, Jiro poured them another round.
Neji awoke to furious knocking on his door during the early hours of the morning before the sun had risen. Mixed within the banging was slurred yelling, causing him to groan and cringe. Neji then shot up from the bed in a state of delirium and rage, opening the door ready to yell at the perpetrator until he saw Jiro standing the slumped in the doorway barely looking conscious.

‘What the—’ he was cut off by Jiro giggling, a stupid grin plastered on his face.

Neji frowned, ready to object to the intrusion again when he smelt the stench of alcohol on his breath. He scrunched up his nose at the sensation.

‘I did it!’ Jiro declared swaying, hand clutching the doorway for support.

‘Yes,’ Neji agreed, ‘you are drunk, well done.’ He sighed and rubbed his strained neck, wondering had coaxed Jiro to drink and then come to him in the middle of the night.

‘N-no not that I did the thing I-I figured out Sena!’ He threw his arms in the air, declaring his discovery as though it were something miraculous but Neji just sighed and pulled him inside and shut the door.

This was not how Neji had intended the night to pan out.

‘What are you talking about?’ He then asked, not sure if he even wanted the answer.

‘Like I said in our ahh…talk.’ Jiro was struggling to put together sentences let alone stand.

Neji questioned if he even knew what he was saying. Still, he continued to wait.

‘At night she trains.’ Jiro pointed at him knowingly.

‘At night she trains.’ Neji repeated lowly, as if he was supposed to know what Jiro meant by that.

‘Yeah!’ Jiro nodded. ‘The training grounds, that’s where y-you can tell her!’

It finally clicked for Neji what he was trying to say.

‘I see.’ Neji had to give him credit for following through on his promise so quickly but the fact he felt the need to turn up at his home intoxicated irritated him. But instead of complaining, he forced
himself to remember that this was Sena’s friend and had to do the responsible thing. ‘Alright, you need to go to bed.’

There Neji stood and went to retrieve some blankets from the cupboard and guided Jiro to the couch. The intoxicated shinobi let himself fall onto the couch, without much grace. He groaned clutching his head. Neji had never been drunk himself, but from what he understood he assumed Jiro’s head was probably spinning.

He tossed the blanket over him.

‘I’m going to get you water.’ Neji said waiting for a response.

He was met with a whine.

‘Stay here and please don’t be sick.’

Neji retreated to get him a glass of water along with a bowl from the cupboard. When he returned, however, Jiro had already passed out, so he left the water on the table and the bowl on the floor, hoping that during the night he wouldn’t wake up sick. Then he switched off the light, returned to his bed lying there very much awake. He sighed then thought about Jiro’s words deciding that he would take them on board. Perhaps he could wait for Sena one night in the training grounds in order to get her to talk. He didn’t like the idea of deception but he was running out of options and getting desperate. There was much that needed to be said and things he needed to find out.

Pondering these thoughts for awhile, Neji finally felt the heaviness of sleep overcome him again and gladly let the darkness take him.

In the morning when he woke, Jiro was still passed out on the couch, so he decided to leave him and go about his usual morning routine. He got up and made breakfast, hesitating at the portions then decided on making enough for two in case his unintended roommate woke up. When he finished, he retrieved clean clothes from the cupboard and headed for the shower. As the warm water crashed against his skin, he finally relaxed, feeling the toll of his sleep disturbance. He rubbed his tired eyes, wondering whether he should try to revisit Sena or wait until the evening to go to the training grounds.

When Neji came out of the bathroom he found Jiro awake and in the kitchen eating breakfast. He stopped when he saw him, quickly swallowing and putting his plate down.

‘Morning,’ he said sheepishly. ‘Sorry about... you know, turning up out of nowhere, drunk.’ He looked back down at his food and prodded it with his spoon. 'Thanks for letting me crash on the couch.'

Clearly Jiro was embarrassed and Neji, now knowing he didn’t have feelings for Sena, felt a little more at ease in his presence.

‘You’re welcome.’ Neji took a seat at the counter, watching him carefully. ‘Do you remember why you came here?’ Jiro nodded while attempting to hold a smirk.

‘I guess I should probably explain,’ Jiro said with a nod from Neji. ‘Well, I figured I needed to get Sena to loosen up to talk to me, so I brought something to help that and-long story short-I may have ended up getting her drunk.’

‘You did what!?’ The Hyūga didn’t even try to mask the annoyance in his voice.

He had somehow failed to put two and two together when Jiro turned up on his doorstep the night
before. Of course, they were both drunk, he had after all just come from there.

‘Relax!’ Jiro said, hands raised defensively. ‘We had a chat, unburdened our hearts, braided each other’s hair; it was fine.’ Neji wasn’t convinced. ‘Look it was good for her, trust me she needed someone to talk to, to start her opening up alright.’ He took another spoonful and shovelled it into his mouth before adding, ‘The point is, I did my part, now it’s time for you to do yours.’

Neji sighed, decidedly letting it go. He had to admit that Jiro had a point; it was time for him to do his part and help Sena. He wasn’t sure what to do or say but he knew he had to try and tonight was the night to do it.

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After nursing a headache for the entirety of the day Sena had decided to go to bed early. She made a mental note to give Jiro a lecture the next time she saw him. The early turn in however proved useless when she awoke in the night in another feverish fit that forced her to relive the terrors of the not too distant past.

Sena sat up on the bed, sweating profusely while her heart thumped wildly in her chest. The images of the dream laid at the forefront of her mind. Knowing she wouldn’t be getting sleep anytime soon, she kicked off the covers, got out of bed and dressed in clothes fit for training. It was the only thing she could do to take her mind off everything.

Grabbing an elastic off the vanity, Sena tied up her hair in a ponytail and glanced at herself in the mirror. It was still dark but her eyes adjusted enough to see her reflection. Quickly she turned away, not wanting to be reminded of how exhausted she must look. There she exited her house via her window, not wanting to wake the others and took her usual route toward the training grounds. The cool breeze on the way there soothed her, helping her to relax a little.

Once she got there she looked at the empty space with the wind blowing through the trees creating an eerie atmosphere. Then she began warming up and running through basic routines. It wasn’t long before her muscles stretched and her body was ready to throw herself into anything she could.

Sena then sensed a familiar presence approaching from behind and before she could run she realised it was time to face the person she had been avoiding the longest. There would be no escape or easy way out this time.

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‘You sensed me coming,’ Neji began, his tone soft, ‘I expected you to run.’

He took a cautious step forward but she neither shifted or turned around.

‘Hm.’ Sena mused. ‘I thought about it but that would not have deterred you.’ She took a deep breath and looked up toward the stars. ‘Ironic isn’t it? Out of the two of us, I’m supposed to be the
persistent one.’ Her tone was colder than usual, making him feel uneasy.

Neji knew he could not let her demeanour stop him.

‘I was worried about you.’ He took another step forward, using all of his willpower to stop from reaching out to her. ‘You’ve been avoiding me.’

‘As I have everyone.’ Her reply was curt, an attempt to brush him off but he saw through it.

He saw the walls she was raising in order to keep him out.

‘I’m not everyone,’ He hesitated before adding, ‘I care about you.’

‘Perhaps you shouldn’t.’

‘What has changed between us? Why are you pushing me away?’

‘It’s for the best.’

‘For the best?’ He was growing irritable, this mask wasn’t her and he didn’t like the act. ‘How can you say that after everything?’ He knew she cared and was determined to break through her cool facade.

‘Don’t you get it Neji?’ Sena snapped, finally turning to face him. ‘The people who get close to me die. Look at what happened to my family, my friends, those whom I held closest to my heart. Look at what happened to you when I was on my infiltration mission, you almost died because of me!’

‘But I didn’t and that was because of you.’

‘And what about the next time?’ Sena shook her head. ‘No, it’s better if I do this alone.’

‘Oh yes of course,’ Neji took a step closer. ‘I’d almost forgotten that you don't need advice or friends or help. You have got it all figured out.’ He could feel the anger building. ‘The nature of your journey is personal and private which ultimately requires you to complete it alone. You think the dangers and struggles that have come and will continue to affect only you and no one else, not even the people who love you. So you choose to go alone, to take on this atonement that is exclusively yours.’

Neji took another step closer so their faces were only inches apart.

‘Because if you accept someone’s support,’ he continued, 'if you accept their help, then somehow it would lessen it for you. So you deprive them of participating in your life, from being there for you.’

‘Don’t speak of my experiences like you have any idea what I went through!’ Sena yelled.

‘I would if you’d just tell me!’ Neji yelled back, unable to keep his own emotions in check.

‘It’s not your burden to bear!’

‘Yes, it is!’ He did not back down even upon seeing her stunned reaction. ‘I have been bearing everything you have thrown at me whether you wanted it or not.’

‘You want to bear what I’ve gone through?’ Sena stepped directly in front of him staring up with a scowl on her face. ‘You want to share this guilt? To see your own mother take her life; to suffer from a curse mark that twists your mind inside out until you want to kill yourself and others? To
watch the same mark consume your father and watch him kill those closest to you? Or perhaps you would like to offer up your body on a silver platter to the Akatsuki letting them touch and fuck you any way they wished until you numbed yourself enough to finally come home? Oh, but that's not even the best part because then you have to stick a blade through your father’s chest and watch as he dies in front of your eyes because you failed to save him! Is that what you want Neji!?’

Taken back at her words, Neji was very much aware of the way her body trembled, chest heaved and her eyes watered.

‘Is that what you want?’ She whispered, harshly.

It wasn’t fair, her words, but he couldn’t overlook the truth and pain behind them. Even though he was angry, somewhere deep inside, he knew he cared about the woman standing in front of him to the point where he would die for her.

Sena had suffered. She needed to say these words, she needed to let out everything that she was holding back if she had any chance of healing. And even if he was the person at the receiving end of such words he didn’t care. It was up to him to make sure she didn’t fall back into the darkness again.

‘Yes.’ Neji said finally.

Before he could elaborate Sena took another step forward with hands stretched ready to push him. He caught her wrists and pulled her close, hands tightening the more she struggled.

‘I would take on anything you went through,’ Neji said, softly, ‘Any pained experience if it meant I could take it all away from you.’

This caused her to stop moving, her eyes widening as he continued.

‘But I can’t take it away. There is no changing what has come to pass. That doesn’t mean that I can’t help you because it’s you who doesn’t seem to get it. Nothing that has happened to you or anything you have done will ever change that.’

A single tear fell down her cheek, tugging at a protective string in his chest, prompting him to add, ‘I want to help you because I care. You made me care Sena and I know you care too.’

He loosened his grip on her wrists, watching the way her eyes watered as she stared up at him.

Neji had wanted to say it was because he loved her but stopped himself. It wasn’t the time. Tonight was about Sena not about him and he couldn’t be selfish with her. Not ever.

Looking into her eyes Neji saw they once again shone warm with affection and were no longer cold and dispassionate. He let go of her wrists.

‘Neji I…’ Sena bit her lip and looked away, hiding her teary eyes from his gaze.

Before Neji could say or do anything she flung herself against his chest, sobbing and shaking like a leaf in the wind. Automatically he wrapped his arms around her and brought her close, her hair tickling his neck and the scent of lilac suddenly took over his senses.

They stood like that for awhile. Sena crying, letting all the emotions she had let build up to explode and Neji letting her while he held her. His grip tightened when he recalled the words exchanged during the argument moments before when she screamed everything she had been through and targeted him with it. He didn’t want to lie to her anymore or be a source of pain in any
Then Sena said something but the words were muffled by the way she pressed her face against his chest.

‘What did you say?’ Neji asked, not loosening his hold on her in the slightest.

She shifted her face but kept her body pressed close to his.

‘I’m sorry.’ She repeated, this time clearly.

He nodded, his chin grazing the top of her head as he did.

‘I’m sorry too.’

Neji had a lot to be sorry for. He was sorry that he hid his feelings, for pushing her away time and time again but most of all he was sorry for entertaining the idea of letting her go.

Sena squirmed against him and he went to step back in case she wanted to free herself but stopped when he felt her arms wrap around him. A small smile came to his lips making him glad her cheek was pressed against his chest, so she didn’t see. Then he remembered something.

‘Sena,’ he said, softly, ‘There is something I have to tell you.’

‘Anything.’ She replied, not moving an inch from his embrace.

He took a deep breath, preparing himself for the path of honesty.

‘I know everything.’ Neji hesitated before elaborating. ‘I read your scroll.’

His eyes squeezed shut the moment the words left his mouth, waiting for their impact. But she didn’t flinch or even move at the confession. Instead, he could swear he heard her smile.

‘I know,’ she said finally, pulling her face from his chest to look up at him. ‘It’s alright.’ She gave a soft smile, one that warmed his heart, making him question why he was worried to tell her in the first place.

He let go a breath he hadn’t known he was holding and stared into her eyes.

Neji noticed then just how close they were, arms still wrapped around each other while their gaze caught, neither daring to look away. Then he noticed heat rising in his cheeks, mentally cursing himself for not having better control. Still, he held her in his arms, overwhelmed by everything he felt but not enough to pull away. He found himself wanting to hold on to her and never let go. Neji had come close to losing her so many times that it was enough to last a lifetime and one day he would tell her exactly why that had made him so afraid.
Sena stood on the outskirts of the Matsura compound, chokutō in hand, outstretched in front of her. She tested it’s weight, the steadiness of her grip and the sharpness of the blade, determining it was in excellent condition for an old blade. Perhaps her father had touched it up? She shook her head just at the thought of him, emotions attacking her all at once, threatening the dig up more memories than she could handle. Her grip tightened on the hilt, chanting the same Please, go away line she did whenever mind wandered into unfriendly territory. For some reason, lately, whenever she felt upset or lost she would think of her mother and the lessons she taught during their brief time together.

There was one fateful day she remembered quite well, where she had gone off to train on her own, wanting to prove herself worthy against her big brothers. The kunoichi had been five years old at the time, and she had climbed a tree, lost her footing and just as quickly had come crashing down. On her way down she had smashed her cheek against the trunk and grazed her knees upon impact.

Sena felt the hard, unpleasant, coolness of stone on her back and her head elevated slightly. She did not remember coming down nor her mother approaching. Sayuri was kneeling next to her. Slowly, but decisively, she straightened her fingers, pulled her hand away from her cheek, allowing her mother to inspect it.

‘Mother ahh!’ Groaned Sena. ‘It hurts mother!’

‘Hush, my love.’ Sayuri touched her face, hand as cold as ice and suddenly the pain wasn’t so bad. Sena’s breathing steadied as she looked up at her mother with watery eyes, refusing to shed any tears. Her look was returned with one of caution and worry. ‘Promise me you will not train again without supervision, Sena.’

‘I promise mother.’

Instead of dwelling on her thoughts Sena lifted the blade and practised her footwork. It was simple enough to recall past weapons training, but she would still have to work on handling a new weapon, which was very different from wielding two chakra daggers. The sword seemed to embody a new beginning, one she was all but glad to embrace, even if it was just as a feeble attempt to forget the past.

There the kunoichi practised, experimenting and recalling different techniques and movements
until she felt a familiar presence. Sena turned and began walking in their direction, sheathing her blade before meeting them halfway.

‘Hey,’ Sena greeted, flashing a subtle smile. ‘Is everything alright?’

‘I just came to see you,’ Neji replied, arms folded.

The Hyūga had come to see her every day since the night they had fought and just as quickly made up. Sena didn’t mind either, allowing herself to finally indulge in his company once again instead of pushing him away was nice. The kunoichi still harboured deep-rooted fears about his safety that had manifested time and time again in the form of nightmares, but she couldn’t turn him away. Sena doubted Neji would listen even if she tried; he’d proven his dedication every single day with his visits.

‘I was going to run some errands,’ Sena said.

‘I’ll come with you,’ Neji insisted.

The kunoichi smiled at the offer and nodded. After several sleepless nights of nightmares, Sena felt an ease in Neji’s company and didn’t dare turn him down. It was a nice feeling having someone to rely on, even if it just was a friendly face to see every day. She was more grateful to him than he knew.

Neji accompanied Sena into the heart of the village, searching through stalls and shops looking at whatever caught their fancy. Sena had noticed he had seemed a little quiet, distracted like something was bothering him. The Hyūga was prone to be quiet by nature, but the kunoichi knew how to read his body language and mannerisms. Something was going on, and she wasn’t sure whether she should pry into the situation or not.

‘Are you alright?’ Sena finally asked, catching him staring off into the distance yet again when she had been in the middle of talking.

‘Fine,’ Neji replied, but she knew better.

Instead of pressing the matter Sena figured Neji would either decide to tell her of his own volition or not at all and she would just have wait and see which prevailed. Rather than worry, she tasked herself with looking at passing shop windows, intent on finding something to buy, as a means of a distraction if not anything else. Then they came to a shop she had not brought herself to walk by since the day her brothers had died. The place itself wasn’t anything more than an antique store which sold various knick knacks and furniture, but the location was where she and her brother had shared a moment years before when she was but a child.

‘You’ve finally come back!’ Sena squealed. ‘It took so long. We’ll stay together now, won’t we? For the whole day! Say it, Tsutomu!’ She jumped up and down in front of her older brother who just smiled and nodded.

‘Yes, Sena. I promise to stay with you the whole day.’ Tsutomu crouched down so that their eyes were level and dropped to a whisper. ‘That is if you don’t get sick of me.’ He gently poked her nose, causing the young girl to blink wildly then smile.

‘I’d never get sick of you big brother!’ Sena’s smile faded slightly. ‘That doesn’t mean you’ll get sick of me though, right?’

Tsutomu looked at her his eyes full of astonishment followed by a smile spreading slowly like he had just realised something. He waited a few moments to answer, seemingly savouring the moment
with his sister, before he placed a gentle hand on top of her head.

‘I could never get sick of you, my little sister.’ Tsutomu took her small hand in his. ‘Hold onto my hand tight, little one, mother and father would never forgive me if I lost you.’

Sena did as directed and gave his hand a firm squeeze, causing him to chuckle.

The kunoichi smiled at the memory, brushing her fingertips across her nose at the thought. There was a time where she couldn’t handle thinking of her brother at all, but now that time had passed, and new revelations had come about, she felt more at ease, almost content thinking back to him. Sena snapped out of her memory once she realised she had been staring into the window for far too long and Neji was waiting patiently beside her, a questioning look in his eyes. She gave him a small smile in return.

‘Come on,’ Sena said, turning away from the shop. ‘Let’s keep going.’

After some time searching around aimlessly, without finding a single thing to buy, Sena grew tedious of the trip and decided she had enough. It was then something caught her eye in the shop window. Without thinking she grabbed hold of Neji’s hand in hers and dragged him over toward the store, attempting to get a better look at the outfit inside. The kunoichi turned back to the Hyūga, wide grin on her face.

‘Look at that!’ She said, pointing. ‘Isn’t it pretty?’

When Sena didn’t get a reply, she turned her focus back to Neji, noticing his cheeks burning a bright shade of red. She frowned before catching his gaze, pointing down toward their hands still very much intertwined. The kunoichi bit her lip to stop a chuckle, and slowly, carefully removed her hand from his. This caused his attention to snap back toward her.

‘What did you say?’ He asked quickly.

‘Oh, it’s nothing,’ she replied, suddenly not caring about the garment.

They continued to walk through the streets neither of them speaking, or bothering to stop at shops anymore. Sena began to wonder whether perhaps it was something she had done to make Neji act so cold toward her. It wasn’t exactly that he was rude, but he was quiet and distant enough for her to worry. It was then he stopped and turned to her.

‘Can we go somewhere?’ Neji asked.

‘Of course.’ Sena replied.

Neji took them around the next corner away from the busy strip of stores. They walked for a time, passing through a familiar route in the village which Sena knew as the way to the Hyūga compound. She didn’t question him as to why they were going this way, noticing he seemed rather tense. When Neji had something on his mind, he bore a stoic expression his eyes narrowed slightly, like he was trying to make out his thoughts visually. Sena knew the expression all too well and usually remained silent until he decided to either share or move on. Today she wondered whether or not the thoughts concerned her, but she did not pry again.

Upon entering the confines of the Hyūga compound, they bypassed the structures and headed further onward, until they entered a garden, one which Sena recognised immediately. It was the exact spot where they had reestablished their friendship after spending so much time apart. It also happened to be the location the kunoichi had shown Neji her curse seal to him all those years ago.
They came to a stop on a small bridge over a pound toward a more secluded part of the garden, the subtle fragrance of the flowers carrying across the breeze. As they stood there in silence leaning against the railing, Sena noticed the sun setting, painting hues of pink and orange across the clear sky. It was beautiful.

‘Do you believe in destiny?’ Neji asked, breaking the silence. The question was abrupt, throwing Sena off guard a little as she turned to face him.

‘I’m not certain anymore,’ Sena admitted.

There was so much she was uncertain of now. Once there was a time she was set in her beliefs, sure of how the world worked and which way her moral compass pointed but now after everything she was left to face the travesty of the unknown. Sena knew that she would not be the person she was had she not gone through everything leading up to this moment, but a part of her could not help but linger on the what could have been. The opportunities that had gotten away. Destiny seemed like such a cruel idea. To think that her whole life she was destined to lose her family and commit such unforgivable actions was too awful to consider. Even if she knew that wasn’t exactly what Neji was asking. It was then she remembered something her mother had told her long ago, realising where he beliefs began and ended.

‘I believe in choice,’ Sena said after consideration. ‘Our actions, the choices we make and the ones we don’t—it’s what defines us. I guess in a way they determine our destiny, but it does not mean it is something already decided for us. It is something we choose.’

Sena wasn’t sure if it was the answer Neji sought but by the way he nodded and his eyes cast forward, contemplating her words, she figured it was enough. The kunoichi watched Neji, drinking in the tightness in his jaw and the rigid way he stood, as if uncomfortable. It appeared like more than that to the kunoichi, who was too experienced in picking apart body language to brush off Neji’s odd behaviours. To Sena, it reminded her of someone trying desperately to hide something—something important. She wondered if he would tell her at all but knew better than to expect such an act from him. Sena tilted her head and looked at the Hyuga, eyes studying him closely. There had been something off about him all day.

‘Why do you ask?’ Sena asked, trying to leave open the opportunity to answer without seeming pushy. A task she prided herself in completing well on several occasions.

Neji took a moment before answering, still seemingly considering his words carefully or perhaps trying to make sense out of his thoughts — she did not know.

‘I used to think it destiny was something fixed, inescapable,’ Neji began, ‘That we are set to walk along the path laid out for us with no escape from this predetermined fate. Seeing what happened to my father…it made me so bitter.’ His words were soft, but their meaning, Sena knew, held something heavier. ‘But that was before. I was in the darkness then, and I was lucky to have someone show me a way out.’

Sena knew exactly who he was referring too, for she was there to witness everything that day at the chūnin exams.

‘Naruto.’ Sena said, smiling.

‘Yes.’ Neji agreed, turning to face her. ‘He was the one who lead me out, showed me a different perspective on things, but Sena…’ ‘There was a subtle shift in his tone of voice that almost sounded like a waiver. ‘You were the one who kept me in the light.’
Her eyes widened at his words. It was such a rare occasion for Neji to be so open with her like this. It was something Sena had always wished for, but now she heard it, saw it, the kunoichi found she wasn’t quite prepared for it.

‘You were the one who taught me what it is to be a true friend,’ Neji continued, ‘To be someone capable of deserving such generosity. You taught me what unconditional love felt like…’ A faint pink tinge dusted his cheeks, as he hesitated before continuing. ‘The thing is, you always understood me, even when I didn’t understand myself and all those times I thought I’d lost you I—I didn’t know if I could… I wanted to… What I’m trying to say is—’ Neji stopped, taking a shaky breath.

It was an interesting sight, seeing Neji so hesitant to the point he couldn’t even put sentences together. The Hyūga either said something on or didn’t, and to see him in such a state would have been amusing to the kunoichi had she not been so taken by his words. There was such raw emotion she had never seen the likes of before, and she didn’t dare interrupt him.

‘The point is I started to think differently… to feel something more… And I just…’ Neji stopped again this time closing his eyes, clearly frustrated and trying to tell her something she wasn’t quite getting.

Sena wanted to say something, she really did, but the kunoichi didn’t know what to say, and she didn’t want to prevent him from expressing what he needed too. Neji clearly needed something though, so she settled for something physical instead. Reaching out she gently brought her hand to his face, cupping then caressing his burning cheek. It caused his blush to darken. There the kunoichi turned his face back toward her and he opened his eyes, burning with such intensity, and emotion it caused her breath to hitch.

‘I…’ Neji took a deep breath. ‘I’m in love with you.’

The words came out so quickly she had to take a moment to confirm he had actually said them. Then Sena blinked again, her mouth opening to say something then just as quickly closing. She couldn’t believe that Neji had just confessed to her. Without realising, her hand fell from his cheek, retracting a little but her eyes remained fixed, caught in the vulnerable gaze between them. Neji took a second to look at her before a frown appeared across his brow, his body pulling away.

‘Forgive me I… I shouldn’t have said anything,’ he said, turning to walk away.

Without thinking, Sena reached out and grabbed his arm to stop him in his tracks, back still toward her. The kunoichi didn’t miss the subtle shiver he gave at her touch. Did she truly affect him this way?

Of course, she did, Sena realised. The kunoichi had known it all along; she had suspected it the moment the signs began to show. The way he looked at her, what he did for her and what he said to her. Sena knew—she had always known—just never dared to allow herself to imagine if it were true because the idea of the person she loved not loving her in return was truly a terrifying thought. One Neji must be thinking right now. She needed to snap out of her daze and do something.

Sena tugged Neji back to face her, his face laced with hints of uncertainty and hurt. The kunoichi went to say something, to acknowledge his confession, admit her own but at that point, words didn’t seem enough. Words were never necessary with them; they had always known what the other was thinking, feeling, to the point where so much as a glance could suffice. And oh did they understand each other, they were made for each other after all, she had said so herself. However, the weight of his confession weighed heavily on her. There was nothing more she wanted to do than to tell him that she loved him too, but there was something inside her that still wasn’t sure.
Yes, she had accepted him back into her life when she had vowed to cut him off in order to keep him safe, but there was still a part of her that couldn’t bare the thought of him getting hurt because or her or worse.

That’s when Sena knew that she was afraid—more so than she had been in her entire life—because if she lost Neji, she truly would be alone. But the kunoichi also knew that should she deny him, deny herself, the chance of happiness then she would be more alone than ever. They loved each other and that was the only thing that mattered. Perhaps there really was such a thing as destiny, and she just had to make her choice to cement it. And Sena’s choice was Neji. It always was and always would be.

Without wasting another moment, Sena grabbed Neji by his shirt and pulled him toward her, planting her lips on his marking their first kiss. The moment Sena’s lips met his she felt his body tense immediately. At first, she thought perhaps it was rejection, but then her common sense kicked in, and she realised there was a more likely reason he didn’t reciprocate immediately. It was his first kiss. The kunoichi couldn’t help but smile at the thought before pulling away ever so slightly, enough to see his face. And what a sight it was to behold, seeing Neji in such a vulnerable state, his eyes wide, lips parted just so, and his cheeks redder than she had ever seen.

Sena’s smile grew, letting go of his shirt, hands sliding up and around his neck, causing his breath to hitch. She leaned in again, slowly, careful to watch his eyes this time, not missing the need reflected in them causing her own desires to heighten and the desperation for his reciprocation growing. A task she took upon herself immediately. Sena leaned closer watching as his eyes fluttered closed, taking it as an act of permission to kiss him again but this time with more intent.

Neji’s lips were stiff at first, uncertain of what to do, but enough gentle prodding and as much passion as her restraint allowed, caused him to reciprocate ever so slightly. The arms wrapped around his neck tightened their grip to pull him closer while Sena started to deepen the kiss, feeling his clumsy yet determined movements following her lead. She felt his hands brush against her sides with every movement still hanging by his sides like he wasn’t sure what to do with them. The kunoichi, reluctantly, unhooked her arms from his neck allowing them to slide down his chest to capture his arms in her grasp, not once breaking the kiss. There she tugged them, pulling them upward, so they sat on her waist, with a bit of hesitation on his part before her hands trailed back up, seeking their former refuge around his neck.

There the kiss broke, but their faces remained together, lips ghosting, a hot breath fanning between them as they caught their breath. Neither of them dared break apart, taking this moment to solidify act, realising that they not only wanted each other but needed each other. It had been kissing, but it was also so much more than that. It was pouring every memory, every thought, every feeling they ever had for each other manifesting at once. Then it overflowed, as they searched for each other gently, patiently, knowing they would eventually find each other and inevitably meet like the land and the sea. And although, growing up in a world of shinobi, neither really knew what caring and tenderness were they discovered that they very much wanted to. Because even though they were different, there was joy and happiness in every kiss, every touch, and every moment because they had chosen each other.

Then they sought each other’s touch again, mouths enclosing together, their actions speaking the words they could not say. Neji moaned softly, opening his lips parted slightly when Sena’s pressed against then, the kiss slow and sweet. Gradually, he once again relaxed into the kiss, his arms hugging around Sena’s waist with an ever tightening grip. For what the Hyūga lacked in experience he made up for in being a quick learner, no longer hesitating and falling into a natural rhythm, giving and receiving like the ebb and flow.
Slowly, they broke the kiss, pulling their faces apart. Sena looked at him properly now, his face flushed but no longer in embarrassment, lips slightly plump almost looking a little swollen, but what she could not shake was the look in his eyes. No one had ever looked at her that way before and it caused a warmth to bloom within her.

‘I love you,’ Neji whispered, this time slower and more absolute.

‘I know,’ Sena replied, a smile spreading.

‘I’m sorry I didn’t tell you so—’ Sena placed a finger on his lips to stop him, shaking her head slightly.

‘You’re already forgiven.’ She leaned forward to press another chaste kiss to his lips, allowing their foreheads to push together. The kunoichi felt the cool metal of his hitai-ate against her skin, but she didn’t mind. The only thing that mattered was that they were there together.

There they stood in the garden, the sun setting slowly as they held each other, entirely embraced in a world of their own. For them, the outside world has ceased to exist and they took the time to search each other. And they did not hurry because they knew, despite all that had gone wrong in their lives they could take comfort in the fact they were bounded together by choice.

For them, it was the beginning and end of everything.

Chapter End Notes

Okay wooooow I really killed you on the slow burn there...40 chapters to kiss and confess ohhhh. Fear not this is not the last chapter, I have around 10ish more planned and if ya’ll are interested I also have a prequel outlined and ready to write as well as a mini sequel. I'm just super invested in this story and I love Neji :) Thanks for sticking with me for 40 chapters!
Leaping through the tree tops, Sena squinted to see the village in the distance. A smile spread across her lips as she turned her head back to face her partner.

‘We are almost there!’ She called, feeling the excitement build within.

‘Someone’s looking forward to getting home,’ Jiro called back, catching up and landing beside her.

They jumped down to the path below, Sena stretching her neck, tilting her head from side to side then back and forth. It had been awhile since she had a good nights sleep and she was itching to get home to a more comfortable bed without worrying about an important mission at all hours of the day.

‘I’m just glad to be out of that place,’ she said, letting slip a yawn. ‘Three days turned into two weeks real quick.’

Sena looked toward Konoha, seeing the small distance between them in the village surging excitement through her. They were finally home after a drawn out political ordeal they thought would never end, but she managed to pull them into a compromise. It also had meant she hadn’t seen Neji in just over two weeks and the kunoichi missed him terribly. Some months had passed since the two of them had finally confessed their true feelings and after the first few weeks, they found each other constantly on missions with little time to spend together. The time they did manage to have, however little, could not compare to any other. It was when the kunoichi was happiest, even if it was something as simple as going for a walk or having dinner.

‘I hate politics,’ Jiro said, bring her back to reality.

‘Which is why you are shinobi and not a diplomat,’ Sena said, starting to walk along the path with the shinobi beside her.

‘And exactly why you are both,’ he said, stretching lazily. ‘Man, I’m wrecked. It was nice to have a mission with you again though,’ the shinobi flashed her a smile. ‘It’s been what, almost three years since the last?’

‘Not quite that long, but yes, it’s nice,’ the kunoichi agreed. ‘Just like old times.’

It made her think of their old sensei along with the constant arguments she and Jiro used to have. It made her chuckle thinking back on it now, especially when her mind wandered to the Chūnin exams. She had been partnered with Kira in the first round and Jiro in the second, the only person to fight her teammate and it happened twice. Sena didn’t bring it up though; she knew Jiro was still
bitter about the whole thing even if years had passed on. It wasn’t long until they walked through the gates, bypassing Kotetsu and Izumo before entering the heart of the village. From there they went straight to the Hokage to report on the success of the mission and were granted a few days off should nothing of importance come up.

Walking down the steps of the tower, Jiro yawned stretching his arms wide passed his head before bringing them to rest behind him.

‘You want to get a bite to eat or something?’ Jiro asked. ‘I’m starving.’

‘Maybe tomorrow, for now, there’s somewhere I have to be,’ Sena said, shooting him an apologetic smile.

‘You mean someone you have to see, huh?’ She rolled her eyes at his attempt to tease.

‘Why don’t you go and do something constructive, like buy Kira dinner?’

‘She’s working the late shift today,’ he sighed before his eyes widened like he had gotten an idea. ‘I guess I could bring her dinner and surprise her?’ Sena nodded and watched as he hurried off after a rushed goodbye.

From there she continued walking, with one person in mind to see.

Upon reaching her destination, Sena felt her hand tingle as it reached for the door handle, turning it slowly to open. There was a surge of adrenaline pumping through her. Sena was finally going to see Neji after so long apart. Sure, two weeks didn’t sound like a lot, but when they only had a few days together at a time, it felt like a lifetime. How she ever spent months away from him at a time, she did not know but was sure she could never do that again.

Entering, Sena quietly shut the door behind her, took off her shoes and continued into the kitchen where she found Neji preparing dinner. He didn’t notice her at first which she took full advantage of, observing and admiring him from her position in the doorway. His hair was up in a messy bun, damp, his hitai-ate missing from his forehead; he had showered recently, the faint scent of his body wash, an earthy scent mixed with a touch of citrus, in the air. The kunoichi watched as he moved about, taking the fish he was cooking off the stove, and placing some vegetables onto a plate. She noticed a softness about him in times when people weren’t around, a sweet manner he adopted naturally when alone or in her presence. There were no hard expressions, no emotional walls put up, Neji was simply himself.

Sena let her pack fall to the ground and sighed in contentment, allowing the stress of the mission to lift off her shoulders while also making her presence known to the Hyūga. He looked up, a little startled at first before she watched his expression flood with relief instead of anxiety. Neji put down the plate he had been holding and wiped his hands on a cloth at her approach. Sena smiled lazily, finally able to indulge in his calming presence once again.

‘You’re here,’ Neji said, a small smile appearing in the corner of his mouth. ‘How long ago did you get back?’

‘I am,’ Sena said, wrapping her arms around his core. ‘I finished reporting in a few minutes ago.

‘You came straight here?’ He held a surprised tone, but she knew he was glad.

‘I did,’ Sena said leaning in for a kiss, which he responded to immediately. ‘And I missed you,’ she murmured against his lips. That was all it took for the kiss to deepen and Neji’s grip on her waist to tighten.
Just like that, despite being apart for weeks, they fell into a natural rhythm as though they had never left each other at all. But that is how it always was with them, flowing together in perfect sync to the point it didn’t matter how long they were apart. Although they desperately wanted to stay together always, it wasn’t the life they had chosen so instead they embraced the small moments as they came and accepted when they didn’t. Still, Sena couldn’t deny how her need for Neji, to be close to him, grew every day along with her love.

They pulled apart, and she stared into his half-lidded eyes, the eyes of a Hyūga that never missed a thing. What she wouldn’t give to be able to say what was on the forefront of her mind right there and then, about how she couldn’t get him off her mind the entire time she was away. Neji, in the morning, when they met the officials from the other village. Neji and the gentleness of his touch while stationed in the guest house saturated in the afternoon sunlight, reading over the mission scroll. Neji, first and foremost. Him, always. But for some reason, her thoughts expressed themselves through actions. Instead, something more carnal bubbled within her, with one need; him.

Taking Neji by the hand, Sena led him away from the kitchen and to his bed where she gently pushed him down, so he was seated on the mattress. He didn’t protest nor speak, but Sena saw the anticipation reflected in his eyes along with the fear. Not the fear of her but of the unknown, the unexplored territory she had so graciously eased him into without hurry or expectation. Tonight was no different, but there was a fire burning in her to be touched, even if it was just him simply holding her.

There the kunoichi stood before Neji, between his spread legs, hands cupping and caressing his face so that he was looking at her. She noticed the shiver that ran through him as well as the way his eyes fluttered when her fingertips glided across his cheeks. As Sena looked down at him she realised her heart had never felt this full, the feeling was overwhelming, but she didn’t shake it away. Instead, she leaned forward pressing a soft kiss to his forehead, centred where his curse mark sat. Sena heard his breath hitch, causing her to smile against his warm skin.

Sena wanted to grab him and never let go. The thought seeped its way into her mind, and she found herself staring at Neji and his balled fists against his thighs and how his eyes shone in the dim lighting; a sight she had missed. His brows furrowed together, an involuntary reflex, the background noise became just that, something inconsequential, something easily drowned out by the distance closed as Sena brought her lips to his cheek. Then she pulled away again. Neji pressed a kiss to her jaw, chaste like he was testing the waters. Everything moved fast after that. His kisses increased in speed and depth as they trailed along her jaw, up her cheek until finally reaching their most craved destination, her lips. The kunoichi reciprocated by cradling his jaw, gently, allowing him to move on his own accord, but it was not enough, plain to see, easy to feel in how the heat between them intensified, burning like a rekindled fire.

Her hands moved, gently caressing down his chest then back up again gripping his shoulders. Neji moaned into the kiss, parting his lips just enough to grant her tongue entrance, carefully moving at first, probing him to reciprocate. She could barely envisage them before this, when they were apart, effervescent and palpable as Neji caved like he always did when it came to her. Sena pushed him back a little, a tight grip on his shoulders as she nipped at Neji’s neck, her desire to wrap herself around him increasing. He trembled in response, curving forward into her touch, seemingly allowing for the sensations to overtake him, a hand reaching out to take hold of her waist.

Adrenalin began to course through her veins as she ran her tongue against his coaxing him to do the same, only with more dominance. Neji pulled away to breathe but only for a second before swiping his tongue along her lower lip then fumbled to get his hands underneath the hem of her shirt, touch warm against her cool skin. The kunoichi’s breath hitched at the sensation, pressing
closer to him, further into the kiss. There was an urgency in Neji’s movements, pulling her in, panting, lips slick from the kissing and fingers trembling underneath Sena’s shirt.

She pulled away slightly to observe him; his mouth red, plump like it was stung by bees and his cheeks were flushed along with the side of his neck. Sena paused her caresses to soak up every little detail because the person in front of her was the one she would gladly break her own heart for, to sacrifice herself for as she had done in the past several times. She would do anything for him, if it meant he would be safe and without suffering, even if it meant enduring her own. And she couldn’t believe that they were here now together, bonded deeper than they ever were before.

Her hands rubbed up and down his sides, before planting them onto his shoulders and lifting herself from the bed, draping a leg either side of his so she was straddling him. Neji gasped upon impact, his eyes reflected question and uncertainty, but Sena smiled, hands sliding around his neck and pulled him in for another heated kiss. He was hesitant at first, but they quickly fell into a rhythm again, his hands taking refuge in the small of her back. Sena smiled into the kiss; it was the first time she had made such a bold move in their make out sessions, wanting to take it slow and ease him in. They had been caught in many heated kisses before that usually ended with Neji breaking away in a fluster or suggesting they stopped. She did every time, perfectly fine with going at his preferred pace, but she also knew he wouldn’t make any furthering moves, so she took it upon herself to test the boundaries.

Their kiss became feverish, their caresses became grabs, and their bodies began to rock together. This time Neji was the one running his tongue across Sena’s lips, prying them open before seeking hers out. Sena took this as a concession to continue, wrapping a leg keenly around his waist so that they are even closer than before. She was so caught up with his leading actions she didn’t notice his hands move from her back to her hips, pushing her body further down against him. That was all it took for the kunoichi to take another step further, pushing him down, so his back hit the mattress, her body entangling around him, trying to close what little distance they had.

There they were caught in a tangled embrace, arms and legs wrapped tight around each other while their mouths sought out the other. Lips crashed together, hot and heavy, moans and breaths filling the silence of the room. As the kiss became more heated their teeth knocked together, lips moving messy against each other. Caught in the moment Sena’s hips rocked forward of their own volition, brushing against his crotch, feeling the subtle bulge buried beneath the fabric. When Neji didn’t stop kissing her, Sena decidedly rolled her hips forward, this time with more precision and force, eliciting a deep groan from him. He still didn’t shift away, but his hold on her tightened, fingertips digging into her flesh, coaxing her to continue. The kunoichi thrust her hips forward, again and again, feeling all too well the reaction of her actions as he hardened against her very quickly.

It was then Neji decidedly stopped kissing her, grip on her waist painfully tight, silently telling her to stop. Sena halted her motions immediately, opening her eyes to see his eyes wide and cheeks flushed with more than just arousal. Slowly, as not to startle him, she unhooked her legs from his waist, pulling her body away while her hands sought his face. He flinched at her touch; her fingertips gently caressing his inflamed cheeks, feeling the warm puffs of air on her face from his ragged breathing.

‘It’s alright—’

Without warning, Neji broke away with a violent jerk, pushing himself up to the end of the bed. Sena followed, reaching to place her hand on his shoulder but before she could, he stood up.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said, coming out in a choked whisper before hurrying off and away to the bathroom. When the door shut behind him, Sena felt a wave of guilt overcome her. She hadn’t meant to startle
him, let alone send him running. The kunoichi clutched her chest, fingertip digging into the fabric as an all-consuming loneliness shook her to the core. She should have stopped or at the very least not taken that extra step further. It was there her mind began to wander to the worst, wondering if perhaps her prior experience with others was the root to his reluctance. It had been something she had wanted to ask him for awhile, but could never muster the courage to do so, even now.

Instead of letting her thoughts consume her, the kunoichi shook them away, stood up and returned to the kitchen to finish preparing dinner.

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In all his haste, Neji fumbled with the bathroom door handle, making sure to lock it behind him. From there he moved to the sink, quickly turning on the taps to drown out the rest of the world along with his spiralling thoughts. Clutching hold of the basin in front of him, he tried to control his uneven breathing, as well as willing away the other problem he had. Neji looked up, hands gripping even tighter, to see the horrified expression on his face—looking terribly flushed and dishevelled. He closed his eyes and groaned, mentally scolding himself for handling the situation so poorly.

What Sena must think of him now….

Neji leaned forward, gathering some of the running water in his hands and splashed his face, attempting to cool himself off. His skin felt like it was on fire, burning everywhere from the tender touch of his lover, making each inch of his flesh all the more sensitive. Everything the kunoichi did had made him feel good, more than, and there was nothing more he wanted to do than go back in there and finish what they started but he couldn’t. The whole situation was overwhelming and moving so quickly. Slowly, his heart rate came back to a steady pace, his breathing evened out, and he focused all of his mental energy into willing away his very hard, very obvious erection. When it didn’t work right away, he splashed his face with cold water again.

Neji had resigned himself to the fact the certain touch was a one off thing only, even if he couldn’t quite convince himself that he would stop if Sena did it again. He realised it was silly brushing it off like that especially when he already wanted it again. The truth was he knew Sena loved him, truly, but there was a subtle voice in the back of his mind that would pick apart that fact, often resulting in scenarios where she left him, of her realising somehow that she was mistaken and didn’t want to be with him anymore. It was ridiculous, he knew, but he couldn’t shake the feeling. And the idea of taking that step further in their relationship, completely giving themselves to each other only made that thought all the more terrifying.

The tightness in his chest increased with the rhythmic movement of his lungs when he tried to pick apart the situation and their relationship. His old ways of bitterness kept trying to creep back into his life no matter how hard he pushed it away. As though in the space behind his sternum all this darkness he collected with past actions and emotions, spread inside of him, like a sickness. As if it would somehow eventually spread to Sena too. When he observed the kunoichi, he wondered if it hadn’t already overtaken her too. Neji was afraid to touch Sena so intimately because if he did it could somehow open her eyes and taint her, cause her to regret the choice to be with him. And it was a choice, that was the hardest fact to comprehend because choice indicated the possibility of change—to leave. He had already taken so much, thrown countless opportunities away in the the past and now everything he had to give felt it would never amount to be enough. So he had acquiesced to allow Sena to touch him intimately with some reservation but this was different than
those other times. It was more this time.

He took a deep breath and bent over to lean on the sink again, the water still running, drowning out his surroundings. The thoughts that had clouded his mind for weeks, always prominent in her absence, pushed their way to the surface leaving him crippled. After all this time, all he had wanted was Sena, and now he had her he couldn’t quite accept it fully. He needed to talk to her, that much was clear; otherwise, he would never be able to get passed this. He would never be able to be with her properly.

The Hyūga shut off the taps and wiped his face down on a towel before unlocking the bathroom door. He pushed it open cautiously, taking a deep breath before he exited entirely, allowing the door to close behind him. His eyes searched the bed where the sheets had become tangled from their past intimate actions, causing a surge of panic to rise in Neji. Had she left?

Needing this question answered, he moved quickly from the bedroom to the kitchen where he let go a shaky breath. There she was, sitting at the counter finishing the dinner preparations he had begun for both of them. A new wave of guilt crashed over him as he looked at Sena in awe. Upon noticing his entry she gave him a warm smile, placing a plate of food in front of him and a kiss on his cheek. Oh, how he didn’t deserve her…

Sena didn’t say anything, didn’t question him, accuse him, nothing just stood beside him and waited, like always. She was so patient and understanding it made him remember why he had fallen for her in the first place. It also made him realised that he needed to tell her everything he had been holding back.

‘I don't want to keep secrets anymore,’ Neji began, uncertain of where to start. ‘I need to tell you something.’

‘You can tell me anything,’ Sena whispered her hand out of habit placing itself on his.

‘You are…’ His frown became more intense. ‘There was a time where I tried to hate you…No, it was not a want of hate it was…I didn’t want to think of you at all to the point I tried to forget everything that you were to me. I wanted to bury every happy memory I had of you and focus on what I had to do, what I had to become. And when I came so close to forgetting about you completely, you managed to push your way back in so effortlessly.’ He let out a sigh and closed his eyes. ‘I wish I could have expressed what I felt then because maybe I could have stopped myself from doing such a horrible thing.’ He realised then her hand hadn’t left his once, even though what he was confessing his worst secret.

‘Neji…’ Sena trailed off, and he opened his eyes. Neji had expected to find shame, disappointment, anything that resembled how she should feel in her eyes but he didn’t see that at all. Instead, there was a fierce understanding and love, like always. It caused his breath to catch.

Neji concentrated on the smooth touch of her cool fingertips on his arm.

‘When you suddenly came back into my life, back when we were Genin I was confused. When I observed you then without any hesitation to be a friend to me I racked my brain to figure out why. I asked myself what it meant, as a person, as a shinobi for someone to be so selfless. At first, I paid it no mind, trying my best to ignore it until suddenly I was afraid… I was afraid of losing you. You understood me like no other, and I couldn’t figure out why until you showed me…’ He ran his fingertips over the cloth of her shirt, where that old scar sat.

Neji started to feel self-conscious of everything he had said, feeling as though he was rattling on. It was the first time since they had come together that he talked that much about how he felt in one
conversation. The fingers of his free hand clutched the bench.

‘I thought I’d been able to move on from all of this, to move beyond the person I used to be but I still feel the guilt…I don’t want to burden you with that. It’s why I couldn’t…’ His voice sounded too raw. He cleared his throat and dipped his head, averting his gaze.

‘Neji,’ Sena said, hand clutching his arm. ‘You are not the only one who made mistakes, especially when it comes to us.’ He looked up to meet her eyes. ‘We have both made bad decisions, lied and pushed each other away but that’s all stuff we have done in the past, not mistakes we should continue to make. You need to let go of this guilt. Your past doesn’t define who you are. It just helped you on the way to who you are now.’ She moved even closer, so their bodies almost pressed together. ‘What happened before…it doesn’t matter; there’s no hurry because I love you, regardless. And I am not going anywhere.’

There was much left unsaid, but it was undoubtedly there like the salt in the ocean, not entirely dissolved but there in the water. Neji felt himself relax, letting go a heavy breath he had been holding.

‘It’s getting late,’ Sena said, sitting down. ‘Let’s eat before I have to leave.’

He nodded, sitting beside her, taking a bite of his food. He was annoyed at himself for wasting so much time thinking when he should have been with her instead. They had been apart for too long, and now she was about to leave again. He missed her and didn’t want her to go, especially now he was feeling better about their situation. That’s when an idea crossed his mind.

‘You can spend the night here,’ Neji said, before quickly adding, ‘If you want to.’

The kunoichi shot him a surprised look which then turned into a radiant smile.

‘You want me to stay?’ The kunoichi bit her lip following the question like she was trying to hold back another smile.

Neji looked at her, expression as serious as when he offered and nodded. ‘I do,’ he said, not shying away from her gaze. He didn’t miss the shine in her eyes at his agreement, nor did he miss the way it made his heart skip a beat.

‘Alright.’ Sena went back to eating, smile still sprawled on her face between bites.

There they continued dinner, in silence at first before they went back into their natural pattern, asking each other what had transpired in their two-week separation. Sena told him what she could about the mission, although he suspected she had told him more than what she should have, their trust was strong. He told her about the short mission he had the first week and the regular duties he took on in the village in the second. He didn’t mention that he had been disappointed in finding she hadn’t returned back home when he did from the first mission but made it clear he had missed her the entire time. And so they returned to their normal flow.

After they finished and Sena came back from her shower, Neji felt like sinking back onto his knees and pushing her down onto the bed, continuing where they had left off before. He felt like sinking into Sena, melting as becoming one. It was an all-consuming feeling, beginning in his chest and moving until it spread to his fingertips and clamoured its way up his throat, leaving him breathless. Neji did not act on this feeling though; instead, he lifted the covers up for Sena, watching as she shifted closer to lie beside him.

They lied there, facing each other, his arm wrapped around her, while she caressed his face. The
concerned look on her face did not go unnoticed by Neji, who observed the way her brow creased and her eyes drifted away from his.

‘What is it?’ Neji asked, his hand absentmindedly running up and down her back.

‘Can I ask you something?’ She asked, brows furrowing further together.

‘Of course.’

‘Have you ever considered calling me Sen?’

Neji stopped to consider the question, wondering why she had something which appeared so trivial on her mind. Then the word triggered something, a memory of something she had written in the scroll. An excerpt about Deidara.

‘No,’ he said, watching her eyes flicker like she was waiting for more. ‘I would not want to lessen you to something. To me, you are Sena, whole and beautiful.’ Neji felt the blood rush to his cheeks, and he cleared his throat, surprising even himself with these words.

The reaction was worth it though, seeing her eyes light up as if he had just given her the greatest gift. He knew the question went deeper than she let on but he wasn’t sure to what, taking solace in the fact he had answered well enough to her satisfaction.

‘Can I ask you something else?’ Sena asked, pressing her lips together then adding, ‘Since we are being honest.’

He nodded, his hand continuing its movements across her back.

‘Does it ever worry you that…hm,’ she paused, closed her eyes and took a breath. ‘Does it bother you that I’ve been with other people?’

This caused Neji’s hand to stop and his eyes to widen. It was not a question he had expected her to ask nor that he even worried about but seeing the vulnerability etched on her face at that moment forced him to realise that perhaps he wasn’t the only one who had unnecessary doubts about their relationship. He kept a smile threatening to spread at bay, not wanting to stir her self-conscious state further.

‘No,’ he said, using his hand to pull her closer. ‘It doesn’t change anything for me.’

True, he wanted them to be able to discover such things together, to be each other’s only everything but he knew it didn’t really matter. Neji had decided a long time ago that all he wanted was Sena, for all that she was and that she had done, and where she was before, whom she was with, didn’t matter in the slightest. He would never reduce her to something as inconsequential as past lovers because the Hyūga knew the kunoichi would never love them the way she loved him. That was enough as much as it was everything.

‘Good.’ Sena leaned forward and gave him a chaste kiss.

When she began to retreat Neji planted his hand firmly against her back and pulled her forward for another kiss, this one a little deeper. They laid there for awhile kissing, slowly and deeply until eventually breaking away, keeping their arms wrapped around each other. And as they started to drift, Sena secured tightly in his arms, Neji realised how he would not mind falling asleep that way every night from then on.
Now we are on the home stretch of this fic with the final chapters close in sight let me know if there is anything you specifically want to see in this fic before it ends. Doesn't matter if it's small moment or big I'm happy to consider it. I've got a pretty good idea for the next chapters of what will come, with still a little bit of plot to go, diving into canon soon, but I'm still open to ideas. Thanks for reading this far x
Blood.

There was so much blood. Two kunai embedded in Tsutomu’s back with another in his chest as he hunched over, hand grasping the desk for stability. Tadao was already dead, a haunted expression left on his face, blood splashed down his chin. Sena stood above on the opening of the roof, watching, eyes wide.

‘I won’t…let you,’ Tsutomu winced, attempting to get words out, ‘I won’t let you hurt her or anyone else.’

Then came laughter, twisted, menacing, spine-chilling, laughter.

‘You can’t stop me,’ came a familiar voice.

Sena looked down to see her father standing there, eyes consumed by the darkness. She had to do something; she had to protect her family. Her father jumped toward Tsutomu, another kunai in hand and ready to strike.

‘Brother!’ The kunoichi called jumping down in front of him, standing like a shield.

‘No Sena, don’t!’ Tsutomu grabbed her arm and threw her aside just before impact.

The kunoichi hit the wall beside Tadao, the pool of blood next to him soaking her clothes. Looking up through half-lidded eyes, dazed from the impact she remembered her brother, looking up to see she was too late. The kunai had already pierced his chest.

‘Tsutomu!’ Sena screamed, crawling over to him. ‘Brother!’ She continued crying out for him, watching his lips move, speaking inaudibly. The image in front of her began to fade, but she continued to wail and kept trying to call for her brother. Even when the darkness took hold and she heard someone calling to her she ignored it and focused only on Tsutomu. The only thing that mattered was saving her brother.

Tsutomu.

The kunoichi felt someone grab hold of her wrists, but she thrashed about, pulling to get free.

She had to save him.

Her throat was constricted, dry like sandpaper scraping together as her voice began to strain. She was screaming.
‘Too late.’

‘Sena!’ Came an echoed voice.

Her eyes flashed open, vision white from the blinding light, her body still struggling. The hold on her wrists pinned above her head, the weight of someone pressed against her to stop wriggling about violently. The kunoichi shook her head from side to side, eyes burning.

‘Tsutomu.

Finally, her eyes focused and Sena took in her surroundings. The kunoichi stilled her body and silenced her screams when she saw familiar lavender eyes looking down at her.

‘Sena,’ Neji whispered, his eyes wide and full of concern.

Sena couldn’t speak, couldn’t move, paralysed by the images of the dream and the realisation of what she had done. The only thing she could do was panic, her breathing rapid, her body trembling. What was happening to her?

The grip on her wrists loosened, she was vaguely aware of his hands shifting and body repositioning. Her eyes began to lose focus, her vision blurring as the thoughts of Tsutomu began to swarm her mind chanting *it was your fault* on a loop

‘Sena,’ Neji said, attempting to get her attention. ‘Sena!’ He said, this time his tone harsh, his hand cupping her chin as if to coax her gaze back to his. But she could barely hear him; his voice had become white noise, an indistinguishable buzz in the background of her thoughts.

‘Tsutomu was dead. It was because of her.

‘Look at me!’ Neji’s voiced finally managed to pull her from her mind. Her eyes caught his again.

‘Neji,’ she whispered, her voice hoarse. The kunoichi saw him relax a little, letting out a sigh as his hand caressed her cheek, fingers gliding gently. Their path flowed upward, and it was then she realised she had been crying, heavily enough to cover her cheeks in tears. Her breathing began to slow down, returning to a normalised pace and her mind cleared.

Sena reached her hand up for the one that cupped her cheek and squeezed. Neji didn’t say anything, but she saw the questions reflected in his eyes. The worry she had caused him seemed almost painful, etched upon his face creating a new sense of guilt within her.

‘Sorry,’ she whispered. ‘I was…’

‘Having a nightmare,’ Neji finished. The kunoichi nodded, her eyes closing for a moment as she took a deep breath. Nightmares plagued her often but this was something far beyond the others, this was absolute torment. What’s more, it felt so real.

‘Do you…’ Neji trailed off, before shutting his eyes seemingly frustrated before sighing. When he opened them again, he simply looked at her, helplessly. Then he leaned forward, pressing a soft kiss to her forehead before pushing himself up, climbing off the bed and out of the room.

Sena didn’t move from her position, her body still surging with adrenaline and her active mind jumping from thought to thought. The dream had not been something she had seen before. When she had nightmares about what had happened the night of the fire, the night her father…there was always the same sequence of events. Every time she jumped into the study, her brothers were already dead, and her father was waiting. It was even how she remembered the event unfolding.
But this wasn’t like that. The nightmare showed Tsutomu still alive and she couldn’t figure out why.

Perhaps it was her subconscious concocting up cruel new ways of punishing her for everything she had done. Still, Sena could not deny how real it had seemed.

Neji returned, a glass of water in hand, sitting down next to her on the bed.

‘Drink,’ he instructed handing it to her. Sena sat upright and did as instructed, taking the glass from him, a few intent sips before placing it on the bedside table. She wiped her lips with the back of her hand before meeting his eyes again.

‘Thank you,’ the kunoichi whispered. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘You don’t have to apologise for things beyond your control.’

‘But I do have control of my actions,’ she said, ‘And of who has to deal with them.’ At that moment Sena felt like she did not exist. She was a double. An imitation of the real Sena left behind long ago. She did not have a name. She was nobody.

‘Don’t,’ Neji said, firm and absolute, causing her eyes to widen. ‘I’m not going anywhere.’

‘But I’m—’ She was cut off by his finger against her lips. The Hyūga brought his face closer to hers, removing his finger as it glided over her cheek. It never failed to surprise her how gentle and soft he could be when they were alone together after putting on such a tough exterior.

‘Please,’ Neji whispered, breath fanning over her lips, ‘Please, stop.’ There was something in his voice that resembled fear, a feeling neither of them like displaying but let slip together right there and then.

The kunoichi sighed, her own hands finding his arms then softly gliding upward until they reached his neck. There her fingers cradled his face, thumbs following circular motions on his cheeks. She could feel him relax, pulling away slightly so they could see each other properly. They sat quietly, limbs mixed with the creased sheets in the wide bed, simply looking at each other. The occasional rustle of cloth was heard as their hands sought each other to get a comforting touch, but their eyes never broke contact.

‘I dreamed of that night at the compound, years ago,’ Sena said, breaking the silence. Neji nodded, knowing which night she referred to.

‘Tsutomu,’ he said. ‘You were screaming his name.’ It was Sena’s turn to nod.

‘I’ve dreamed of that night many times, but this was the first time…’ She hesitated, ‘It panned out differently. But it doesn’t matter; it was only a dream.’ She shook her head, attempting to rid herself of the troubling thoughts. ‘I screamed out his name, huh?’

‘Yes,’ Neji said.

‘Ironic,’ Sena said, smiling. ‘When I was younger I would call out to him whenever I had a nightmare. Now I have them about him.’ She let out a small laugh, attempting to lighten the mood but Neji just raised his brows.

Sena sighed, wishing she never had that nightmare. Neji leaned closer with firm intention, but then suddenly stopped. Sena gazed up at him in expectation, holding her breath, waiting for him to continue. However, the kiss was redirected from her lips to her forehead, lingering there for but a
‘It’s late,’ The Hyūga said, ‘you should try and get some more sleep.’ He went to move, but Sena enclosed her fingers around his wrist to keep him there. The guilt that had revealed itself inside her earlier began to grow.

‘Neji,’ her voice stuck in her throat causing her hand to raise to her neck. He continued to measure her with his eyes, still full of worry but also affection. ‘That day when you told me how you felt you said that I was the one who kept you in the light. Such an act is something I always intended to continue, but now I’m surrounded by my own darkness. And you bound yourself to me only for it to become a cruel condemnation I—’

Neji interrupted her with a kiss, a caress and an embrace.

‘Sena,’ he murmured against her cheek.

‘Yes?’ She replied.

‘We should try and get some sleep.’ Sena nodded, feeling her skin graze against his, warming her both body and soul.

The kunoichi laid down again, with the Hyūga following suit next to her. She nestled in closer, turning so that her back was pressed against Neji’s front in a spooning position with him, and she smiled weakly, feeling a strong arm draped over her waist, pulling her in with a tightening grip. Neji buried his face the wild mess that was her hair, likewise breathing in her scent, and Sena wondered whether he found the position as comforting as she did. They had both confessed more than she had thought possible the past two days, resembling, almost, the magnitude of his initial confession months before.

‘Sena,’ he whispered against her ear, his grip tightening. ‘I love you and will continue to no matter what. And if you think that means condemnation then so be it I am condemned.’ He paused, his breathing tickling her cheek. ‘As I see it the only way I am such a thing is if I am without you.’

Just like that Sena felt like she existed again. No longer nameless, no longer a double or an imitation. She was where she was supposed to be. And even though the darkness that tormented her would not disappear so easily, for now, she felt content with Neji at her side. With that she allowed herself to relax and drift to sleep.

— — —

Hours later, the sun barely risen, Neji awoke with his face half-buried into the pillow and Sena’s hair. He took in the alluring scent, sighing softly as he pressed his body closer to the kunoichi, his arm still tightly wrapped around her waist. In turn, the Hyūga felt her wriggle, pushing back against him, causing him to smile. It was then he was aware of the knocking at the door.

Neji groaned, carefully loosening his grip on Sena and pulling his body away reluctantly. He smiled when he saw the kunoichi moan and shift at the loss of warmth, but as much as he wanted to return to the position, he settled for leaning down and planting a gentle kiss on her cheek. Then he tore himself away and headed toward the continued knocking against the front door.

When he opened it he found a messenger waiting to inform him he needed to report in for a
mission. Neji nodded, closing the door and returning to his bedroom where Sena still laid, her eyes opened, half-lidded, and a pout on her lips.

‘Who was it?’ Sena asked, her voice soft and sleepy.

‘I have another mission,’ Neji replied, sitting beside her. ‘I have to report in, in an hour.’

‘Good,’ Sena said, blindly reaching for him with her hand. ‘That means you have time.’

‘Time for what?’ He asked, amused at seeing her in such a state. Her hand finally found his thigh, clutching the fabric of his pants.

‘Time to lie here with me.’ She pulled the fabric, coaxing him to lie back down beside her.

‘I have to start getting ready.’ His words were firm, but his body acted on its own, climbing back into bed with her assuming their previous position with his arm wrapped around her.

‘It takes fifteen minutes at most to get there.’ Sena’s voice was muffled slightly by the pillow. ‘That gives you thirty minutes to stay here with me and another fifteen to get ready.’

‘What if your math is wrong?’ Sena turned in his arms to face him, her eyes narrowed.

‘When has it ever been wrong?’ Neji didn’t reply. Instead, he smiled and moved his face closer. He felt her stir in his arms before an arm snuck under his, allowing them to overlap as she wrapped it around his core, so they were both holding each other. At the same time, Sena pushed one of her legs in-between his, their lower halves dangerously close. It caused his breath to hitch at first until he finally relaxed into the position, reminding himself how much he wanted to just hold her like this. Now that Neji had cleared up his own feelings the day before, he felt more at ease with her proximity.

The events that had transpired in the earlier hours of the morning troubled him, but instead of voicing these thoughts he merely observed her. Sena did not seem shaken as she was before when she had awoken from the nightmare. In comparison, she was the complete opposite now, and as he observed the kunoichi, he noticed the way her eyes flickered, full of warmth and curiosity, not weighed down as they had once been. She seemed relaxed, lighter, genuine and it was not a masked facade for his sake. He decided to let the night go for now but worried about separating from her and taking on this mission.

— — —

Once it came time for Neji to report in, Sena returned to her own home, running into her uncle on the way in. Kyou stood in the garden, watching her approach with arms folded and a smirk on his face. The kunoichi gave him a small wave.

‘I heard you got back yesterday. I have to admit I didn’t expect you back here this early.’ Kyou said, causing Sena to shoot him a look. ‘Now as the adult, I feel I should be setting some sort of rules in place or something.’ His tone was unforgivingly mocking.

‘Hm. So I am fit enough to lead and kill, but the world will come crashing down if I spend the night somewhere else?’ Sena folded her arms, prodding her uncle to continue the sarcastic conversation.
‘Fair point,’ he turned toward the house. ‘Come, I need to show you something.’

Sena followed her uncle into the house and to the study. There was an unusually spry air around her uncle that made her think he was up to something. True, he usually was a lively person fuelled by sarcasm at others expense, but since the incident, with her father, the positive aura had wavered. When Kyou opened the door and reached the desk, he bowed toward the main chair.

‘My lady,’ Kyou said, a smirk on his face once again. Sena just sighed and took a seat.

‘You are such a child,’ she said, leaning forward onto her elbows. There was a newfound trust between them now, but the kunoichi knew better than to let him play mind games. It was no wonder he was skilled at Genjutsu.

‘And you sound like my mother,’ he said, retrieving something from his pouch.

‘Then we both have fallen into roles we should not have.’ Sena watched him closely.

‘Hm,’ Kyou placed an item on the desk in front of her. ‘You have too much of your parents in you to be a child.’ He didn’t wait for a reply instead gesturing toward the item.

Sena looked down to find a pendant attached to a chain placed before her. Her brows raised, looking from her uncle to the necklace, questioning him silently. ‘Well?’ She finally asked.

‘This is what we found on Osamu that night, and I thought it was worthwhile for you to see it.’ His smirk faded, instead replaced with a serious expression causing the air around the to change. It was always the way whenever either of them mentioned that night and what they both did.

The kunoichi reached for the pendant, taking it carefully in her grasp. With one hand she held the chain while the other gently ran its fingertips over the circular piece of metal hanging from it. One side was smooth, like a blank canvas while the other had some engraving on it. Slowly, she turned the pendant to see the engraving. It was the clan symbol, a circle with a bolt of lightning down the centre. The mark of a Matsura.

Taking a moment to observe it, suddenly the item triggered a memory. Sena's eyes widened as she looked up at Kyou.

‘This was my mothers.’ Sena said. ‘It used to bear the Uchiha clan symbol as well as the Mastura, what happened to it?’

‘I don’t know, it was like that when I found it,’ Kyou replied. The kunoichi recalled the story her mother had told her.

‘It was a gift from her parents.’ Sena paused to observe the pendant again. ‘Then when my father asked her to marry him she got the Matsura symbol engraved.’ Her mother had told her that it was supposed to represent her identity for both clans, even though one had forsaken her. Sena brought the chain up toward her and clipped it around her neck, savouring the token of both her mother and father. A frown spread across her brow.

‘Why didn’t you give this to me sooner?’ Sena asked. ‘It has been months.’

‘I was waiting for the opportune moment.’ This caused the kunoichi to raise her brows. ‘You weren’t exactly in the best frame of mind following the event, and I didn’t want to tip the scales against your healing.’ He elaborated, but Sena could tell it was more. Perhaps it was just as painful for him to think about early on.
‘Thank you.’ Sena said, letting her mind wander to her father once again. ‘Something has been bothering me.’

‘What’s that?’ Kyou asked.

‘This blade,’ The kunoichi reached down to the sword sitting beside her, the one her father had taken. ‘When I was searching for my father in my time with the Akatsuki, we came across an empty stand for a blade such as this, and the inscription claimed it was the Amaterasu blade. There was a legend attached, about a lady with the same name.’

‘Is that so?’

‘Yes. It’s the same name as a technique of the Sharingan.’

‘I suspect a question is coming.’

‘Hm. Why would they have the same name? Do you think this chokutō is linked to the Uchiha somehow?’

‘It’s possible.’ Kyou leaned back in his seat to consider this. ‘More likely, however, is both names trace back to the legend. There was a time where many believed in a goddess with the same name.’

‘So do you think the legend is true?’

‘Well, all legends are based on some truth, but you have to take it with a grain of salt. Just because names and certain points are correct doesn’t mean the entirety of it is. I wouldn’t worry too much about it.’

‘I guess you are right.’ Sena leaned back in her seat thinking about her family. Her mother had been an Uchiha, techniques and all and Tsutomu had inherited it all. But the only thing she had inherited from her mother other than her looks was her stubborn will. Sena did not possess the visual prowess.

‘What else is troubling you?’ Kyou asked with an all-knowing expression.

‘The night of the fire,’ Sena began. ‘I’m starting to think something different happened.’

‘What do you mean?’ Her uncle asked leaning forward.

There was a knock at the door and Saio entered.

‘The Hokage has summoned you,’ Saio replied. ‘You are to report in immediately.’

— — —

‘You want me to put a team together?’ Sena asked, standing before Tsunade and Shizune in the Hokage’s office.

‘Yes,’ Tsunade replied, ‘A specialised team that you will lead.’
‘Are you sure that’s a good idea?’ Sena asked, uncertainty getting the better of her. ‘It’s not that I don’t wish to complete this assignment, it’s just given everything that has happened—’

‘You have proven yourself to be a skilled kunoichi who has a knack for gaining intel.’ It seemed Tsunade had made up her mind on the decision. ‘With the threat of the Akatsuki growing each day I need people like you to have us prepared as possible.’ Tsunade paused, exchanging a glance with Shizune. ‘Especially with Naruto returning to the village.’ This caught Sena’s attention, he eyes widening ever to slightly.

‘I understand milady,’ Sena gave a swift nod. The Hokage grabbed a pile of files from the desk and held them toward the kunoichi. She stepped forward and took them, glancing through to find personnel files of several shinobi.

‘These are the list of candidates I have recommended for this task.’ Tsunade held out another piece of paper. ‘This is the report to fill out when you have decided.’

Sena looked down at the files in her hand. Was she to find and lead a new team just like that? It would take time for training and should she make the wrong decision their formation could fail, hindering the needed results.

‘I have a request.’ Sena said, looking back toward Tsunade. ‘I will form a team, but for the missions to work I will need people I have worked with before along with a particular set of skills.’

‘Who did you have in mind?’

‘Jiro Nakayama and Kira Kato.’

‘Your old team?’

‘Yes milady. Kira is a medical-nin which will be necessary for the risks that follow gathering intel on the Akatsuki and neighbouring nations. She also has precise chakra control heightening her Taijutsu abilities in close combat as well as minor Genjutsu abilities. Jiro, on the other hand, can fit easily from mid to long range fighting with his water style and weapons handling and his Taijutsu isn’t half bad when needed either.’

‘So it will be a three-man squad.’ Tsunade took a moment to consider this. ‘Kira Kato is currently not taking on missions and is stationed at the hospital as per her request.’

‘When we were Genin,’ Sena began, ‘Kira lacked the drive and confidence in battle because she was more worried about saving people. What she didn’t comprehend was that the shinobi world in which live they are one in the same. I’m confident that her time serving the medical core has made her realise that.’

‘I see.’ Tsunade took back the personnel files. ‘The shinobi from your time at the academy have been put together and named after the team captain. Team Guy is an example of that.’

‘I think Team Hitomi has a better ring to it than Team Sena,’ the kunoichi admitted.

‘Very well, you are to notify them of this decision and begin training until I have a mission available. The three of you from here on out will be known as Team Hitomi.’

‘Understood,’ Sena said, bowing before taking her leave. It was time to reunite her team.

Chapter End Notes
*clears throat* so remember when I said there was only going to be a few chapters left and this was the home stretch? Well oops I spent my time off sick re-watching Naruto and came up with a whole new set of chapters to have a more satisfying end game. So THIS FIC LIVES ON! #doingitforNeji
Echo

Chapter Summary

The return of some and the assignments of the others.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sena knocked impatiently on the window from the balcony waiting for a response. She stopped when she finally heard a grumble, and the curtains violently pulled open to reveal a very unimpressed, half dressed Jiro. The shinobi shot her a deadly look, but she merely smiled and feigned innocence with a wave. This only seemed to annoy him further as he slid open the door with a sharp squeak and huffed.

‘You better have a good reason for waking me up this early!’ Jiro snapped.

‘It’s noon,’ Sena replied, brows raised. The shinobi’s expression did not falter appearing annoyed as ever, and his scowl became more unforgiving. ‘I have a new assignment to discuss with you, get dressed and hurry up.’ The only reply she got was a grumble as he retreated into the room. Sena began to wonder whether or not she had made the right decision, choosing him for her team but then remembered how much he had changed since their Genin days and pushed the uncertainties aside. She only hoped that having him there would be enough to convince Kira.

After a few moments of shuffling around Jiro called out. ‘Why are you here now anyway I thought you would be spending your day off elsewhere? More specifically with someone. Can’t we just discuss this assignment later?’

‘No. Besides we aren’t the only ones with a new mission,’ Sena said.

‘Ah, I see, so the honeymoon was broken up once again by missions. Speaking of, this better be a serious assignment and not some stupid plan to get me to do something for you!’ He yelled, followed by a bump and a groan.

‘Don’t hurt yourself.’ Sena smirked. ‘It is a real assignment, in fact, I think you’re going to like it.’ She leaned against the outside wall, closing her eyes and soaking up the warmth in the sunlight. There was something that made her feel all the more thankful for such a feeling since she had returned to the village. The repercussions of her infiltration mission were still prominent it seemed. Sena heard another loud thump. ‘What on earth are you doing in there?’

‘I’m ahh—damnit—I’m trying to put my shoes on,’ Jiro called out. ‘So are you going to tell me what the assignment is?’

‘I’m already regretting this decision,’ the kunoichi sighed pinching the bridge of her nose. ‘I’ll tell you on the way, just hurry up!’ With another soft thud, the shinobi finally emerged from the door, squinting in the sunlight. Sena observed him properly now, watching the way his brown hair stuck out in different directions and the heavy bags under his eyes, indicating one thing—a restless night; No wonder he had been sleeping in so late.
‘Come on, let’s go.’ Sena softened her tone a little, feeling guilty for her impatience.

There Sena jumped from the balcony down to the street and started walking with Jiro following. It was busy in the village that time of the day, and she knew it was going to take longer to get to the hospital than usual. The two continued walking along the path passing by the people and various stores, deeper into the village, keeping a fast pace.

‘Where are we going?’ Jiro asked hands shoved in his pockets, his eyes still glazed over in a sleepy state.

‘To the hospital.’ The statement caused him to stop and turn to face her.

‘Wait you don’t mean—’

‘Yes. We are paying Kira a visit.’ Sena continued walking, not bothering to wait for him to process. There would be time enough to explain later once they were both notified. They needed to get through this process quickly if they had any hope of becoming a well-trained team again.

‘Wait, hold on.’ The shinobi caught up with her again. ‘Are you going to tell me what’s going on or not?’ This time Sena was the one who stopped. She took a deep breath and turned to face him.

‘Lady Tsunade asked me to put a specialised team together,’ she began, ‘I chose you and also Kira; together we shall form Team Hitomi with myself as the leader.’

‘For what purpose exactly?’

‘We will have missions just like any other squad, but our primary goal is gathering intel on the Akatsuki and other threats to the village.’

‘What!?’ Jiro’s eyes widened. ‘You cannot be serious, after everything you did to get away from them they are just throwing you back into their grasp?’

‘The decision was mine,’ Sena began walking again. ‘Besides this isn’t infiltration, it is merely finding information.’ She turned back towards Jiro who was still stood frozen in his position and shot him a smile. ‘Now come, it’s your job to help me convince Kira, so get ready to utilise that charm of yours.’

Jiro sighed, his expression dropping. ‘I hate you,’ he said, finally moving to follow her.

———

Sena stood at the training grounds, taking refuge from the sun beneath the shade of the tree, leaning against the trunk as she waited. The others were due to arrive any minute, should they agree to her team proposal. Jiro had seemed to accept the assignment without much reservation, but Kira had reacted with doubt and uncertainty, exactly what the kunoichi had been expecting from her former teammate. Still, Sena held hope that Kira would come around eventually once she understood the responsibility they held by accepting such a task.

Jiro was always the type to jump into a situation head first and think later. It reminded Sena of her brother, Tadao, who was always a hot-headed competitor. The kunoichi wondered whether it served as the reason their bond formed so quickly even though the shinobi saw her first and
foremost as his rival. Much like her brother had. But even though Jiro had a history of such
behaviour, the kunoichi couldn’t deny how much he had grown, and how his skills had improved.
With their missions together she had been able to witness it first hand.

Their team dynamic had not always been synchronised and harmonious. In fact, in the beginning,
they did not work well as a team at all despite their efforts and bickered incessantly much to the
annoyance of their seasoned instructor. Hitomi had a knack for letting their arguments play out and
using them against them later in an attempt to make them understand the importance of teamwork.
However, it was the Chūnin exams which they undertook years ago that served as the first step to
changing their relationship. The forest of death allowed them to work together, though reluctantly,
to retrieve the necessary scrolls and make it to the checkpoint in time.

Then came the final battles. Out of the entirety of participating teams, Sena remained the only one
to have faced not one but both of her teammates in battle. To this day she still holds onto the
accusation that it was not randomised at all. In fact, a part of her suspected her sensei had a hand in
making it all come to pass. However, he denied it on the many occasions she asked. It didn’t make
her bitter though because it turned out to be exactly what her teammates needed to grow. Losing the
battle to Sena made Kira realise that she wanted to focus more on her medical ninjutsu abilities,
allowing her to grow and become a great medic.

The final round between Jiro and Sena was something altogether different. Their fight had enabled
them to not only understand each other but also understand themselves better. They had both given
it their all, and although Sena had won the match, they both gained something much more
important. They had created a bond that laid down the foundations of a meaningful friendship that
would serve great importance.

Sena couldn’t help but understand, after all these years, that they were placed together on team 5
for a good reason—they worked well together. It was as though whoever put them together knew
that they would move beyond all their bickering, differences and obstacles to form a deep bond that
only they could feel and understand. At least that was what the kunoichi hoped was the case. Still,
she held faith the others would decide to join her after giving them some time to think.

It was then Sena heard footsteps approaching from in front of her, sensing a familiar chakra. She
looked up to see Jiro and Kira walking toward her, slowly, almost cautiously. A smile found it’s
way to her face as she pushed herself off the tree trunk to meet them halfway. A wave of relief
overcame her, knowing she would not need to find a new team under such short notice now she had
her old team together.

‘Well?’ Sena asked, placing a hand on her hip. ‘Is it safe to assume you have accepted the
assignment since you are both here?’ She looked toward Jiro first, knowing that should Kira have
any uncertainties she would most likely look to him to lead her thoughts. Strange how close they
had become when they were both so different.

‘Yeah,’ Jiro hesitated, reaching to scratch the back of his neck. ‘Guess it means I’m all in.’ Sena let
out a deep breath, feeling part of the weight lift from her shoulders. Then she turned to Kira who
had an uncertain look in her eyes.

‘I um…’ Her eyes looked down then just as quickly looked back up. ‘Yeah, I guess I am
considering it.’ A small smile spread across her lips. ‘I mean who will save you two when you
inevitably get yourselves hurt?’

Sena returned her smile. ‘You mean when Jiro gets hurt?’ Jiro shot her a look.

‘Yes of course,’ Kira replied, causing Jiro’s expression to become more hurt, looking back and
forth between them.

‘Hey if this is how it’s going to be with you two then count me out!’ All three of them exchanged
glances before chuckling. And just like that, they were a team again, one that didn’t need much to
become a whole unit.

‘Alright boss,’ Jiro began arms folded. ‘What’s the game plan? I see you picked our old training
grounds.’

The kunoichi smiled, a sinister feeling overcoming her as she placed her other hand on her hip. ‘It’s
simple really; I want both of you to attack me.’ She looked up to find their confused expressions. ‘I
need to see what you’re made of and make sure I didn’t make the wrong selection.’ There the
kunoichi took a battle stance. ‘So come at me with everything you have got, no holding back from
anyone.’

‘You have no idea how long I have waited for this day,’ Jiro said, taking his position with a smirk.
Kira just sighed beside him and followed suit. ‘I am definitely going to regret agreeing to this.’

— — —

Two figures walked along the sand desert, side by side, cloaked in black adorning red clouds and
wearing straw hats. The ringing of bells echoed into the vast emptiness of the planes with each gust
of wind, picking up force the closer they came to their destination. The taller of the two turned to
other.

‘Sasori, how long until we reach our destination?’ He asked, voice deep and impatient. ‘I’m not
fond of this desert, hm.’

‘Deidara don’t be an impatient brat and keep moving.’ Sasori replied, continuing to make progress
at a leisurely pace. ‘We will be there in a few days.’

— — —

The three teammates spread across the open training ground, hunched over and breathing heavily,
each recovering from the physical exertion. Sena grabbed hold of a tree for stability, a smirk on her
face watching Jiro lying down, spread like a starfish on the grass while one hand clutched his
heaving chest. Kira was a little further away, leaning back against a boulder her arms limp by her
sides. Each member had given it their all and Sena couldn’t help but feel proud.

Pushing herself from the bark of the tree, she walked over, body swaying slightly with the
exhaustion taking over as she approached Jiro. Her breathing was beginning to steady, but her
heartbeat reverberated throughout her entire body, feeling light-headed as the endorphins pumped
through her. Truth be told, she had missed training with the others, especially when it forced her to
push beyond her limits.

‘Looks like I’m the last one standing,’ Sena said, looking down at Jiro. ‘I win.’
'Oh yeah?' Jiro grabbed her ankle and pulled, leaving her no time to react and causing her to fall on her back beside him. 'W-what about now?'

' Hmm,' the kunoichi chuckled trying not to choke on her breaths. 'I still won.' She turned her head to the side to face him. 'I will admit though, your skills with weapons have improved. Makes me think you have been training with Tenten.'

'Maybe I have. But not the type of training you and Neji have been doing, I’m sure.' Sena threw a weak punch at him which only caused him to laugh.

'You know I thought you would have dropped all that nonsense by now.' The kunoichi sighed. 'But back to the weapons, your skills still have room for improvement. Do you remember what Hitomi used to say to me when I was training with daggers?'

'You’re the golden child and please don’t kill Jiro?' He replied, words thick with sarcasm.

'I am serious.' She shot him an unamused look.

'Fine, no I don’t remember, please enlighten me.'

'Hopeless.' Sena muttered. 'He would say don’t think of the blade as an extension of you and instead think of you as an extension of it.'

'I never did understood his metaphorical bullshit,' he said rolling his eyes.

'Just trust me and think about that when you train, alright?' The kunoichi sighed. 'I am just trying to help you.'

'Yeah, yeah, I know.'

'Kira,' Sena said sitting up to look at her teammate. 'Your fighting has improved, but your stamina needs work. I want you and Jiro to train with each other every day to practice both your taijutsu and ninjutsu.' Kira nodded. 'And I also want us to train together every day with medical ninjutsu.'

'But I am already skilled in that area.' Kira cocked her brow.

'Exactly, which is why I need you to help teach me to hone my abilities. My skills are quite basic in comparison, and it would do well to have two shinobi in our squad with some healing abilities.'

'Right yes of course.'

'Alright, get up.' Sena directed pushing herself upright. 'Let’s do this again.'

'What!?' Jiro groaned.

— — —

Deidara moved across the sky on top of his clay bird, taking in the surroundings and surveying the Sand Village that lay below. Using his scope, he determined the number of enemies watching the skies and prepared his detention clay, releasing the small creatures upon them seeing as they scattered and launched themselves. A smirk came to his face watching as his art took on such an important role to capturing the Jinchūriki. His mission would be fulfilled with a bang.
As he released the detonation, he watched the sand shinobi fall one by one, taking pride in his work. All the thoughts of art caused his mind to wander to a certain raven haired kunoichi he had lost without a trace. Something that frustrated him greatly. After weeks of searching he had given up hope of finding her, and he had no choice but to assume she had died. And although it burdened his heart to do so, he accepted it for what it was and dedicated every ounce of himself to his art.

The kunoichi had been an explosion into his life, like his own personal art for the taking, he knew it from the very beginning. Her presence had radiated something fierce that caused him to fall hard, and he doubted he would ever have that feeling with another again. Nothing would prove to be as intense as the feelings Sena had given him. And although she was gone, Deidara dedicated every moment he lived to her. Every new creation was inspired by the memory of her, every explosion dedicated to her, and every spare moment he thought of her. The blond may have joined the Akatsuki on a whim, but it had brought him something better than he could ever have imagined.

The blond jumped from his clay bird on top of the main building. ‘Infiltration successful,’ he murmured to himself. There he looked up to find someone standing before him. ‘Hm?’ The man had red hair, a sand gourd and the kanji symbol for love on his forehead. It was the Jinchūriki target in question, Gaara.

‘That’s as far as you go,’ Gaara said, arms crossed.

‘Oh?’ A smirk came to Deidara’s face at the realisation he would be able to have some fun after all. He knew Sasori would not approve of such an exploding display, but he didn't have many other options now.

*Just you watch Sen; this one's for you*, Deidara thought as he readied himself to attack.

— — —

‘Kira attack!’ Sena called from the sidelines, observing the match between her and Jiro. They had made a routine of practising every morning and evening now, and the kunoichi was determined to improve their skills. ‘Now dodge, block, don't give him the upper hand and keep your guard up!’ She watched as Kira thrust a kunai at Jiro almost hitting him in the chest. ‘Yes, that was good! A little steadier on your grip though.’

Taking a step back as the two came closer Sena continued to observe her teammates. In the few days which had passed, she was confident in their strengths and abilities, but she would not allow them the opportunity to make mistakes, so she trained them harder than ever before. The kunoichi refused to let anyone else die at the hands of an enemy so she decided she would make sure both of them would be able to defend themselves should she not be there to assist them. On top of that, the foes they would be hunting were no ordinary criminals; they were the Akatsuki.

Kira lunged forward again kunai in hand ready to strike at small opening Jiro had left. Sena watched keenly wondering who would be bested in the scenario. Then as Kira pushed forward, at the last second Jiro grabbed hold of her wrist and flipped her onto her back. Sena sighed, however, she was still proud of her teammates.

‘That was better,’ the kunoichi said trying her best to keep her tone positive. She could not hide the worry from herself, however. There would be no telling how either of them would react in battle. ‘Again.’ Jiro reached out a hand to help his teammate up before they both took their stances.
‘Sena,’ came a voice from behind her. The kunoichi turned away from her sparring teammates to find a familiar face.

‘Shikamaru,’ the kunoichi began, ‘what is it?’

‘The Hokage needs to see us, now.’ He sighed. ‘It’s a drag I know, but it can’t be helped.’

‘Hm, very well.’ Sena turned back to her team. ‘I have to report in but keep training and Kira, when I get back I want to see you put Jiro on his backside.’ Kira, her shot her a cunning smile and nodded before the kunoichi turned away to join Shikamaru.

Together the two left the training grounds and headed toward the mission assignment office.

‘Do you know what this is about?’ Sena asked, seeing the tower in sight. ‘I was only just given a new assignment after all.’

‘I’m honestly not sure, but there was talk of us coming up with various strategies against a certain criminal organisation.’

‘Strategies? It was juvenile of me to think I’d be able to move on from all this so easily.’

‘Yeah, you do have the most experience first hand with them, but it could be something else altogether,’ he paused for a moment. ‘Naruto returned to the village yesterday.’

‘What!’? Sena turned to him with a stunned expression. ‘Naruto’s back? Wow, that came around so quickly.’ Then it dawned on the kunoichi what the weight of that information. ‘Wait that means…’

‘Yeah, they will be making their move soon.’

‘Damnit.’

‘Let’s just find out what we have been summoned for and go from there.’

Sena nodded, and the two continued, reaching the door of the assignment room when suddenly a woman from behind them rushed by exclaiming something about an emergency. Shikamaru and Sena exchanged glances before proceeding toward the half-opened door. When they entered they saw Kakashi, Sakura and Naruto already there stood before the Hokage and other instructors. Upon entrance, the five shinobi exchanged nods and silent acknowledgements when Iruka and Shizune expressed shocked remarks.

‘What is it what has happened?’ Naruto asked.

‘The Kazekage of the Hidden Sand, it seems he has been taken prisoner by the Akatsuki,’ Tsunade said.

‘Ah, you mean Gaara?’ Naruto said, frustration rising in his voice. ‘So they’re back again.’

‘We’ve been studying them,’ Tsunade began, ‘we know more about the Akatsuki than any other village. Therefore the Sand Village has officially requested our help.’

‘You’re not suggesting that—’ Shizune was cut off by Tsunade.

‘Sena, how has your squad progressed so far?’ Tsunade asked.

‘They are coming together well,’ Sena began, ‘but I think this situation calls for me to be blunt. They are not ready to take on a task such as this right away.’
‘I see then that means I have no choice.’

‘You’re not suggesting that team Kakashi?’ Shizune objected.

‘This is urgent.’ Tsunade sighed. ‘I haven’t time to form another squad, and besides, we have someone here who has actually fought the Akatsuki and another who has infiltrated them.’

Sena felt all eyes suddenly fall onto her following Tsunade’s remark. It wasn’t common knowledge that she had infiltrated the Akatsuki, but now that it would make her useful in this situation, secrecy it seemed did not matter. The kunoichi did not change her expression and kept her focus on the Hokage.

‘Yes but, even so,’ Shizune attempted to object again.

‘Alright, Team Kakashi I am assigning you a new mission. You are to go to the Sand Village at once, find out what is going on there and keep us informed. You are to remain there and follow their orders, giving them any backup they need.’ Tsunade turned back to the kunoichi. ‘Sena, for this mission you will be assigned to Team Kakashi, your knowledge and experience will be crucial.’

‘Understood, milady.’

Chapter End Notes

Ha can you guess what's coming? Look who is back huh ;)


The Race

Chapter Summary

The mission development and the race to get to Suna.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Team Kakashi, along with Sena, set out immediately toward the Sand Village at a steady pace, despite Naruto’s push to get ahead. It was the first time Sena had seen him in years, his determination reminding her all too well why he had touched so many people’s lives. The kunoichi had been thankful to him, more than he knew, since he was the one to reach Neji all those years ago, finally. She hadn’t lost faith entirely in the Hyūga but when she saw him in the Chūnin Exams and what happened with Hinata she had begun to lose hope in bringing back the boy she once knew. And then just like that, the last round came, and everything was brought to the surface by none other than the blond knucklehead himself, allowing Sena to finally understand why everything had changed. The fear of what would have happened if this didn’t come to pass haunted her.

Now, watching Naruto as they leaped from branch to branch, the kunoichi wondered how much he had changed, mainly, whether or not his will to help others had become greater. Judging by his reaction to set off after Gaara, Sena hoped his sentiment had only grown.

‘Sena,’ Naruto said, breaking her train of thought. ‘What did granny Tsunade mean when she said you know about the Akatsuki?’ The kunoichi looked at him, body only betraying but a glimpse of the surprise she felt through widening eyes. It was there Sakura jumped to the other side of her.

‘A lot of things have changed since you left Naruto, our classmates have been given more serious missions.’ Sakura said before turning her attention back to the kunoichi. ‘You infiltrated them, didn’t you?’ Her brow furrowed. It seemed Sena wasn’t the only one who had grown up, becoming attuned to details and gathering information.

Sena didn’t answer right away, curious as to how Sakura had discovered such information especially when Tsunade herself declared it top secret. Even though Sakura was the Hokage’s apprentice, she would still be out of the loop when it came to the situation of the Akatsuki, most shinobi in the village were. Knowledge was the most dangerous tool in their world and simply knowing the smallest thing about the criminal organisation would be enough to get one killed. In fact, Sena would bet that the moment they figured out she was alive, if they hadn’t already, she would be a prime target. The kunoichi chanced a glance back at Kakashi who gave her a curt nod, a concession to reveal the truth, despite her wanting very much not to.

Sena let out a heavy sigh, trying to find the best place to begin and the limits to what she should reveal. Knowing she would have to tell them the important parts, like who they were and their capabilities, was clear, but as to how she came to possess such information, the kunoichi wanted to skip over those details.

‘Yes, it’s true; I managed to infiltrate the Akatsuki.’ The answer she settled for was as vague as it was revealing—to the right person.
‘But how did you do it?’ Naruto asked, a serious expression on his face. Perhaps he wasn’t the right person to leave vague information with to figure out for himself.

‘You’re asking the wrong questions,’ Sena replied, keeping her view on the branches ahead as she took the lead.

‘Huh?’

‘Naruto, she means it doesn’t matter how she got it, what is important is the information she did get,’ Sakura said, catching up again. ‘Right, Sena?’ She nodded in reply. ‘So what can you tell us about them?’

‘In my time with them, I only ever encounter four of the members,’ Sena began, ‘Two of the members I have met, the village had encountered before, mainly you Naruto. Kisame Hoshigaki one of Seven Ninja Swordsmen—’

Naruto cut in, ‘Hey yeah I remember him, the big shark looking guy right?’

‘Hm,’ The kunoichi nodded. ‘And his partner is Itachi Uchiha.’ Both Naruto and Sakura gasped at the mention, each sharing a knowing glance.

‘Sasuke’s brother,’ Naruto mumbled. The two fell into a lulled silence, the tension heavy with the obvious brooding the two team mates were doing. Sena didn’t exactly know the whole story with Sasuke leaving the village, but she knew the toll it had taken on her comrades. Naruto and Sakura perhaps were left with the more permanent scars, emotionally and mentally from losing their friend. But the kunoichi also remembered what had happened to the others in Shikamaru’s squad when they were sent on the recovery mission. Mainly what had happened to Neji; he had almost died.

‘Naruto, Sakura,’ Kakashi called from behind, closing the gap between them. ‘You can worry about all that later, for now, we still have two members we haven’t heard about yet. So listen carefully this information is important.’ Sena looked to each side and watched them nod then continued.

‘The least I know about is a member named Sasori. I only met him on the odd occasion, and when I did, I was usually required elsewhere.’ The kunoichi paused to dodge an overhanging branch. ‘The little information I was able to gather came from his partner. Sasori favours puppetry and is supposed to be incredibly skilled.’

‘Puppets huh?’ Sakura commented.

‘Like Gaara’s brother?’ Naruto asked, fists balling just at the mention of the fellow Jinchūriki.

‘Kankurō?’ Sena said, more of a confirmation than a question. ‘He does use puppetry yes but back so Sasori; I don’t know any of his weaknesses, techniques, nor have I seen him fight. His partner, however, did comment on his abilities so he isn’t to be underestimated.’

‘Who was his partner?’ Sakura asked. Sena took a deep breath, pushing away all the memories and images that surfaced just at the thought of his name. The events that happened while she was with the Akatsuki were not ones easily forgotten nor were they easy to speak aloud.

‘Deidara,’ Sena said, not looking at either of them. ‘He is the one I know the most about and where a lot of the intel came from.’

‘Does that mean we can trust him?’ Sakura asked. ‘I mean is he on our side?’
‘Absolutely not, his only allegiance is to himself.’

‘But how did you get someone like that to give you information?’ Naruto asked.

‘I had something he wanted, and I used that to make him trust me.’ Sena almost shuddered at the oversimplification of the situation, but there was no way she would tell them the gruelling details.

‘What was it? Can we use it now?’ Naruto asked, his enthusiasm beginning to peak. It was Kakashi who came to Sena’s rescue this time.

‘What are his abilities?’ Kakashi asked, allowing Sena to ignore Naruto’s question.

‘Deidara specialises in explosions, possessing an explosion release Kekkei Genkai which coupled with his cunning will and knack for misdirection makes him very dangerous. I said not to underestimate Sasori; it counts for Deidara doubly so, he likes to make battles a game, all in the name of art.’

‘Hm, these guys are the real deal huh?’ Naruto said, a determined smile crossing his lips.

‘Yes, and all the better if we can avoid them, if at all possible.’ There was no way Sena wanted to cross any of them again so soon, not when she barely had any time to prepare or discuss strategies with Shikamaru. It was far too dangerous to even think about them.

The team continued to move through the forest at a quickening pace. It seemed Sena’s words had inspired a new found determination amongst the team. As they kept running through the trees, the kunoichi couldn’t help but feel Kakashi’s gaze linger on her every so often. Sena didn’t dare look though; she was tired of the looks of sympathy those who knew about the situation gave her. She didn’t want their sympathy or their sorrow; she simply wanted to forget.

‘Hey is that Temari?’ One of her teammates called.

___ ___ ___

Deidara and Sasori made their way to the edge of the cliff, looking down to the river below where the rock covered the hideout. Deidara smirked to himself, admiring his creation as he watched as his clay bird flew down with the Jinchuriki.

‘At last, we are here, hm,’ the blond said eyeing the tag placed on the boulder.

‘Let’s go,’ Sasori said, his tone impatient as ever.

They both dropped down to the water, walking across the calm current toward the entryway. Deidara lifted his hand, performing the sign to unseal the barrier and allow them to cross. As the large boulder rose from the water, the blond couldn’t help but get a certain feeling in the pit of his stomach. A sense that something big was going to happen.

___ ___ ___
Everything was on fire, the smoke cloaking the surroundings of the house from view. Every one around stood silently looking up at the hole in the roof. Sena tried to scream at them, but no words came out, no matter how her lips moved or how hard she tried, the silence was the only thing that could be heard. Then suddenly she was on the roof looking in again, the familiar scene of her elder brother talking to her father while her other brother lay dead on the ground.

‘This isn’t how it was supposed to go,’ Tsutomu said to Osamu.

It was then everything happened in a flash. Tsutomu was on the ground, the same kunai she always saw embedded into him, blood running down his chin. The familiar tears were streaming down her cheeks, the cackle of her father and muffled words of her brother. Except for this time, she could understand some of them.

‘Tadao wasn’t supposed to be here…You weren’t meant to be here…Hitomi.’ Then at once, the scene vanished absorbed by darkness and Tsutomu’s words echoed in her mind on a loop until she finally jumped upright with a start.

Sweat dripped from her forehead, causing her bangs to stick to her skin, her breathing rapid and her chest heaving. Sena buried her face into her palm in a feeble attempt to get her body under control and calm herself into a reasonable frame of mind. No matter how many times she dreamed of that night, the vivid qualities never faded. The nightmares came so frequently she found she had trouble discerning the dreams from reality. Sena closed her eyes and took a deep breath, filling her lungs with every anxious thought and letting the breath go, hoping those thoughts would leave her too.

Bringing her hands from her face, she looked down at them, blurry vision focusing on the lines and detailing while her heart rate steadied. Then she took another deep breath bringing the hand to her chest. Sena turned to where Sakura was sleeping soundly beside her, sighing in relief knowing she hadn’t woken her up. Hopefully, that meant she had gotten her screaming and thrashing under control. There her mind wandered back to that night at Neji’s when she had woken up in a fit beneath him. It had caused a great deal of guilt to fill her, but it also made the kunoichi miss him even more. The Hyūga was the one person she could talk to about this even if it just were vague bits and pieces; he would listen and help just by being there.

A strange sense of déjà vu overcame Sena as she thought about the situation she was in now; tracking down the Akatsuki while separated from Neji. Not a fate she had intended to repeat, but she had a duty to her village to uphold. Although the kunoichi couldn’t help but feel that for every step forward she took for herself, she always ended up taking several backwards for the sake of others. There was no changing this outcome; it was simply who she was whether she liked it or not.

Pulling back the blankets, Sena stood up and carefully slipped out of the room, attempting not to wake Sakura as she pulled the door closed. There would be no going back to the sleep for the kunoichi now, so she decided to walk the halls close by their quarters to clear her mind. They had arrived in the Suna safe and sound, just in time for Sakura to heal Kankurō. Being in a neighbouring village, Sena didn’t want to wander off too far as to raise unnecessary suspicion. The two villages did have a good relationship in comparison to the others, but the kunoichi knew all too well how easy it was to break an alliance. Things were tense in the Sand as it was, with their Kazekage missing and she didn’t want to be on the receiving end of questioning, not when they had a mission to complete. Despite not wanting to wander too far, Sena soon found roaming the same halls over and over became more of a distraction than a way of clearing her mind, so she set herself a new destination.

It had been some time since she had last visited Suna, the last time proved quite beneficial to both parties. Her in finding leads on her father and the Sand in finding perpetrators in their midst. Sena
rounded the corner stopping at the doors of the medical bay, pushing them open as slowly as she could as not to disturb those inside. As the kunoichi walked in quietly, she observed Kankurō sleeping on the bed, breathing heavier than normal. She approached and studied him, seeing the way the sweat perspired on his forehead, and his body had the faintest signs of a tremor. It seemed his body was still fighting off the last properties of poison they hadn’t managed to get out of his system.

Sena retrieved a bowl full of cold water, a cloth from the supply cupboard and brought the supplies over to the bench beside the bed. After dipping the cloth into the water, she ringed it tight before placing it onto Kankurō’s forehead. This action caused puppet master to flinch, catching her attention immediately though she did not speak yet. Instead, she continued to dab the damp cloth down his cheeks, neck then back up to his forehead, holding it there.

‘Have you slept at all?’ The kunoichi asked, a smirk appearing when she saw his body tense.

‘You try getting poisoned and relaxing,’ Kankurō replied, eyes cracking open. ‘I could ask you the same thing, what are you doing up so late?’ He went to sit up, but Sena took a firm hold of his shoulder and pushed him back down.

‘Don’t try and force yourself, your body still has to do its job and recover,’ Sena lifted the cloth, which had fallen, back up to his forehead, pressing the back of her hand against his cheek in the process. ‘You’re still hot.’

‘Thanks,’ he replied, the hint of a smile appearing and the kunoichi just huffed. ‘You didn’t answer my question.’

‘I couldn’t sleep.’ Sena sat in a chair beside him, stretching her arms and yawning.

‘Hm, you sound tired.’

‘So do you.’

‘Yeah well it’s a lot harder to sleep when you’re in pain I guess.’

‘You and me both.’

Kankurō opened his eyes, sizing her up with a glance. The kunoichi’s mask didn’t falter, eyeing him right back without fear. Then he merely huffed, like he had let what she said slide, turning his gaze to the roof. Sena let go a breath she had been holding, and relaxed back into her chair. There would be no questioning then.

‘It’s been awhile since we last saw each other,’ Kankurō began, ‘never would have thought the next time would involve you saving my life.’

‘I didn’t save your life this time, Sakura did. I was nothing more than her back up, an extra set of hands at most.’

‘Still, thank you.’ Kankurō turned to face her again raising his hand. ‘And about that “this time” business, that last time you saved me that doesn’t count.’

‘Oh please, if I hadn’t been there you wouldn’t have discovered the intel leak nor would you have realised you had spies in your ranks.’ Sena shot him a coy smile.

‘And you wouldn’t have known about the perpetrator if I hadn’t mentioned my suspicions earlier that day.’
‘Only because I brought it up in the first place.’

‘Because I initiated conversation with you.’

‘So you initiating conversation trumps me saving your life?’

‘Yep.’

Sena rolled her eyes at his smirk. ‘Insatiable,’ she muttered, suddenly reminded of her friend Jiro. Both of them were so stubborn when they thought they were right.

‘Looks like I’m ahh—’ Kankurō hunched forward, clutching his chest. Sena quickly jumped up, placing her hands on his shoulders to force him back.

‘Lie down,’ the kunoichi said, ‘I told you, you still need to let your body recover.’

‘Damnit,’ he muttered, relaxing his body and letting his hands drop.

Sena sat back down and yawned again, feeling the tension in her jaw as she did. It seemed he wasn’t the only one there who needed to rest but instead of doing so she shrugged it off. They sat there in silence for awhile, the only sound filling the room was the occasional sigh or groan from Kankurō. It wasn’t long before the silence was broken.

‘How did you survive them?’ Sena turned to him, surprised at the question as well as looking for clarification. ‘The Akatsuki.’ Her eyes widened. There was something off putting about suddenly everyone knowing her secret, especially when they asked questions she didn’t want to give answers to.

‘How did you—’

‘Ah it doesn’t matter, I’m glad we both managed to survive them.’ He groaned as he shifted. ‘It’s just Gaara is so strong and he…’ Kankurō trailed off. ‘Just help get him back alright?’

‘I promise I will.’ And the kunoichi was serious in her promise for she knew what it was like to be a prisoner of the Akatsuki as well as she knew what it was like to lose a brother. Sena would do everything in her power to make sure Kankurō didn’t have to go through that same guilt she had in the past. Perhaps she was still going through it even now. It was then the kunoichi stood up and returned to her room.

— — —

Neji waited along with his team one of the assignment rooms, just having returned from their mission. They were ordered to stay and await further instruction, much to the Hyūga’s annoyance. The entirety of the way back he had been looking forward to returning to Sena, hoping she hadn’t been sent away on another mission and now they were stuck he couldn’t even see for himself. Leaning against the wall arms crossed, Neji closed his eyes while the others talked about the previous mission. Instead of joining in, much too tired to bother, Neji contented himself by closing his eyes and thinking about Sena.

For every second that passed by his anticipation and irritation grew, but he kept it internalised, drowning the outside world out. Instead of thinking about the time passing he thought of whether
he should return straight home when they were given clearance or to go straight to Sena’s. The kunoichi would probably be training at this time of the day; perhaps he should try the training grounds. Before Neji could decide, however, his thoughts were interrupted by the opening of the door.

‘I have an S-Rank mission for this team,’ Tsunade said, entering the room with Shizune. The declaration caused even Neji to be stunned. It wasn’t that he doubted his talents, but the severity of the mission usually fell to those higher in the ranks.

‘Alrighty, what’s the mission?’ Guy asked with his usual enthusiasm.

‘The Kazekage of the Hidden Sand has been taken prisoner by the Akatsuki. I have already dispatched a team to the village, however, I am sending you four as back up, and you are to leave immediately. You must assist Team Kakashi.’

‘Team Kakashi?’ Lee asked.

‘Team Kakashi consists of Kakashi Hatake, Sakura Haruno, Naruto Uzumaki and for this mission also includes Sena Matsura.’

Neji felt his breath catch, unable to suppress his surprise. The Hokage had sent Sena after the Akatsuki again so soon? A new found determination surged within him as he took a step forward.

‘Let’s go.’

ahhhh sorry if it seems very canon heavy, I'm trying to only include necessary parts as not to bore you. It's going somewhere I promise.
The tension in the cavern was high, and the other Akatsuki members were beginning to get restless from the days of channelling their chakra. Deidara found his patience waning and the need to get out and set off an explosion or something else to let off steam was increasing. It was such a task to catch the one-tailed and had even cost one of his arms in the process; he was beginning to feel that joining the Akatsuki had proved to be a tedious choice.

‘More intruders,’ Zetsu said, pulling Deidara from his thoughts. Kisame had already been told to take care of another team with a leaf shinobi Itachi had called Might Guy.

‘You didn’t cover your tracks very well, did you Deidara?’ Pain accused, causing the blond to turn.

‘Well, as I said… the Jinchūriki host proved more powerful than we thought, hm.’ The truth was Deidara didn’t feel like being lectured when he was the one who caught the first Jinchūriki practically by himself.

‘You’re a bumbler and a fool,’ Sasori began, ‘your methods are too crude for any sort of secret operation.’ This set off something inside the blond, making him even more irritated than he was before. What he would have given for a good c2 explosion right there and then just to shut them up.

‘Crude!? Hm those clumsy traps of yours were hardly subtle my friend! Hm.’

‘Why you—’

‘Stop bickering amongst yourselves,’ Pain cut in. ‘Now then, who to send this time?’

‘Me, this time it must be me,’ Hidan insisted.

‘This time a leaf shinobi should go,’ Zetsu said, causing Deidara almost to roll his eyes. Just the mention of the certain Uchiha was enough to make him angry. If it wasn’t for Itachi, Deidara wouldn’t even be apart of the organisation in the first place and he could focus entirely on his art, but a deal was a deal so he bit his lip and huffed.

‘Very well, it’s decided then,’ Pain agreed.
Team Kakashi along with their new company, lady Chiyo, leaped through the treetops in the direction of the Akatsuki hideout. Naruto and Sakura jumped ahead, deep in conversation about something while Kakashi and Chiyo were the same behind her. It seemed to Sena that everyone in their squad had personal ties one way or another to the Akatsuki. The kunoichi couldn’t help but feel their ties ran deeper than her own, after all, she only infiltrated them for information, she never actually held real personal ties to them…right?

Sena felt something unnerving tug at a certain string in her chest. Perhaps she shouldn’t have chased after the Akatsuki so soon. It had been months but the wounds inflicted from her time with them were still prominent in the kunoichi’s mind. There were nights where she still dreamed of being trapped in the hideout and days where her mind wondered how she survived so long without so much as seeing the sky. There were also times her mind would drift from the task at hand—remembering every detail of her time away, details she wanted to forget but couldn’t.

Sena shook her head free of these thoughts, knowing that they would only prove to be a source of distraction on her mission. She was sent because of her knowledge, and she would need to have a clear mind if they were going to utilise what intel she had. Even if it meant facing them again, she would do what was ordered of her.

They jumped from the branches, near the edge of the forest and continued running on foot. Kakashi took the lead, Sena tailing close behind him along with the others who seemed to be finished with their conversation. Then Kakashi skidded to a halt, arms up to hold them back.

‘Everybody stop!’ He said an almost desperate tone in his voice.

Sena looked up, confused as to what exactly was going on when she spotted a figure in front of them.

‘Who is that?’ Sakura asked, moving from behind Kakashi beside the kunoichi. Sena examined the man in front, noticing first the trademark Akatsuki cloak, dark hair and red eyes—the Sharingan.

‘I know you,’ Naruto said through gritted teeth. ‘Itachi Uchiha.’ Sakura gasped, and Sena felt a sinking feeling in her chest. The last time she had seen Itachi she had been thrown into one of his Genjutsu.

On instinct Sena drew her blade from the sheath on her back, making sure to hold a firm grip on the hilt.

‘So that’s the one, the child who wiped out his entire clan.’ Lady Chiyo said from beside her. Sena frowned thinking of her grandparents, the ones who were apart of the massacre. They weren’t exactly on good terms with Sena’s mother or the rest of the Matsura clan, but they were still her family.

‘Kakashi, Naruto it’s been awhile,’ Itachi said, keeping his icy stare on them. ‘And Sena it’s been even less time than that.’ Sena grunted in reply, still confused by the circumstances of their last meeting and the fact that Itachi hadn’t killed her. He had murdered his entire clan, but he had let her live after tying her up and torturing her.

‘I wasn’t enough for you huh!’? Naruto yelled. ‘You had to go after Gaara as well.’ His anger was
getting out of control, causing Sena’s grip to tighten on her blade even more. ‘I’ll destroy every last one of you!'

Sena looked up and caught Itachi’s eyes, the intensity of the red sending shock waves throughout her body. The kunoichi knew she ought to look away, but for some reason, her eyes stayed locked in the intense stare neither of them backing down to look away. Then suddenly she felt it, the purpose of the look.

‘Hm, you think I don’t know what you’re doing,’ Sena said. ‘Why have you put me in a Genjutsu?’ She looked around; everything was the same except the others weren’t there, it was just her and Itachi.

Itachi turned to walk to the side, away from their position and toward the forest. When Sena didn’t move, he turned back to look at her, eyes beckoning for her to follow. Her brows knitted together, and despite all her instincts telling her to ignore him and fight off the trance, her curiosity got the better of her, so she stepped forwards to follow. The kunoichi wondered why she wasn’t in a Tsukuyomi like the last time where she was caught. There was no time to dwell on such things though, not when she had a dangerous foe’s attention on her. Sena took a deep breath and stopped a metre away from Itachi.

‘Why the Genjutsu?’ Sena asked again, trying her best to sound determined even though there was nothing the kunoichi could do protect herself until she was released. Itachi looked at her, eyes shining that distinguishable red she had grown accustomed too. It was the same eyes her mother had, the same eyes Tsutomu had. An uneasy feeling began to spread in the kunoichi’s chest, but she subdued the feeling before it overwhelmed her.

‘I wanted to talk first,’ Itachi said in a monotone voice. It was the same as before, that time Sena was caught by Kisame. Itachi was cold toward her in his tone and words, but his actions proved different, it was as though he had wanted to protect her—no that was assuming too much—it was as though he didn’t feel the need to kill her. The fact arose again: Itachi had murdered his entire clan but had spared her when she was no-one to him— But of that fact Sena wasn’t so confident.

They stood there for awhile, only staring at each other, each trying to discern what the other was thinking. There was something about the way Itachi’s gaze stayed on her that made the kunoichi believe he was trying to figure out something but as to what she did not know. Instead of talking again Sena waited for him to make a move.

‘Where did you get that blade?’ Itachi asked, finally breaking the tense silence. Sena didn’t respond straight away, wondering the best way to reply while also finding out why he wanted to know. If Itachi hadn’t taken place in the massacre, Sena might have thought that perhaps he was the kind boy she had once known in their childhood encounters.

The kunoichi, recalling childhood memories, couldn’t help but become perplexed further knowing that Tsutomu and Itachi were once friends. Now one was dead and the other a criminal. It just didn’t add up, but she didn’t have time to analyse, she had to tell the Uchiha something, so the kunoichi settled for the truth.

‘I took it from my father,’ Sena replied before adding, ‘Why did you want to talk?’ The kunoichi hoped it would be enough to get some form of information out of Itachi, but she also knew how cryptic the Uchiha could be just from their brief encounters.

‘Where did he get it from?’ Itachi asked, ignoring her question.

‘I’m not certain, I wasn’t with him at the time,’ Sena replied.
‘Hm,’ Itachi closed his eyes and sighed. ‘You’re lying, not that I expected you to tell me the truth.’

‘You haven’t answered my questions; it hardly seems fair for me to answer yours, you might as well just release me and be done with it.’ Sena attempted to hide her curiosity, but she was well aware that Itachi would see through it. The kunoichi just hoped he would oblige her desires and tell her, as unlikely as it was, what his motive was.

‘Very well, I put you under a Genjutsu to talk, away from the others.’

‘That’s the what, but you still haven’t given me a why.’

‘It’s trivial, but our conversation is not something your companions need to be apart of, they are unnecessary right now none of them are Uchiha.’

‘I’m not an Uchi—’

‘Yes I know, you are a Matsura, you’ve made that clear.’ Itachi took a step forward causing her to tense. ‘But even you cannot change the circumstances of your birth—that is your parentage.’

‘Hm, if you really thought I was an Uchiha then I would have died in the massacre.’ Sena took a small step forward. ‘Itachi, you would have killed me, so why do you insist on me being an Uchiha.’

‘Your death was not necessary.’

‘But the death of the entire clan was?’

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t understand you nor do I gain anything by listening to you, so release me and stop wasting my time.’

‘It seems there are many things which you do not yet understand…Your perception of reality is blinding you.’ Sena frowned, uncertain as to what he was referring to exactly. ‘You do not know the true power of that blade, do you?’ It was supposed to be a question, but it hit Sena with the facts—she really didn’t know anything about it. Itachi studied her closely, she could practically feel his eyes pierce her. ‘It seems I have found out all I needed to know.’

Itachi held up his hand, and suddenly Sena was standing back beside Sakura, her body feeling slightly drained of chakra.

The Genjutsu was finally released but Sena found she came out with more questions than what she had gone in with. Why was Itachi so fixated on her blade?

Sena was sure that none of it was a good sign.

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In the cavern, Deidara started to become restless, groaning at how long the process was taking. It wasn’t like him to be in one place for too long, and he itched to move or at least get some air, somewhere far away from the other members. The blond knew however that it was impossible until they had completed the ritual. If he was honest, becoming a member of the Akatsuki was a
tedious existence, one not worth losing body parts for. Deidara’s eyes cast down to the torn sleeve of his cloak where the Jinchūriki had crushed his arm with sand. Such a nuisance he had been. Deidara smirked, thinking at least he wouldn’t have to deal with the boy ever again.

‘The Jutsu wore off did it?’ Pain asked, snapping Deidara back to reality. ‘But we were able to delay them, that should be enough. Well done Itachi, Kisame.’ The blond looked up to find the other members had opened their eyes and consciously rejoined them. His eyes narrowed when their gaze fell onto Itachi.

‘Aren’t you forgetting someone?’ Sasori snapped, ‘Need I remind you where your bodies for the Jutsu came from; They were both my subordinates.’ The puppet master never did like to be forgotten, something about everlasting art Deidara never agreed with; Despite this, he smirked at his partner’s evident annoyance.

‘Hm, you should be the one thanking me,’ Pain said. ‘It’s only because of my impersonation Jutsu they could join the ranks of the Akatsuki, short-lived as it was.’ The leader chuckled causing Deidara to raise a brow. ‘It’s almost finished. Itachi what of our enemies number and abilities?’

Deidara groaned to himself, frustrated at just another mention of the Uchiha.

‘It’s a five man squad from the Leaf,’ Itachi began which was enough to hold Deidara’s attention. The Leaf was where Sena was born, the village she had served for a time.

‘It is comprised of Kakashi Hatake, Sakura Haruno, The Nine Tails Jinchūriki Naruto Uzumaki and Chiyo and elder of the Sand.’

‘Hm, I thought you said it was a five man squad,’ Kisame said. ‘I believe you missed one Itachi.’

‘The final member,’ Itachi looked directly at Deidara, making him almost shiver at how intense his gaze was, ‘Is another Leaf shinobi, Sena Matsura.’ Deidara felt his breath catch, his heart feeling as if it skipped a beat. Had he actually heard Itachi correctly?

‘That name sounds familiar, isn’t that the brat we encountered who claimed to have information on Jinchūriki?’ Kisame asked, and Itachi nodded. ‘Ah yes, we had some fun with kunai, her and I, such a pity it ended so quickly.’ Deidara felt himself scowl, but he was so overwhelmed by the information to say anything.

‘Deidara you ignorant brat,’ Sasori said, ‘You told me she was dead. Did you let her escape willingly? Did you let that girl get the better of you? You fool, I told you she was a spy.’ Sasori’s words proved to be the last straw.

‘Shut up Sasori I saw her die with my own two eyes, hm!’ Deidara turned his gaze to Itachi. ‘I don’t know what you’re playing at Uchiha, but Sena Matsura is dead, you are mistaken.’

‘Doubtful,’ Itachi replied. ‘But perhaps you should see for yourself when they arrive that you are the one who is mistaken.’ Deidara scoffed. Itachi was just trying to mess with him, he was sure of it, and the whole issue with what happened to Sena was a perfect opportunity.

The blond tore his gaze from Itachi and huffed. Sena wasn’t alive, Deidara knew that for a fact. If she were the kunoichi would have looked for him and found him, surely. Although, even he had to admit he never did find her body or any trace of her whereabouts. Maybe her village found her before he did and that’s why she was with them again. Wait that would mean that Sena was alive. Such a prospect was too good to be true. Still, it would mean he could see her again, touch her, keep her and never let go.
Deidara closed his eyes and concentrated his focus back to the ritual. The quicker they finished the sealing, the sooner he could confirm for himself once and for all if Itachi was telling the truth about his love. A big part of him still held onto the knowledge that she was dead however another part of him, though small, hoped that she wasn’t. Deidara smirked, suddenly finding a new light at the end of a dark tunnel.

More time passed by, although it felt like it was moving a lot quicker, now that the blond had something to look forward to at last. He chanced a glance up at Itachi to see if his face would reveal any more of the truth but found nothing but a stone cold stare. The look only caused Deidara to become frustrated and restless once again. What he would give for it all to be over.

‘Now we are entering the final stage,’ Their leader said, causing Deidara to sigh, relieved.

‘What should we do about these annoying pests?’ Kisame asked.

*You won’t be doing anything Kisame; this situation is all mine,* Deidara thought.

‘They’re getting closer and more quickly than anticipated,’ Zetsu said.

‘Not a problem,’ Pain replied, ‘We delayed them just enough. Ignore them, in any event, we have a backup plan.’ Deidara smirked, knowing full well what he was referring too.

‘I think he means that in the end it will be up to you and me Sasori my man, hm.’ He looked at his partner.

‘Well then, I suggest we hurry up and finish our business here.’ Sasori mirrored his frustration, the need to get the ritual over with. ‘We will want a moment to catch our breath before greeting our guests.’

‘Oh yes indeed, we must get ready to give them a warm welcome. Hm.’ And what a welcome it would be. Deidara had two prospects to look forward too. The first seeing Sena alive and well again and the second would be proving Itachi wrong. Both were sweet and alluring, but unfortunately, the blond knew he would only get one. Such a pity.

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The sun had risen by the time Neji and the rest of his team reached the entrance to the Akatsuki hideout which Pakkun had told them about while travelling. The Hyūga jumped down to the water, running across the surface to a large boulder. They had finally arrived after journeying for days now all that was left was to wait for Team Kakashi. Neji hoped they would arrive soon, and that Sena hadn’t run into any trouble as they had. Even though she could handle herself, Neji had a bad feeling about the whole situation. He had lost her to the Akatsuki once, and he wasn’t about to do it again.

‘So this is the place?’ Guy asked, examining the rock face in front of them.

‘Gaara is on the other side of that boulder,’ Pakkun confirmed.

‘It won’t be easy getting passed that barrier.’

‘What’s the plan?’ Tenten asked.
‘We smash our way in!’ Lee said, with his usual enthusiasm.

‘No Lee,’ Guy said turning around to smile. ‘Late, as usual, Kakashi.’ Neji’s eyes widened before he quickly turned around to find team Kakashi jumping down to join them. The Hyūga felt his heart rate increase as his eyes searched for Sena.

‘Well, you see we ran into a little trouble along the way,’ Kakashi said, walking toward them. Neji ignored the exchanges of conversation his eyes finally locking onto the person he sought. There was Sena safe and sound, smile sprawled on her face when her eyes met his. He felt a weight lift from his chest and relief flow through him at the sight of her.

‘Well?’ Came a familiar voice, causing the Hyūga’s attention to shift from Sena.

‘Naruto?’ Neji asked unable to believe the sight before him. The restless child he once knew had grown up, it seemed, in more ways than one. After all that time away he was back and probably even stronger than before, causing Neji to remember something he had decided back in the Chūnin Exams. He wanted to battle Naruto again.

‘Now then, let’s do this Kakashi,’ Guy said, bringing his attention back to the group.

‘Right,’ Kakashi replied. ‘First things first we need to get a look inside.’

‘Leave it to me,’ Neji said, activating his Byakugan and turning toward the boulder. As he looked behind the rock blocking the hideout he could make out a hollowed area inside, as well as sense a number of chakras. There also seemed to be a figure of some sort with the chakra signatures circling. When he began to search more, he felt someone walk up beside him and place a hand gently on his arm.

‘I sense several chakra signatures in there,’ Sena whispered, ‘but not all of them feel right. It is as though they are…shadows. What can you see?’ Neji felt his body relax a little at her touch, allowing him to focus better.

‘Inside it looks like there’s a large cavern but—’

‘But what?’ Lee interjected.

Neji kept searching, discerning that Sena had been correct about the chakra patterns being off, it did almost seem like they were shadows. He didn’t know what to make of it—they appeared to be there but at the same time not.

‘I just can’t quite make out what is going on in there,’ Neji said. ‘I see several people.’

‘Neji what about Gaara, what is happening?’ Naruto said grabbing hold of his arm and shaking him violently. ‘Is he one of the people you see?’

‘Back off a second.’ Neji said, pushing Naruto away. ‘I’m trying to locate him now.’ He moved his gaze downward toward something on the floor and then up again.

‘NEJI!’ Naruto yelled making Neji lose what little was left of his patience. The boy may have grown up, but he was as loud as ever.

‘Take it easy!’ There his eyes caught sight of something he didn’t expect. ‘I don’t…What is that thing!? ’

‘Neji what is it? What’s going on? What is in there?’
'Let go of me!' Neji said shoving Naruto off but this time with more force.

'What did you see?' Sena asked, giving him a concerned look. Neji knew she had sensed it too, and they both were sharing the same feeling.

'It’s hard to describe with words.'

'Wait, but that would mean…' Tenten trailed off.

'Whatever it is we will have to see what it is for ourselves!' Lee said.

'That makes it easy then, doesn’t it.' Guy said, readying himself at a distance. He was going to try and crush the boulder himself.

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There was a crash from the outside, causing the cavern to shake slightly. Deidara looked up wondering how long it would take for them to push through. The blond also wondered if Itachi was telling the truth and that it would be Sena there.

'Hm it’s getting noisy out there,’ Pain said.

'Looks like we got ourselves some expected visitors,’ Kisame said with a smug expression.

'But which group is it now, hm?’ Deidara asked, hoping for the group that supposedly had Sena as a member. ‘The one that my man Kisame was stalling or perhaps…’

'Both, it’s both groups,’ Zetsu said. Deidara felt a wave of excitement flow through him at the prospect of his lover returning.

'It seems one of them is also a Jinchūriki,’ Sasori said, ‘oh don’t be jealous now Itachi.’ The puppet master laughed, and Deidara smirked feeling the same spite surface. It was time to prove the Uchiha wrong or be reunited with the one he loved. He simply couldn’t wait to see which turn of events would transpire.

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Sena lifted the wireless radio to her ear, placing the piece comfortably in before tying the fabric around her neck to keep it secure. The kunoichi watched as Kakashi and Team Guy did the same with Neji at her side. Sena didn’t even have to look at him to feel that he was tense, probably just as on edge as she was about the whole situation. The Akatsuki was part of the reason she had been gone so long, and she didn’t want to repeat that same mistake or get caught up with Deidara again. Still, she had a weird feeling stirring inside of her, one that told her she should face him again but whether it was for closure or a whim the kunoichi wasn’t sure.

'Right is everyone clear on the plan then?’ Kakashi asked. ‘Team Guy will remove the four other seals at the same time as we remove the one here. Then Sakura will smash the boulder open with a chakra infused punch.’ Everyone nodded in response when Guy called his team over for some sort
of pep talk. Sena wondered if it would hold its usual enthusiasm when she felt a hand touch her back ever so softly.

‘Be careful,’ Neji whispered, removing his hand just as quickly as he had placed it and moved to join his team. Sena tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, attempting to hide her smile and remembered to concentrate on the mission. It was the only way she could promise Neji to stay safe, as he had asked.

‘Sena,’ Kakashi called, catching her attention. ‘You must stay out of sight until I give the signal, I’ll use the radio to communicate with you when necessary.’

‘I understand,’ Sena replied, gaze shifting to the entry way of the hideout. ‘He is in there Kakashi. I can feel it—sense his chakra—there is no mistaking it.’ She took a deep breath preparing herself for what was to come.

‘All the more reason for you to stay out of sight. They may still think you are dead and we can use that element of surprise to our advantage.’

‘If that is the case then there is…’ The kunoichi hesitated, ‘another advantage I have when it comes to Deidara.’

Kakashi’s eye widened ever so slightly as Sena turned back to face him.

‘You are under no obligation to do anything like that.’

‘I will do what it takes to fulfil the mission and protect my comrades, the same as you.’ Sena folded her arms and turned back to the boulder, unable to look him in the eye. ‘Just remember no matter what I say or do that I am on your side.’

‘You don’t have to verify that, I trust you.’

‘I know. I am saying it more for my benefit than yours.’ Then before Kakashi could get another word in she quickly added, ‘We better get into position.’

‘Right,’ Kakashi said. Although he didn’t say anything more, Sena could feel his stare burn into her back as she walked away.

It was time to face her past head on whether she liked it or not.

Chapter End Notes

YAY! Thanks for reading, as I said before I promise we will move out of canon scenes soon, sorry if it’s a bit canon heavy! The next chapter will be less so! Hope you’re excited for what is to come! Thanks for reading as always :) <3
Silence filled the air, the only sounds that could be heard was the water lapping against the rock face in front of them. Sena took her position beside the boulder, at a safe enough distance that the inevitable debris from Sakura’s punch would create did not hit her. Looking up Sena saw Kakashi in position, giving him a curt nod then he did the same for Sakura. They were in position, now all they had to was wait for the confirmation that the others were too.

Sena took a deep breath, preparing herself for the battle to come. She was going to face the Akatsuki again in a matter of minutes and not only that; she was going to have to analyse the situation as quickly and thoroughly as possible without mistakes. There was no telling whether or not they still believed she was dead; there was also no way of knowing if Deidara would still trust her after everything. Sena would have to utilise every tool at her disposal for their meeting.

Then just when the kunoichi was adjusting to the idea of seeing an old foe, the others confirmed their position over the radio. It was time, and somehow she still didn’t feel ready.

‘Sena,’ Kakashi said over the radio, ‘remember to stay out of sight until the time is right.’

‘I know,’ Sena replied.

After that everything happened very quickly. Kakashi removed the seal and Sakura leapt at the rock using her chakra infused punch to shatter it completely. The moment she did Sena jumped up landing on the cliff face just above the entrance, making sure she was completely out of sight before the dust settled. Sena crouched, watching as the others ran ahead inside as she waited for the opportune moment.

As the kunoichi waited, she wondered whether or not she would be able to hear what was going on but her fears were diminished once she heard Naruto yell. It wasn’t so much words as it was angry grunts and noises, but Sena could tell exactly the reason why without looking. Sena couldn’t sense Gaara’s chakra and if she had to guess it was probably because there wasn’t any chakra left to sense and therefore Naruto was angry at seeing his friend in such a way. No, it was more than just his friend, it was someone who shared a life too similar to his that their circumstances were linked in a way none of the others could understand.

Sena closed her eyes and focused on listening to what was transpiring in the cavern below. It seemed the rescue mission was a failure, but they would still have to get out of this alive and try to stop the Akatsuki from doing this to anyone else.

‘Finally, now then, which one of you would be the Jinchuriki?’ Sena’s eyes flashed open as she
recognised Deidara’s voice. It sent chills down her spine and set off a series of flashbacks she forced herself to push away.

‘Tell me you’re mine…’

Sena bit her lip and took a deep breath then took a step back, almost slipping as her foot got caught in a small crater. Looking down Sena realised it was a hole, one big enough to see into the cavern without being caught. Wasting no time she knelt down and looked inside. There she found the rest of Team Kakashi and Lady Chiyo standing before two men. Narrowing her eyes, Sena realised the two men were Deidara and Sasori then saw what or rather who they were sitting on. The kunoichi gritted her teeth at the blond’s careless nature knowing it would only rile up Naruto.

‘You,’ Naruto began, ‘You bastards I’ll kill the both of you!’

Sena sighed, preparing to run in the second things got out of control.

‘The one who bursts in and starts barking, that would be him then,’ Sasori said.

‘Sasori my man, I think you are correct, hm.’

Sena began to adjust to Deidara’s voice again, her mind comprehending, albeit slowly, that he was really there in front of her. He didn’t seem to sense her presence either, at least that’s what she hoped.

‘You bastards, where the hell do you think you’re sitting?’ Naruto was only growing angrier which meant he would probably jump in soon.

‘Well so much for that mystery, this kid’s the Jinchūriki.’ Deidara said, voice a little too amused for her liking. ‘He’s the one who bursts in and barks first alright. Seriously, Itachi was right on the money, hm? Seems he was wrong about there being five members though.’

Itachi…that meant they not only knew they were coming but who would be coming. Sena gulped and sub-consciously felt for her blade finding minor relief in the feel of the hilt. Did Itachi specifically tell Deidara about her?

‘Gaara, what the hell are you doing? Come on why are you just lying there? Get up! Gaara! Answer me, what are you deaf, come on knock it off already!’ The sight of Naruto so distraught tugged at Sena’s heart.

‘Enough Naruto! You know full well that…’ Kakashi trailed off.

‘Your friends right and you know it too, he’s been dead for awhile now, heh,’ Deidara said, reaching down to tap Gaara’s face. The sight made Sena’s stomach turn.

‘Well,’ Sasori mused.

‘Yeah, that’s him alright, hm.’

‘Give him back, give Gaara back!’ Naruto yelled and began to run at the two Akatsuki before Kakashi moved in front to stop him.
‘Cool it; if you charge in without thinking then we are done for,’ Kakashi said.

Sena shifted her attention back to the Akatsuki watching as Sasori looked at Deidara with a look that seemed menacing even from where she sat.

‘What, something on your mind Sasori, my man?’ Deidara asked.

‘I’ll hold onto him,’ Sasori declared.

‘Huh?’

‘Since it appears that the Jinchūriki will stop at nothing to get him back.’

‘Hm.’ Deidara chuckled. ‘Yeah, that’s putting it lightly.’

Then Sena noticed Kakashi lift his hand to the side of his neck, clicking down on the radio transmitter very subtly.

‘Okay it looks like the guy on the left is the one who infiltrated the sand and took Lord Kazekage,’ Kakashi’s voice came in clearly, but he spoke quietly. ‘Which means this one is the puppet master who wounded Kankuro so badly, her grandson Sasori huh.’

‘Yes,’ Sena whispered back. ‘The blond one is Deidara.’ She saw Kakashi nod slightly, not wanting to give anything away.

‘Well my man,’ Deidara began, ‘I doubt that you wanna hear this, but I’ll just go right ahead and say it anyway. I think I will take care of the Jinchuriki, hm.’

‘Look our quota is one a piece, don’t push your luck Deidara.’

‘An artist my man always seek ever greater stimulation, heh, lest his senses go dull on him, my man. Rumour has it that the nine tails Jinchūriki is very powerful, hm. A canvas truly worthy of my artistry.’

‘What? Those pyrotechnics of yours, art? Art is a work of beauty, captured and left for posterity. Art is eternal beauty.’

‘Eternal beauty? Are you kidding me? Look don’t get me wrong, as a fellow artist I respect your point of view, but true art is fleeting a flash of beauty burning brightly and then vanishing in a heartbeat. Just like my muse. Hm.’

‘What did you say?’

Sena wanted to roll her eyes at the familiar exchanged she had to both bare witness to and heard about countless times. Deidara and his love for art could turn into quite a tedious, one-sided conversation but listening to them argue about it like this was close to torture.

‘Apparently, Deidara one of us doesn’t understand what true art is.’

‘That would be you my friend, hm.’

Then Naruto stepped forward, balling his fists, looking as though he was going to burst.

‘You lousy, rotten—’

The two ignored him, and Sasori kept talking.
‘Nonsense, eternal beauty is what constitutes real art.’

‘Don’t be absurd, true art only lasts a moment,’ Deidara said and kept the argument going.

‘Enough is enough!’ Naruto yelled throwing a large shrunken which Sasori deflected with the metal tail without even flinching.

‘Are you trying to make me angry?’ Sasori continued, attention still on Deidara.

‘Hey, easy! I told you you didn’t wanna hear it didn’t I? Give me a break will you? Hm.’

‘I don’t have to remind you what happens when I get angry do I?’ Sasori threatened lifting his metal tail and pointing it in Deidara’s direction. ‘Why don’t you explain it to me again Deidara.’

‘Hm,’ Deidara stood up. ‘Art is one thing and one thing only.’ Sena noticed him lift his hand, squinting to see the mouth moving like it was chewing — detonation clay. ‘The explosion itself!’ Deidara threw the clay into the air and Sena recognised the figure immediately, it was his clay bird.

It was time for Sena to get ready and make her move, especially if he was going to try and escape, for she may be the only one with the vantage point to stop him.

‘It’s not even in the same league as your grotesque puppet show,’ Deidara said, turning to Sasori who unleashed his tail upon him.

Deidara jumped up onto the bird, out of the way in time with a smirk on his face. The bird lifted up Gaara into its mouth.

‘See you around my man,’ the blond called as the bird swallowed the body of the Kazekage.

Deidara began to fly toward the exit, his gaze fixed on Naruto, and Sena could tell exactly what he was doing. The blond was trying to coax Naruto away from the others in an attempt to catch him. The kunoichi prayed Naruto wouldn’t do anything rash and remember her words of warning that Deidara liked to play with his prey. By looking at the Jinchūriki however, Sena knew that was too much to hope for which meant she would have to use her position to intervene.

‘Kakashi,’ Sena quickly said, standing upright. ‘It’s a trap don’t let Naruto fall for it. Once he’s outside, I’ll take care of him!’

Before Kakashi could respond however, Naruto made a dash towards the exit and was not about to listen to anyone tell him otherwise. Sena huffed, then turned her attention to below waiting for Deidara’s bird to come into view. Bending down ready to jump she finally saw the bird appear and begin to ascend.

‘Just where the hell do you think you are going?’ Sena heard Naruto call from below.

It was now or never, the kunoichi thought.

Sena jumped from the cliffside down to the red Torii in front of the entrance using it as the base of her jump upward. There, blade in hand, Sena landed on top of Deidara’s bird behind him, causing the blond to turn. Then he gasped upon seeing her, his eyes wide and mouth agape. Sena looked back at him with determined eyes, not giving away a single shred of emotion until she assessed the situation.

‘Guy!’ Kakashi said over the radio. ‘Do you read me? The enemy has split up; we’re going to need
Sena took a deep breath and turned to the side away from Deidara to listen to the conversation coming through her ear piece.

Guy came through the radio breathing heavily. ‘I don’t think we can…we’ve been caught in an enemy trap. We need a little more time Kakashi. Huh, signing off.’ Sena heard Kakashi sigh, but it sounded more distressed than usual.

‘Neji, do you read me?’ Kakashi said. ‘Are you in the same situation?’

‘Yes,’ Neji said, sounding like he was mid fight. ‘I can’t talk though.’

The sound of the Hyūga’s voice made Sena’s heart skip a beat. What she did next was going to have to be what would help keep her comrades safe, and she would need to think carefully about what it was she could do. They needed more information on the Akatsuki for the sake of the other Jinchūriki, mainly Naruto. It may be the only opportunity they would have to get it, so it was up to her.

‘Well whatever you are a dealing with, finish it quickly,’ Kakashi hesitated. ‘Sena is with Deidara.’

‘What!?’

I’m sorry Neji, Sena thought as she lifted her hand to the transmitter button.

‘Kakashi, you don’t have to worry about it anymore.’ Sena caught Deidara’s eye. ‘I’m sorry, I have to do this, but I am signing off.’

Sena released the button and turned back toward Deidara who was still staring at her in bewilderment like he couldn’t quite believe she was real. The bird wobbled slightly, that familiar unbalanced platform for flying she had once been accustomed to as it flew circles Naruto and Kakashi below. The kunoichi and the blond stared at each other neither really knowing quite what to say.

‘Sen,’ Deidara said, his voice breathless. ‘Y-you’re…alive.’ She sensed the relief in his voice on the last word. There was hope she could do something after all.

‘Yes,’ Sena said, taking a cautious step forward, her blade still in hand at her side.

Deidara’s gaze fell toward it, brows knitting together as if uncertain as to her intentions. He still wanted to trust her it seemed and if she were going to get anywhere with the blond, then she would need to give him an incentive. Slowly, Sena lifted her blade up before sheathing safely on her back. There she looked up to find Deidara still surprised, but the expression on his face was a little softer.

‘Have you come here…for me?’ Deidara asked seeming almost unsure of what to say.

‘In a way,’ Sena said, choosing her words carefully. ‘It depends on you.’

‘I want you to come back with me.’ Deidara held out his hand toward her causing the kunoichi to frown and stiffen.

‘Then why didn’t you bother looking for me?’ Sena knew she would have to play her part convincingly if she was going to get any information.

The blond was taken back by that his face reflecting disbelief.
‘You think I didn’t look for you?’ Deidara asked quickly jumping on the defensive, the reaction she was looking for. ‘I spent days searching up, and down that river and weeks searching every inch of land I could find after that, but there was no trace of you!’ The blond took a step toward her; their body only inches apart now. ‘Why didn’t you come back to me?’

‘Give him back!’ Naruto called from below, catching their attention. ‘Give Gaara back!’ Sena could see the red in Naruto’s eyes, indicating the transformation. That coupled with the smirk Deidara gave her, put her on edge.

‘Hm, he really doesn’t know when to give up does he?’ Deidara muttered. ‘Why don’t we take this conversation elsewhere, I’ve got time for a chase while we catch up.’

Sena felt the bird move, tipping slightly but enough for her to be caught off guard and lose balance. Deidara’s remaining arm reached out to catch her, moving her in front of him so she could see the others behind. He had unintentionally pushed her into a good vantage point, but Sena didn’t reveal this information instead she concerned herself with their proximity. Deidara’s body was pressed against hers, arm wrapped around her back and face inches from hers reminding her of all the times she had taken this position in the past. Normally she would submit and give herself to the cause but that was before, things were different now, her decisions didn’t just affect her now.

‘Sen,’ Deidara said, hot breath tickling above her lip. ‘We were meant for each other, stay with me this time.’

Sena felt her breath hitch as his grip on her tightened which did not go unnoticed by him.

‘What? Don’t you trust me anymore, hm?’ His tone was disappointed rather than accusing, but it didn’t set her anymore at ease. Deidara’s eyes cast downward, his hand tugging on a piece of fabric tied around her core—her hitae-ate. ‘Are you really back with them, your old village?’

‘Things are different now,’ the kunoichi whispered. ‘My father is dead, and I no longer need to search for him away from my home.’

‘What about us?’ Deidara leaned forward, ghosting his lips over hers. ‘Hm?’

Sena placed her hands on his chest, pushing him forward slightly for some breathing room.

‘There is another option here,’ Sena began angling her head so she could see over his shoulder below to Kakashi and Naruto trailing beneath them. Then she reached behind her undoing her hitae-ate, his eyes watching her every move keenly. ‘You could come back with me and help us. Help me protect my comrades, tell me what you know and let me help you.’

Deidara lifted his hand and placed them on hers, gripping them tightly as he took a deep breath.

‘I can’t do that Sen,’ Deidara said and pulled his hand away. ‘I need to be free to do my art as I wish, that’s the only thing worth doing.’

Then Sena noticed Deidara place his hand in his pouch and she knew what was coming. Out of instinct, she grabbed what was left of Deidara’s other arm, the one crushed by sand, causing him to freeze in surprise.

‘What are you—’

‘How did you lose your arm Deidara?’ Sena asked a little too harshly.

‘I…’ Deidara sighed, avoiding her eyes. ‘I lost it capturing the Jinchūriki.’
‘Exactly. You’ll continue to lose limbs, if not your life, should you continue with the Akatsuki so why not come with me instead?’

‘It’s not that simple!’ Deidara snatched is arm away and released some clay creatures from his other hand.

There was nothing Sena could do to stop this; certain Kakashi could handle himself she concentrated on the long term instead. Deidara was smirking now, looking down at Naruto below, a distance from Kakashi who was dealing with the explosives. Sena grabbed Deidara’s chin and pulled it back to her, no longer caring about being gentle but rather to get her point across. His stunned expression proved it was working.

‘Why isn’t it simple?’ Sena asked. ‘You told me you never wanted to join them in the first place so why do you continue?’

‘Because I have no other choice. I told you before that I made a deal.’

‘Screw the deal, I thought your art was more important,’ Sena sighed, ready to take it a step further. ‘I thought I was important to you.’ The kunoichi almost cringed saying those words.

‘You are important to me, but I can’t exactly just decide to leave the Akatsuki and affiliate myself with some village, in case you haven’t realised I am an S-rank criminal.’ Deidara lifted his hand to her cheek. ‘I don’t need anything like that anyway, all I want is you.’

‘Then…’ Sena hesitated before holding her hitae-ate over the side and letting it go. ‘Just come with me then and no one else.’

Sena glanced over the edge where her leaf headband fell and saw the others still trailing behind. She relaxed a little knowing Kakashi had evaded the explosive creatures Deidara had set on him. The kunoichi looked back up to catch the blond’s gaze.

*Come on take the bait.*

‘I—we can’t just do that,’ he said finally.

‘You’re an idiot,’ Sena muttered taking a step back, and Deidara’s eyes widened.

Carefully, as not to warrant suspicion, Sena raised her palm to her neck, covering the radio button and pushing down. She only hoped he didn’t realise what she was doing but that Kakashi would understand her message.

‘Sen—’

‘I’m sorry Deidara but you had you opening, you should have taken it.’ Sena used her other hand to reach inside her pouch and retrieve her chakra dagger, infusing it with lightning style as subtly as possible. ‘But now you leave me with no choice. Unfortunately for you, I know your secret.’

Sena threw the dagger down into the clay bird before Deidara even had a chance to react to what she had said. On impact, the bird exploded, and the pair lost their footing and began to fall. Just before they did Deidara had tried to grab Sena, but she pushed back, so she was closer to the trees, hoping she had provided Kakashi with the window he needed to hit Deidara. But it seemed the blond was more prepared than ever, already in the process of releasing another clay bird which expanded and soared to catch him.

Sena continued to fall, embracing her fate when she remember a request Neji had made of her —
that she remained safe. Looking up she saw Deidara coming toward her, calling her name with his arm extended until suddenly something appeared and began to suck him into a void of sorts. It was Kakashi, she was sure of it but that technique, it couldn’t be…

Confident that Deidara was taken care of, the kunoichi turned her attention back to herself and the fact she was falling and quickly. Looking down she saw the trees below and saw that they would probably cushion her fall, but she needed to slow down if she wanted to avoid breaking bones or worse. Moving without time to lose the kunoichi began to weave hand signs for a water jutsu just above where she would land in the tree. Closing her eyes, Sena crashed into the water which effectively slowed her before hitting the branches on the way down. By the third branch, she was able to manoeuvre her body and land, although it was clumsy and she fell to the hard ground.

Groaning, Sena rolled onto her back to see the clear, blue sky breaking through the tree tops. For a moment Sena forgot what she was doing and felt a tiny bit of peace before all the memories came flooding back.

— — —

Leaping from branch to branch, Neji increased his speed in order to catch up with his teammates. More so than that he was desperate to get to Sena and the rest of Team Kakashi to see what was going on. The last he had heard from them, Sena was with Deidara and Kakashi was requesting backup. The Hyūga hoped they had worked out their situation and they weren’t too late to provide backup. From what he saw of Sakura and Lady Chiyo’s battle, there was hope filling him; he just hoped it wasn’t of the false kind.

Then someone jumped alongside Neji, and it only took a glance along with the flash of green to know it was Guy Sensei. A simple nod in his direction and they both picked up the pace before they eventually found Tenten and Lee.

‘Why so slow you two?’ Guy called down before reaching for the radio. ‘Kakashi, are you there? Come in Kakashi?’ The man sighed. ‘Guess the radio is out of range. Neji can you see what is going on with Kakashi and the others?’

Neji nodded, activating his Byakugan and setting his sights on Team Kakashi.

‘Yes I see them,’ the Hyūga began, ‘they’re still engaged with the enemy. It appears they’ve recovered the Kazekage, however…’

‘However?’ Guy asked.

There was no chakra signature coming from Gaara at all which meant the worst possible scenario they could have hoped for coming into this mission.

— — —

The birds in the forest were cawing and flying wildly amongst the treetops indicating a disturbance nearby. Sena didn’t need to guess who it was nor did she need to think about what she needed to
The kunoichi’s plan to distract Deidara from Naruto and Kakashi in order to gain information had failed, and there was only one option left now—she would have to kill him.

Sena let out a heavy sigh before pushing her aching body upright, standing with the support of the tree trunk beside her. The water had broken her fall, but it didn’t stop the impact of the branches on the way down and the effect on her body. Looking down she saw her arms covered in cuts and scratches, judging by the way her face stung she could only assume her face was the same. That didn’t matter though; there were more pressing things to attend to now that she could sense Deidara’s chakra in the distance. Taking a deep breath, Sena pushed herself from the tree and set off in the direction she sensed.

The kunoichi had no idea if the blond would even trust her a second time but it didn’t matter anymore, she didn’t need him to trust her, she needed Deidara eliminated. Picking up the pace she forced her body to move despite the ache reverberating throughout her body; There would be time for rest later, she reminded herself. Yes, later she would rest and reunite with Neji again, and everything would be fine. First, she had to face her past.

Dodging an overhanging branch, Sena ducked before hearing someone move in the distance. The kunoichi quickly jumped up and onto a branch before whoever was there could see her. Taking a deep breath in an attempt to dull the ache, she felt in her back Sena focused on the task at hand. She didn’t need to look to know it was Deidara, the exact person she had been looking for.

The kunoichi studied him, noticing that he was missing yet another arm, meaning he wouldn’t be able to set off explosions so easily. There was, however, the mouth on his chest as well as the usual one but getting clay into either of those orifices seemed unlikely. The kunoichi’s vision lingered on Deidara’s arm, but her mind went to Kakashi. The idiot had activated the Mangekyou Sharingan and hadn’t told her when she was probably the only person left in the Leaf able to help him with the visual technique. She made a mental note to give him an earful about it later, for now, he at least had enough control to have disarmed the blond.

Sena retrieved a scroll and chakra dagger from her pouch and jumped down from the tree top activating the seal she needed. Deidara turned as she did, eyes widening but before he could say anything the pair was surrounded by a barrier—one they both knew only she could deactivate—the buzzing sound of lightning style made that clear to both of them.

‘You lied to me didn’t you!’ Deidara snarled, preparing for an attack.

Sena’s face remained expressionless, the usual mask she bore in battle as not to tip off her enemy to any weaknesses. When Sena didn’t respond Deidara took it as an incentive to continue his accusations.

‘Have they turned you against me? When did I lose you?’ The blond took a step forward. ‘Was it when we got separated? Or was it before that?’

The kunoichi still didn’t respond, her brows knitting together in frustration.

‘Tell me!’ Deidara yelled, ‘Did you even want to be with me?’

‘The only reason you are alive right now is because of me,’ Sena said, but even she knew it sounded like she was spitting venom.

Sena took a deep breath.

‘You’re a fool Deidara. You trained your eye to withstand the Genjutsu of the Sharingan, but you
Deidara seemed taken back at this. Sure he was used to Sena being blunt and assertive but never had she been so brutally honest with him, how could she? Whenever they were together, she had her part to play, but now Sena had nothing to lose.

‘W-what the hell is that supposed to mean!?’

‘Do you really think you can stay a criminal forever? That you can be apart of the Akatsuki without every single shinobi coming after you?’ Sena took a step forward gripping her dagger. ‘It is not the freedom you believe but rather a death sentence.’

‘I thought you understood! I thought you wanted to be with me!’

‘My village, my comrades, will always come first.’

‘I still don’t understand,’ Deidara said, holding her gaze in an intense trance. ‘If that was true…do you care about me at all?’

‘Idiot,’ Sena muttered. ‘Despite everything that happened, I feel sorry for you, cared enough to give you a choice to redeem yourself from the path you have chosen. But like the irrational boy you are, you threw it away and sealed your fate.’

Deidara’s expression dropped then replaced with shock as he realised, finally, the truth.

‘I’m sorry Deidara,’ Sena took a step forward, dagger raised, ‘But you have left me with no other choice.’

Then the kunoichi leapt forward, plunging the chakra infused dagger through his chest all the way through, the shear force and power tearing it out the other side. Sena exhaled, all the pent up adrenaline feeling as though it exited with the simple breath. It wasn’t until she turned that she realised her mistake.

The figure in front of Sena began to crumble into white dust indicating that it wasn’t Deidara but a clone. Groaning at her foolishness, the kunoichi pulled her arm back and released the seal that kept the barrier up.

‘I will find you,’ Sena muttered. ‘I won’t let you hurt anyone else.’

‘Over here,’ Neji called jumping down from the trees.

They Hyūga had used his Byakugan to track down Deidara, and they finally were close enough to sneak up from behind. It also meant he would have the chance to battle the very person who had hurt the one he loved most. He would never forgive the Akatsuki member for what he did to Sena, nor would he let him live.

They arrived at the bush where Deidara was hiding and stood behind at a safe enough distance to wait for the Akatsuki member to reveal himself. It wasn’t long before Deidara shuffled out from the leaves to greet them. The dumbfounded expression on his face alone was not enough to satisfy
Neji.

‘Well done Neji,’ Guy said.

‘Heh, child’s play actually,’ Neji replied not bothering to hide his smug tone.

‘I get it Byakugan, one of the Kekkei Genkai of the Leaf, just like the Sharingan.’ Deidara said, a smirk on his face, the sight causing Neji to tense in anger. ‘You used those eyes of yours to sneak up on my blind spot hm? This is my first time seeing it in person, I’d be curious to see how it differs from Itachi’s Sharingan, but I think my escaping takes precedence at the moment.’

The confidence of Deidara, both armless and seemingly surrounded annoyed Neji. The man was just a loathsome as he remembered.

‘Heh, you’re looking at Team Guy here my friend,’ Guy began, ‘and we are the number one squad in the leaf, you’re not going anywhere.’

‘That is a promise!’ Lee said.

‘I hope you’re ready,’ Tenten added.

Then the fight broke out between them, Deidara with a kunai in his mouth and the speed to dodge their attacks. They continued like that for a few moments until the blond attempted to flee, away toward where, Neji saw, Team Kakashi was. Before he arrived there though Neji’s team pushed him within range and he hit him with an air palm. The move effectively sent him flying into a tree however Deidara proved more resilient than the Hyūga had expected.

‘Be careful everyone,’ Kakashi called, ‘he’s a long ranged fighter who uses explosives.’

Neji watched as Deidara jumped down to what looked to be a clay mould of sorts, surprised upon seeing the blond bite into it.

It was then that a figure jumped in front of Neji, arms spread and stance tall. It was Sena.

‘Everyone stay back!’ The kunoichi called.

Neji continued to watch Deidara with his Byakugan when he realised that he was concentrating all of his chakra into a single point.

‘Oh no,’ he whispered. ‘Everyone get out of here immediately!’

The others turn to run as ordered, realising that Deidara was setting off an explosion, one they probably would not be able to out run. Neji chanced a glance backwards, seeing the beginning of it before he turned to Sena at his side who was already looking at him with a frown. She was calculating something, he could tell by her familiar expression.

‘We’re never going to make it,’ called Neji.

Despite his words, however, Sena stopped and pushed him to the ground and stood in front of him. There he noticed the kunoichi pull forth a scroll but he knew it would be useless if the wave from the explosion hit them first.

Just when Sena was about to wield the sign to activate it, Neji saw Kakashi grab her ankle and push himself forward in front of her.

‘Kakashi don—’ Sena stopped, and Neji closed his eyes waiting for impact.
But the impact never came, and suddenly everything was silent except for a faint buzzing noise.

‘What’s going on?’ Guy said, causing Neji to open his eyes.

The sight that greeted him caused even him, Neji Hyūga, to second guess reality. One minute the explosion was on their tail, and now it had disappeared completely leaving a clear, blue sky and birds chirping in the trees. The buzzing noise he had heard turned out to be Sena’s lightning style utilised as a shield to protect them. But what had happened?

‘It worked, just in time,’ Kakashi said weakly before collapsing onto the ground.

Sena released the shield and rushed over to him along with Naruto.

‘Kakashi sensei, are you alright?’ Naruto asked.

‘I don’t get it, what did you do?’ Sakura asked.

‘Sent the explosion off into a different space,’ Kakashi replied.

‘His Sharingan has transformed into something new called the Mangekyou Sharingan,’ Sena said, tone rather harsher than Neji thought she would hold. ‘That was reckless using it like that without proper practice and control! Why didn’t you tell me about this?’

Yes, of course, Neji thought, The Sharingan’s visual jutsu.

‘We can talk about that later,’ Kakashi insisted, ‘for now is everyone okay?’

Everyone’s gazes turned to Gaara, and the mood changed.

Chapter End Notes

Hope this came across the way I wanted it. I have something exciting I think you all have been waiting for in the next chapter! Thanks for reading, feel free to comment or Kudos! <3
The return to the Sand Village was an occasion of both happiness and sorrow. Gaara had been revived but at the expense of Lady Chiyo giving her own life, which struck an all too familiar chord within Sena. There was too much death and sacrifice in their shinobi world and Sena felt helpless to stop it. The system she had followed since childhood was revealing itself to be wrong with each passing year.

Leaving the Kazekage’s office following the meeting that had been called to discuss all the facts of the mission, Sena sighed walking down the hall toward the exit to wait. The others had taken it upon themselves to replenish supplies for the journey while Sakura took care of Kakashi who was still recovering from his reckless use of the new Sharingan technique he had awakened. Sena had taken the opportunity to have a moment to herself in order to process what had transpired during the mission, and although Neji had wanted to accompany her, she denied him. There were things she had to understand in her mind before she could talk to him about them.

Leaning against the doorway, Sena looked out toward the village which seemed to sparkle in the sunlight, bringing the unique architecture to life. There her mind wandered back to the mission, mainly to Deidara and how foolish she felt for bothering to give him a chance. The man had put her through things she did not wish to repeat or even remember and on top of that he was a criminal. So why had she felt sorry for him?

Did she love him? Definitely not.

Did she care about him? Not in any deep way.

What was it that made Sena hesitate and try to give him a chance?

Then her thought process was interrupted.

‘Hey.’

Sena looked up to find Kankuro standing across from her, leaning against the other side of the doorframe, arms crossed.

‘Hey,’ Sena replied.

‘You good?’ His eye contact unwavering as his gaze caught hers. ‘You seemed spaced out there for
‘Yeah, I’m good.’ Sena closed her eyes and rubbed her temples. ‘Just thinking and processing everything.’

‘Given what came up in the meeting, I take it you’ve had experience with the Akatsuki before.’

‘In a sense, but that fact isn’t really useful anymore.’

‘It helped you save my brother.’

Sena’s brows furrowed together and she on instinct turned her gaze from Kankuro back toward the village.

‘Lady Chiyo was the one who saved Gaara.’

The technique the old woman had used perplexed Sena still as she remembered the strange sensation she had felt while sensing Gaara’s restoration and Chiyo’s demise. It was a bittersweet feeling that shook her to the core as if she was feeling life begin and end all at once. It made her curse the sensory abilities she possessed.

Sena turned and caught Kankuro’s eye again, his expression seeming softer than she had seen it before. Not wanting to continue on this subject she decided to move on, ignoring the obvious pity he felt for her. It was misguided and undeserving.

‘You look a lot better, do you feel alright now?’

The question seemed to catch him off guard.

‘Ah yeah, I feel back to normal now.’ He began to scratch his neck awkwardly. ‘I’ve actually been meaning to thank yo—’

‘Sena.’

The two turned, finding her comrades standing in front of them, their packs replenished. Sena watched as Neji looked between them, glancing from Kankuro then back to her, the slightest hint of a frown on his face.

‘Are you ready?’ He asked handing Sena, her pack. When she had denied him her company, he offered to renew her supplies for the journey.

Sena gave him a small smile and nodded.

‘Yeah, let’s go.’

Together they made their way toward the outskirts of the village, first passing by the memorial stone for Lady Chiyo, a sight Sena knew Sakura would like to see having formed a bond with the woman. Sena found her own need to visit; it was a reminder of the sacrifices one must make for the sake of the village and the people. That and she had also taken a liking to the old woman, despite her indifference toward them as Leaf ninja in the beginning.

Then came the goodbyes to the Gaara, Temari and Kankuro outside the entrance to the village. Sena hung back off to the side, allowing for Naruto and the others to benefit from the Kazekage’s presence, knowing they were the ones deserving of such an honour. The truth was she was still felt uneasy about the entire mission, not just because of what had happened but the prospect of what
was still to come. The Akatsuki had managed to extract one tailed beast which meant it was only the beginning and that they of would go after others, including Naruto. That put everyone in danger.

Just when Sena found herself lost in thought again, she felt a weight against her back, just below the shoulder. When she turned to look, she found it was Neji beside her, who quickly retracted his palm as quickly as he had placed it. The expression on his face remained neutral, but his eyes were full of question and concern. Instead of allowing Neji to worry further Sena shot him a small smile, before turning back to Naruto and the others.

After finishing their goodbyes and pleasantries, it was time to return home to Konoha and hopefully have some well-earned rest. The others turned ready to leave, but just as the kunoichi turned to join them, someone called out to her.

‘Hey, Sena!’ It was Kankuro.

Sena turned back to Neji who had stopped to wait for her.

‘I’ll catch up with you,’ Sena said, but he didn’t look convinced. ‘I’m sure it’ll take a second.’

She took a couple of steps back toward the Sand shinobi.

‘What is it?’ Sena asked.

‘I never got the chance to say thank you for saving me and bringing my brother back.’

Sena shrugged.

‘Our villages are allies; you would have done the same for us.’

‘I guess,’ he averted his gaze and shifted looking very uncomfortable. ‘So, listen. I was wondering, next time I see you, maybe we could grab a bite to eat or something.’

Sena’s brows raised. She had not been expecting such a request from Kankuro, considering their conversations usually derived of sarcastic banter or village talk. It wasn’t like him to be so serious outside the confines of missions or matters of business. A smirk found her face suddenly feeling very oblivious for not realising his intentions sooner.

‘Are you asking me on a date?’ Sena asked, not bothering to hide the mocking tone.

Kankuro blushed a little and shifted again giving away his intention immediately.

‘Well yeah, I guess I am.’

Sena tried to hold back a chuckle but couldn’t, feeling sorry the moment she saw the humiliation on the Sand shinobi’s face.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘It’s just I wasn’t expecting this from you.’ The kunoichi took a deep breath, forcing the laughter to stop and regained her composure. ‘I’m flattered, really, but the thing is I am already with someone…’ She watched as he frowned a little before adding, ‘romantically speaking.’

‘Oh, yeah, of course, no big deal,’ Kankuro said, regaining a little bit more of his usual confidence back as his eye caught something in the distance. ‘It wouldn’t happen to be the one death staring me right now would it?’
Sena turned back to see Neji watching them very closely, brows knitted together. She laughed again, facing Kankuro with a wide smile.

‘Neji?’ She clarified. ‘Yeah, he is the one.’

‘I see,’ Kankuro muttered, crossing his arms. ‘Well should that change—’

‘It won’t.’

‘Understood.’

Sena bit her bottom lip, still processing the situation in her mind when she realised she had spent a lot of time talking.

‘Anyway I should be going, I don’t want to keep them waiting.’

‘Right, well see you.’

Sena began to walk toward Neji before stopping and shooting Kankuro one last smile and wave.

‘Try not to run into any more poisons while I’m gone,’ Sena called wanting to savour the friendship they had established.

‘Yeah, try not to steal other people’s leads!’ He called back, a smile appearing on his face once again.

Sena smirked at the comment but continued heading toward Neji, feeling a little lighter than before. The thoughts that had been weighing her down lifted and left her alone for the time being while more positive thoughts flooded her mind. Once she reached Neji, he gave her a look which she couldn’t quite read, but if Sena didn’t know better, she would say he looked annoyed.

‘Sorry to keep you waiting,’ Sena said, apologetically as possible.

‘What was that about?’ Neji asked coolly.

‘Nothing important, I’ll tell you later.’

Neji’s only response was a short ‘hm,’ and then he set out after the others. The reaction threw Sena off a little, but it didn’t worry her too much at first, for all she knew he was just in a bad mood. Talking to later would surely clear it all up, if not the kunoichi thought of other ways of getting him to come around. The ideas circling her mind made her smirk.

It didn’t take them long to catch up to others walking in the desert with Kakashi drained from the Sharingan. Sena wanted to give him another talking to but bit her tongue, deciding she would do so once he was fully recovered. The Copy-Ninja just seemed pathetic in that condition, so much, so it made Sena feel sorry for him. They moved slowly for awhile until Guy, seemingly tired of the pace, decided it would be an excellent idea to carry Kakashi. Sena couldn’t hold back her laugh when Lee offered to do the same for Neji, which earned a very stern glare from the Hyūga.

From there they continued through the desert, and by the time they made it out and into the forest it was almost nightfall. With the exertion they had all put themselves through the past week, they decided to make camp and rest for the remainder of the evening. Much to Sena’s dismay, Neji’s mood hadn’t lifted in their journey, and he barely spoke to anyone, snapping at those who dared try. Sena took it upon herself to be the one to set him straight.
‘I’m going to do a quick patrol,’ Neji declared, walking away from the camp.

‘Hang on,’ Sena called, following him. ‘Do you want me to come with you?’

‘No, it’s fine.’ He didn’t even look at her, just kept walking.

Sena didn’t back down that easily though which the Hyūga should have known. She quickly reached out and took hold of his hand, forcing him to stop. Neji didn’t snatch it away or move it at first but did look back at her, a little surprised. Sena frowned, trying to read his expression watching as his jaw clenched. He was hiding something that was for sure.

‘What’s wrong?’ Sena asked.

‘It’s nothing.’

Neji gently tugged his hand away and disappeared deeper into the forest without another word or chance for her to pry.

The kunoichi couldn’t help but sigh and had no choice but return to the camp and wait. If Neji didn’t want to talk then there was nothing she could do about it, not when they were travelling with the others around anyway. Something was troubling him, and she didn’t like it. Instead of moping about though, Sena unravelled her bed roll next to Sakura and decided to at least try and get some rest.

No matter how many times Sena tossed and turned that night, she couldn’t get her worries about Neji off of her mind.

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It was early in the morning when they all decided to get up and to move again. The sun had barely begun to break through the trees, and there was a chill in the air. Neji was the first one awake. He didn’t sleep well with everything on his mind, not to mention that he was very much aware of Sena rolling and sighing a metre away from him. The truth was he had wanted to tell her what was on his mind, but he had no idea how. How was one supposed to communicate such childish feelings?

The Hyūga instead, decided to do what he usually did and bottle up the thoughts and feelings while unintentionally pushing Sena away in the process. The moment he did, however, he regretted it instantly, more so knowing it was causing her to become worried and lose sleep. It wasn’t a conversation he wanted to have with others around when they could potentially eaves drop so he resigned himself to the idea of talking to her properly once they returned to the village. Not that he ever wanted to have the conversation he felt foolish about at all.

As an attempt to distract from all the thoughts swimming in his mind, Neji took the lead, doubling their speed from the previous day. The need to get home and away from everyone was growing by the hour. Even though he stayed ahead, Neji was aware of Sena trailing close behind keeping an eye on him. He could practically feel the intensity of her stare as the tension between them became unbearable. Now and then, once it became too much to handle and he felt as though he would explode, the Hyūga chanced a glance in her direction. However, it wasn’t as subtle as he had planned because most times he tried Sena’s gaze locked onto his. Every time it happened, his skin felt hot like he was flushed with fever, but he knew it was just his frustration reaching the breaking point.
Despite all of this he pushed on until they stopped for a quick break to rest and eat. Neji took a seat against the trunk of a tree, retrieving his drink canister from his pack and taking a sip. While he did this, he watched Sena approach and take a seat at the same tree beside him. He noticed that she purposely kept a little distance between them probably not wanting to overstep her boundaries. The idea of that tugged at a particular string in his chest making the urge to talk to her again rise. But then the image of her standing with Kankuro laughing entered his mind and bitterness overcame him. That coupled with the fact that Sena still hadn’t explained what happened with Deidara was plaguing his mind. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust her it was just not knowing what happened sparked something within Neji he couldn’t quite explain. He decided to keep quiet while they sat there and was relieved to find she followed suit.

Then they were off again, Neji still in the lead, trying to get back to Konoha as soon as possible. The idea of having to stay in that position for another two days put him on edge, but no matter what he did he couldn’t stop glancing back at Sena, worried. The prospect of losing her became all too real in his mind, and he couldn’t handle the thought of it. The longer they travelled for, the more helpless the Hyūga felt. There had to be something he could do to defuse the situation.

It wasn’t long until nightfall came again and they stopped to make camp. Much like the night before they got a fire going, ate then got out their bedrolls and attempted to rest. All through dinner Sena and Neji stole glances from the other, searching for each other then looking away again. Neji saw the questions reflected in her eyes, but he didn’t have the courage to answer them yet so instead he retreated to the safety of his bed roll.

Despite not wanting to discuss the particular issue, Neji couldn’t help but indulge in the kunoichi’s presence, wanting to keep a watchful eye on her. When he couldn’t sleep, Neji turned to face her, watching as she breathed soundly, occasionally moaning softly in her sleep less than a metre away. It calmed his mind seeing her at peace, remembering the nightmares she had been plagued with not long before. Neji wondered whether they were still bothering her but reminded himself she had not stirred the night before. On instinct, he shuffled his bed roll a little closer just in case.

Neji watched her for a moment longer then sighed and allowed his eyes to drift closed. Then he heard her stir and shift.

‘Neji?’ Sena murmured in her half-slumbered state.

He opened his eyes to find hers half-lidded and looking back at him. Then Neji watched as her hand poked out from the top of her blanket, snaking it’s way out and over to his face. Sena’s hand was cold against his cheek, but he didn’t flinch or shy from her touch, certain that everyone else, aside from whoever was on watch in the distance, was asleep.

‘Are you alright?’ She asked, sounding very groggy but also concerned as her fingertips stroked his cheek.

‘I’m fine,’ he said gently, taking her hand in his. ‘Go back to sleep.’

He pressed two soft kisses to her knuckles and guided her hand back underneath her blanket.

‘M’kay.’

Neji watched as Sena snuggled into her bed roll and drifted back to sleep, feeling his heart fill at the sight. Guilt surged through him not long after that, and he decided the second they returned to the village the next day he would make things right with her. A part of him which was prepared for the worst didn’t even care what she told him; he just wanted things to go back to normal. And with that decision made Neji found he could sleep easier.
In the morning Neji woke to the sunlight shining onto his face through the gaps in the treetops. Blinking a few times the Hyūga opened his eyes to the light, scrunching his face at the intensity before turning his head to the side. There his gaze found Sena who had begun to stir. Instead of lingering on her, Neji sat up and stretched, pulling the cover of his bed roll away before standing up. There he pulled on his shoes and heard Sena sit up beside him. He had almost forgotten moving closer to her in the night and was glad he was awake before the others had realised.

There Neji stood up about to take a walk and check the perimeter when Sena called out to him.

‘Where are you going?’

Neji didn’t turn to face her, not wanting to reveal anything that might spark the conversation he so dreaded.

‘Just going to check everything is clear.’ He went to continue ahead.

‘Wait I’ll come with you.’

Before Neji could protest, Sena had pulled back her cover, put on her shoes and was at his side. Without a word or glance, they went ahead further into the forest in silence. They continued like that for awhile until the tension built up and they began stealing glances once more. That was all it took for Sena to break the silence.

‘Alright, tell me,’ she said, taking hold of his hand.

‘Tell you what?’ Neji asked, avoiding her gaze in a weak attempt to shrug her off. He should have known better.

Sena grabbed his cheek with her other hand and forced him to look at her.

‘Neji,’ she murmured.

Neji didn’t find an angry expression on her face though. Instead, he found a look of concern which caused his hard exterior to crumble.

‘It’s trivial.’ And childish, he reminded himself.

‘Not if it’s got you this tense and worked up. It’s important to you so please, tell me.’ Her hand moved from his hand to his arm, giving it a gentle squeeze. ‘I don’t like seeing you this way.’

The last sentence was enough to wear him down. Neji took a deep breath and closed his eyes, hoping it would somehow make the situation better.

‘What was going on between you and Kankuro back at the Sand Village?’

‘What are you implying?’ Sena asked, brow raised.

‘Nothing,’ Neji said pulling away. ‘Forget it.’

Sena was quick to reach out and grab his arm again to prevent him from leaving.

‘Wait.’ She took a moment as if studying him. ‘Don’t tell me you’re... jealous?’ Neji tried to pull away from her grasp as she circled to get in front of him but failed. ‘Oh Neji, that’s what this has been about?’

Neji could feel his cheeks burning and his irritation growing.
‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’ Neji wanted the earth to swallow him the moment he heard Sena smirk. He didn’t appreciate being so open and vulnerable.

‘I’ll tell you what happened, alright. Just promise me you won’t jump to conclusions until I finish.’ Sena gave him a look when he didn’t answer right away.

‘Alright, alright.’ He took a deep breath. ‘I promise.’

‘At first, he just wanted to thank me for helping with the antidote and the rescue mission,’ Sena stopped, pinching the bridge of her nose and letting out a heavy sigh. Then her eyes met his again. ‘Then he sort of asked me out on a date.’

‘He did what!?’ Neji could feel the anger within him ignite instantly but he tried to stay in control. ‘Well, what did you say?’

‘What do you think I said?’

Neji folded his arms and huffed, waiting for her to confirm his thoughts. Sena’s brow furrowed, but just when it looked like she was going to get angry, her expression softened again. The kunoichi sighed and reached out for his arm again.

‘I declined the offer and told him I was with you, alright?’

The confirmation allowed Neji to relax a little bit. His worst fears were finally put to rest, and he could happily continue with the instinct to trust Sena. Deep down he knew she would always be loyal to him, but there was always that voice in the back of his head that clouded his mind. The voice that reminded him he didn’t deserve her.

‘Good,’ Neji said looking down. ‘I’m sorry I acted the way I did.’

‘Hm,’ Sena mused. ‘You really did get jealous didn’t you?’

‘No, I just go concerned, that’s all.’ His tone came off a little more defensive than he had intended which caused Sena to laugh.

‘Oh Neji, why didn’t you just come and talk to me?’

‘Because I knew it was foolish,’ Neji began, ‘besides I didn’t want to entertain the idea of you being with someone else.’

‘There is more to this than just Kankuro, isn’t there?’

Neji nodded, not wanting to reveal everything at once but knew he had to be honest and tell her something.

‘When Kakashi said over the radio you were with Deidara…I thought the worst.’ Neji clutched the hand hold his arm and squeezed. ‘I remembered what you looked like the first time I saw you with him. I never want you to go through that again.’

Sena’s hands made their way up to his cheeks, pulling his gaze to meet hers. As he looked into her eyes and saw the emotions reflected in them, ones that said she understood. He concentrated on the cool touch of her palms on his skin.

‘I don’t want to lose you,’ Neji whispered.

Sena brought her face closer to his so they were mere inches apart, their breaths mingling.
'You never will,' Sena murmured before placing a chaste kiss on his lips.

The simple act was intended to be sweet, Neji was certain, but it set off something inside of him he couldn’t hold back. The next thing he knew his lips were on hers again, this time with more passion and need. Sena responded by gripping the fabric of his shirt, balling her fists against it to use for stability while she pushed further into the kiss. Neji took hold of her waist pushing her back until they stopped, hitting the tree.

There the Hyūga felt the desperation inside him grow into something almost carnal as he tore his lips from hers only to place them on her neck instead. He trailed kisses down her neck to her shoulder and across the exposed skin of her chest, returning up to her jaw on the opposite side. Neji had forgotten all about being in the open or on a mission with others his only concern was his need for Sena.

The kunoichi moaned, her fingers winding themselves in his hair gently pulling his head up, so their lips met once again. The kiss was messy and needy, their tongues meeting and teeth clattering. Their arms wrapped around each other, both trying to get close as possible.

‘Neji,’ Sena breathed, barely, between kisses. ‘Don’t you…think we should…wait until…mmm… later.’

Instead of listening, Neji swallowed each word with each flex of his mouth, increasing the rhythm of his tongue against hers. They continued like this for what seemed like forever until he heard a voice call out.

‘Neji!’

The Hyūga recognised it as Lee, somewhere in the distance and he immediately broke the kiss. Such a sight was not something he wanted others to see despite his cloudy, lust filled thoughts only moments prior. Both of them were panting, still pressed against each other locked in an intense gaze that seemed to say they would finish the moment later. Neji sighed and reluctantly pushed himself away, effectively breaking contact.

Yes, it was something they would continue, once they had reached the village but the Hyūga couldn’t help but feel a tingling sensation as he grazed his lips with his fingers on the way back to the camp.

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Once the two teams made it back to the village, they checked Kakashi into the hospital to get much needed medical attention and then reported into the Hokage. Tsunade had requested that Sena stayed behind to have an individual briefing so she told Neji she would meet up with him afterwards at his place. The kiss which had taken place in the woods replayed in the back of her mind, distracting her constantly throughout the meeting. Then finally the discussion was over, and Sena was free to leave, returning home to pack some clothes before heading to the Hyūga compound.

Home was eerily quiet when Sena returned. Kyou was not there, Sena vaguely remembered him mentioning being away on clan business, and it seemed Saio was out either running errands or required elsewhere. The only presence Sena detected was one she had been longing for and the
signature coming from her bedroom. The kunoichi rushed up the stairs, down the hall and stopped at the entrance of her room. Taking a deep breath, she slid open the door to find Neji standing in front of her vanity, arms folded. He turned on hearing her enter, a soft yet unsure expression on his face.

‘I…’ Neji hesitated, ‘didn’t want to wait.’

A warmth bloomed within Sena, and a smile spread across her face at the Hyūga’s words. They were sweet in their own way and more so now that Sena understood the deeper meaning behind them.

Their eyes caught in an intense stare, reflecting the carnal instinct they both had shared in the forest hours before. It was the same feelings of lust and desire they had kept buried for so long, manifesting and encapsulating them whole. The next thing Sena knew they were both crossing the threshold wrapping their arms around each other while their lips met in a passionate kiss. It was very much like the one they had shared in the forest, but this had the opportunity to go further without fear of interruption.

That kiss and the one they were sharing, had been different to the ones shared before. Neji had given himself fully to each without reservations unlike all those times in the past and Sena couldn’t help but drown in each second of it. It always surprised her that his lips though soft and gentle could be at the same time be firm and determined. It made the kunoichi kiss back with growing ferocity and depth, her hands making sure to grab and caress every part of him she could.

They both fell onto the bed, Sena on top and Neji more than willing to accept her dominance placed his hands on the small of her back. Sena pressed a firm kiss to his lips before dropping to his chin, across his cheeks continuing to pepper kisses across the bare skin of his chest earning strained moans mixed with shallows breaths from the Hyūga. Continuing to seek places to litter him with open mouthed kisses, Sena made quick work of unbuttoning his shirt, unravelling the layers until his chest and core were completely exposed. The kunoichi met no restraint from Neji and took it as a concession to ravish him all the way down until his waistband and then back up again pulling his shirt off completely in the process.

Then her lips sought his once again as she repositioned herself, subtly aligning their hips together and pushing down when she kissed him. Neji hissed into the kiss but made no move to stop her, instead laced his fingers through her raven locks and pulled her closer. They fell into a rhythm, and Neji’s hand glided down fingertips pushing Sena’s shirt aside to caress her exposed skin, rubbing circles up the small of her back.

They continued to kiss like that for awhile until Sena could feel something poking into her backside. She smirked, it had always prided her knowing she could make the Hyūga respond that way. Having restrained herself from rocking her hips too early not wanting to overwhelm him again, Sena took it as the opportunity to start.

With a new found determination Sena began to roll her hips and wiggle her backside over Neji’s clothed erection. Neji stilled his lips against hers for but a moment, taking a sharp intake of breath before returning to the kiss. Sena could feel his body tense at first, stilling all other movements other than his lips, causing her to worry. But then his hands moved, running along her backside then up toward her hips. Sena feared Neji might try and cease her motions and pull her off until she realised he was just trying to gain more friction. The Hyūga pushed her down onto his arousal, grip tightening on her hips at the same time causing the kunoichi to moan softly.

They had never crossed that line before, both completely giving into their desires so willingly and Sena loved every second of it. Not wanting to waste an opportunity, she redoubled her efforts
Sena could feel her shirt bunching up beneath Neji’s movements and broke the kiss wanting to discard the hindering garment. Sena sat back and grasped the hem of her shirt and pulled it over her head tossing it to the side, not once stilling her hips. Then she looked down at Neji captivated as her eyes observed his features wanting to imprint every detail in her mind; the way his cheeks flushed in arousal to his slightly parted lips which exuded soft moans as he watched her through half lidded eyes. It was all too much to take in at once, so she pushed herself forward and crashed their lips together, this time cupping her hands on each side of his face.

The intensity of the moment grew as did the friction between them as Sena snapped her hips faster and harder feeling all too well his reaction. Their kiss broke, Neji biting his bottom lip in a feeble attempt to suppress moans while Sena attached her lips his neck sucking the skin gently as not to leave any marks. There she felt him buck his hips against her causing her to mewl at the pleasurable jolt. It was all Sena needed to push down with even more force than before allowing her hands to explore his chest tracing circular patterns down toward his waistband.

This seemed to snap Neji from his lust infused trance and back to his senses because he stilled movements and grabbed her hips.

‘W-wait,’ he said, breathless giving away his arousal.

Sena detached herself from his neck, unsure of what was happening as she looked down at the panting Hyūga beneath her. Neji mirrored what the kunoichi was sure she looked like—a flushed, dishevelled mess.

‘I don’t think I can…’ Neji trailed off, trying to take deeper breaths amongst his panting.

‘It’s okay we don’t have to,’ Sena said, pressing a chaste kiss to his lips, ‘we can just keep doing this for now.’ She rolled her hips once to communicate her meaning.

‘No, stop.’

Sena halted her motions again, worried she had gone too far as she watched him run a shaky hand through his hair. She could have sworn this what he had intended during the forest and by coming here early. Perhaps she was wrong.

‘It’s not that I…’ The Hyūga sighed covered his face with his palms and sighed.

Sena took his hands in hers and pulled them from his face, so he was forced to look at her.

‘What is it? Tell me.’

Neji pushed himself upright, Sena still sitting in his lap preventing him from moving away and avoiding the issue. She wasn’t going to go through the not knowing and waiting again; it was torture for both of them.

‘It’s nothing,’ he dismissed, turning his head to the side. ‘We shouldn’t be doing this.’

‘Uh-uh no.’ Sena grabbed his chin and turned his head to face her. ‘I don’t buy that for a second, just tell me whatever it is, please.’

A scowl crossed Neji’s face as he snatched his hand from her and turned away again.
‘It doesn’t matter so why must you persist.’ His tone was hostile and harsh, but Sena couldn’t help but see through it for what it was: a defence.

‘It does matter if it affects how you feel about me!’ Sena snapped.

Neji turned back to face her, eyes wide as if he had not been expecting such a response from her. What else could she do though? It was impossible to read his mind.

‘What?’

‘You heard me,’ Sena said a little more gently. ‘Whatever you aren’t telling me is obviously affecting us being together.’

‘That’s not— you’re misinterpreting this completely.’

‘Well, how am I supposed to interpret it if you give me nothing? The only conclusion I can draw is that you don’t want me in that way.’ She subtly moved her hips brushing her backside against his still very hard erection. ‘But even that doesn’t make sense when you react like this.’

Neji groaned and took a deep breath.

‘It’s not that I don’t want you, far from it, it’s just that…’

‘It’s just what?’

‘I know I don’t deserve you alright!?’ Neji snapped finally revealing the truth.

Sena felt her chest clench as the words tore her heart apart.

‘How can I allow you to give yourself to me and throw away everything else?’ Neji continued, his eyes cast downward. ‘You are the head of a clan, and I am but a branch member of another. I cannot leave my clan or my duties.’ Sena didn’t miss the way his fingers subconsciously touched his forehead. ‘And I won’t ask you to leave yours just for me.’

‘Neji.’ Sena’s voice was small and wavering unable to fathom the words for how deeply his words had struck her.

‘I can’t—won’t— taint your existence like that.’ It was then she saw his fists ball beside him, trembling ever so slightly. ‘You deserve better.’

‘You could never—do you really think I care about all of that?’ Sena reached down taking his hands in hers to steady them, feeling tears come to her eyes. ‘You think I worry about making sacrifices in order to be with you?’ The kunoichi had no idea Neji had been feeling such a way and didn’t want him to suffer further.

‘Sena…’ Neji bit his lip and averted his eyes.

‘Neji look at me.’ She requested a single tear sliding down her cheek. When he didn’t move, she gently caressed his cheek with her hand, turning him, so his gaze met hers. When those lavender eyes finally came to her, her heart almost shattered completely. The man before her, the one she loved with every fibre of her soul, looked so defeated—broken.

‘There is nothing you would ever do to taint my existence; I know that with all my heart. Just like I know that no one could ever deserve me more than you. I have watched you become a person far better than I could ever hope for; someone who without knowing it, has always been perfect for
me.’ Sena smiled through the tears, taking Neji’s hand and bringing it to her lips.

‘I don’t want to make you regret anything,’ he tried to pull away, but Sena wouldn’t allow him to, not again.

‘I won’t ever regret anything. I want to be with you,’ she whispered kissing his knuckles on the one hand. ‘And only you.’

‘Are you sure?’ Neji hesitated, looking at her with uncertainty and she finally understood.

Neji was a part of the branch family which meant he was treated in a far harsher manner than she would ever truly understand. Since his father’s death negativity was thrust on him most of his life, which caused the bitterness within him to spread and multiply almost swallowing him whole. The things expected from Neji were always given, he was a genius, so nobody bothered to think twice about him. He said himself that he didn’t know what unconditional love felt like until she had come along to show him. Neji wasn’t used to someone loving him, so he immediately thought it was because he was undeserving. Sena now finally understood and would do everything she could to show just how wrong he was.

‘I am sure.’ Sena pressed her lips to kiss the knuckles on his other hand. ‘Just like I am sure that you deserve me.’ Perhaps more than I deserve you.

The Hyūga’s breath hitched, Sena leaned forward and wrapped her arms around his neck, fingertips gently stroking his hair. It had taken a moment before his hands moved to her back, and he sighed, eyes locked with hers. They sat there like that for a moment, Sena shuffling forward, wanting to be as close to Neji as possible. Then her hands slid down his chest and up his neck, stopping to caress his cheeks. There her fingertips danced in light circular motions up towards his hitae-ate, tracing the leaf engraving before disappearing amongst his hair, behind where it knotted. Neji shot her a questioning glance.

‘Do you trust me?’ Sena asked softly.

‘Of course,’ Neji murmured.

Sena then untied the hitae-ate and carefully removed it from his forehead watching as his overgrown bangs, and wisps of hair fell shaping his face. The kunoichi smirked placing the head band on the table beside them before drinking in his well-defined face while her fingers explored the contours. He really was handsome, beautiful even and it made her love him all the more.

‘Will you let me show you something?’ Sena asked, fingertips tracing over his lips.

‘What is it?’ Neji asked reluctantly.

Instead of answering Sena pressed her lips to his, kneading them slowly and gently at first until he responded and efficiently deepened it into something more. Once again his hands found her back, softly caressing the skin there. Sena moved her lips to his cheek and began trailing kisses up, cupping his other cheek with her hand to push him further into her touch, until she reached his ear. There she pressed her lips to the outside of it, feeling him shiver against her once she worked her tongue along it.

‘Let me show you what you mean to me,’ she whispered then nuzzled her face against his cheek, earning a soft moan from the Hyūga. Sena lifted her face, so it was hovering over his once again.

‘What are you—’
Neji was silenced by her finger on his lips.

‘Please let me show you; you don’t have to do anything at all.’ Her hand caressed up and down his chest for emphasis.

‘Okay,’ he breathed, giving her permission to continue.

‘Thank you,’ she whispered, giving him a small smile. ‘Lie back for me?’ Neji nodded and leaned back into the pillow, hands falling to his sides like he didn’t quite know what to do with him.

Sena leaned forward and pressed a kiss to his jaw.

‘From the first day we met, back when we were children you were sweet and kind to me, my first real friend,’ She began, Neji’s breath hitching.

There Sena pressed another kiss this time to his neck.

‘Even when your heart was raw with your own family tragedy you came and cared for me when I had my own. You made me see that even in their darkest times people can still be caring.’

Sena’s words were light between them, almost as her lips were, along his face. After a few more kisses she finally felt Neji relax a little, his hands sliding up to take hold of her hips.

‘The time at the academy and after graduation when you avoided me it felt like something was missing. And then the Chūnin exams came, and I feared I had lost you forever, that the person I cared so much for had disappeared into the darkness.’ Her lips moved down his neck, leaving a wet trail of open mouthed kisses. ‘But then the last round came, and I finally understood why you changed. It crushed my heart to finally understand the pain you had gone through and how hard it must have been.’ Sena reached his chest, her fingers running in circling motions. ‘When I saw you in the medical bay afterwards my heart filled when I realised the Neji I once knew had returned.’

Sena shifted over him, brushing against his erection ever so slightly in the process eliciting a choked moan from the Hyūga. Her face hovered over the large scar on his chest, the one he had received during the recovery mission years prior.

‘You’re so brave…’ She pressed her lips to the scar, ‘so strong…’ then she moved to the other scar near it and kissed that one.

There the kunoichi shifted upwards, keeping a slow and steady rhythm of her hips against his and pressed her lips to his cheek.

‘So kind…’ She moved to the other cheek, ‘And caring…’ Then she found his lips, ghosting over them, ‘You made me want to be a better person…’ She closed the distance between them and allowed their lips to crash together. She once again moved her hips over his erection, this time pushing down a bit stronger.

‘B-But that’s not all.’ Sena moved her face up further, to where the curse mark lay, the one that had caused him so much pain. She brought her hand up, tracing the lines of the mark while she looked him in the eye.

Neji’s brows furrowed together on instinct at the contact to his forehead but he didn’t say a word, merely waited for her to continue. There was something in his gaze which resembled awe altogether with something else she couldn’t quite make out. Perhaps it was gratitude or even uncertainty, either way, the kunoichi continued.
‘You made me realise that I didn’t need to do things on my own, that I could trust in people...trust in you. No one is more deserving of me because no one else has faith in me like you do.’ There she leaned forward and kissed his forehead.

When Sena pulled away she hovered above him once again, her hand gently stroking his cheek and gliding over his lips.

‘You showed me life was worth living even when I got lost in the darkness.’ Her voice cracked revealing the intensity of the emotions she was feeling. ‘I love you so much Neji, and I want you to know that.’ Instead of waiting for a response she kissed him with the full force of everything that had built up.

Neji didn’t hesitate to kiss back, not for a second, the neediness in his resolve manifested exponentially as he ran his tongue over her bottom lip and bucked his hips upward. Sena willingly opened her mouth allowing their tongues to explore, running against each other. The rhythm of the kiss continued to change pace, Sena pulling away between kisses to speak.

‘W-will you...let me...show you now?’ Her voice was breathless and strained, but Neji seemed to hear clearly as he gave a nod in response.

Sena wasted no time trailing more open mouthed kisses down his chest, abdomen and further down until she reached the waistband of his pants. Looking down at the obvious tenting bulging Sena leaned down without hesitation and pecked his clothed erection from the base to the top. Neji shuddered intimately at the gesture letting out a strangled groan in the process. A smirk crossed Sena’s lips, feeling her own arousal increase as she hooked her fingers under the waistband. Her eyes found his, half-lidded and watching her intently.

‘Help me with these?’ Sena asked, wanting permission as much as the assistance.

Neji hesitated for a second before nodding and sitting up to provide easier access as he raised his hips. Sena with his assistance pulled the garments down allowing for his erection to spring free. Halfway down his thighs, Sena stopped, knowing it would be enough to get them out of the way. Then she crawled back onto his lap, watching the way he blushed when his arousal brushed against her abdomen and the way he clenched his jaw and balled his fists.

Giving him a chaste kiss and then a warm smile, the kunoichi trailed her hand with a featherlight touch down his chest all the way until she reached her desired destination. Keeping one hand on his shoulder to steady herself, she wrapped her other hand around his very hard erection. The second Sena touched him, Neji moaned and let his head fall against her shoulder, the warm puffs of air tickling her skin.

The kunoichi gave an experimental stroke upward, making sure to keep her grip loose until the proper lubrication was applied. It seemed to be enough for Neji’s receptive member as she felt it twitch just as she reached the head. There Sena ran her thumb over the head, which was already oozing pre-cum and slathered it down along his shaft. This time she gave it a firm stroke, keeping her grip tight and continued her movements once she heard the moans spill from the Hyūga.

The hand that had been on his shoulder found his hair, gently stroking it once his hold on her waist became painfully tight. Sena didn’t complain but rather relished the fact she could make him feel that way. Continuing her firm grip, she increased her speed every so often taking note of the extra sensitive areas along the way. Once she figured which made Neji the most responsive, she added pressure just below the head, purposely letting her thumb to linger there. That simple act alone caused Neji to throw his head back allowing her to move a little more freely.
The Hyūga was becoming undone already with a few simple touches, and his continuous pants and moans only spurred her on. The kunoichi wanted to do more for him to make the experience as pleasurable as she could. Continuing her ministrations, Sena used her other hand to push Neji all the way back until his head hit the pillow and began pressing kisses down his chest, making sure to let her tongue lap over his skin.

When Sena reached his waist, she repositioned herself, so her lips reached the tip of his cock, eyes locking with Neji. Just when he seemed about to ask what she was doing, she took the tip into the wet heat of her mouth not once breaking eye contact. When Sena pulled off again, Neji whined, and it was the most beautiful thing she had heard in her life. Stifling a giggle, she focused on the task at hand, running her tongue along the underside of his shaft, slowly, from the base to the head. Then she peppered kisses along the length before taking him into her mouth again.

The kunoichi swirled her tongue around the tip before taking more of him, pushing the length of his cock deeper into her mouth. Sena stopped once she reached halfway then retracted, moving her head back forth while her hand pumped the rest of his length. It wasn’t long before Neji was a mess of moans and bucking hips, trying desperately to thrust deeper into her mouth. Sena obliged his wishes letting her cheeks hollow while removing her hand and allowed herself to take him entirely, stopping once her mouth hit the base and his cock hit the back of her throat. Truth be told he was bigger than Sena had imagined, but she took on the nice surprise with determination.

There Sena began to suck as hard as she could, tongue swirling strategically, her hands pressing against his thighs for support. She didn’t stop when Neji threaded his fingers through her hair, softly playing with it while at the same time coaxing her to continue. The kunoichi had no intention of stopping until she made him climax. Keeping her eyes on his face, watching the way it scrunched up in pleasure and his eyes squeezed shut, Sena kept bobbing her head up and down his length. And when she felt his body tense and begin to spasm the kunoichi doubled her efforts, all to push him over the edge.

‘Ahh…Sena…I’m—’ Before he could even finish his sentence Neji let out a loud moan and came, releasing himself inside of Sena’s mouth.

Continuing to suck Sena let him ride out his orgasm, swallowing every bit of cum he released into her mouth before pulling off, satisfied he was done. Making sure nothing dripped down the kunoichi wiped her chin on the back of her hand before lifting Neji’s pants and boxers back up and over his hips. Once she did that the kunoichi looked down at the Hyūga admiring the way his flushed cheeks looked in contrast to his milky white skin and how some of his hair stuck to his sweaty forehead. Sena smiled, reaching out to brush the stray hairs aside then allowed her fingertips to caress his cheek as she laid beside him.

Once his breathing returned to normal, and he had recovered from his high, Neji turned to look at Sena. She continued to trail her fingertips across his warm cheeks, eyes never leaving his for a moment.

‘Sena…’ Neji began, voice hoarse. ‘Why did you—’

Sena pressed her lips to his in order to stop him. She didn’t know what he was going to ask, but she knew it was something she could answer with one sentence.

‘Because I love you,’ she whispered against his lips.

Neji didn’t respond verbally. Instead, he wrapped his arms around the kunoichi and pulled her close to his chest. Sena nuzzled her face into his neck, indulging in the warmth of his body. There was no need for words because Sena understood him completely, it was his way of telling her that
he loved her too.

There were still things they would have to discuss, but for the time being, they contented themselves with being in each other’s arms because for them, that was enough.

Chapter End Notes

hoooooweeee what a long chapter which was hell to edit but hey it finally happened yay for smut!
Melancholy Skies

Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Her heart was pounding in her chest; the blood thrummed in her temples, her hands were shaking a little. She brought them under control by clenching her fists. The intensity of the troubling dream that had awoken her remained fresh in her mind. The kunoichi calmed herself with the help of deep breaths. She loosened her shoulders, and moved her neck, stiff from the built up tension.

As usual, the birds filled the grey and foggy dawn with an explosion of chirping in anticipation of the sunrise. Although the sky still held onto the night, a streak of sunlight in the east, barely breaking in the distance, warned of the new day. The days seemed to pass by in a heartbeat, too quick for comfort, causing the skies to become melancholy, constantly reminding Sena of the time she was losing. They had only arrived back in the village the day before but the days lost suffocated her just thinking about it. She had to get her team into action and find out more information about the Akatsuki.

Continuing to walk along the road away from the Hyūga compound and toward the centre of the village, she noticed a certain calmness in the air, one undisturbed by the mad rush of people often seen during the day. It was a nice change of pace. Sena always enjoyed early morning walks for that reason. That and she found it was becoming harder to get a good nights sleep. There was too much to think about while at the same time not enough information to calm her.

It wasn’t long before she reached the hospital, which Sena knew from experience, had but a handful of staff during the evening. That made it easy to slip by the desk clerk and watch out for the medical personnel on their night rounds or doing light duties. Sena made it to the room she was searching for within minutes, only having to avoid one person. It was not exactly appropriate visiting hours, but she knew the patient well enough to know that they wouldn’t be asleep.

Sliding the door open quietly, Sena slipped into the room and over to the patient’s bed, making sure to keep an ear out for any other hospital staff approaching. She wished she knew what time they did their rounds and which rooms were checked but it was too late for that. Upon her approach the patient stirred and opened one eye, looking at her.

‘Sena,’ Kakashi began, making no move to sit upright. ‘Why are you here?’

‘To scold you,’ Sena replied crossing her arms.

‘Isn’t it a little early for a scolding? Besides shouldn’t you be sleeping? You need your rest.’

‘I could say the same to you, awake at this time. But that’s beside the point. You should have told me about your Mangekyō Sharingan. I could have helped you train and lower the risk factor during the mission. Look at what happened! You’re in the hospital on bedrest for at least a week! It could
have been a lot worse.’

‘If I hadn’t used it then the mission might not have been successful,’ Kakashi sighed and rubbed his temple. ‘But I guess I should apologise for not telling you. You’re right; you probably are one of the few people in the village with knowledge on the Sharingan. But there are reasons I kept the information to myself.’

‘Reasons I’m sure you will indulge me in now.’

Kakashi nodded, forcing himself to sit upright with struggling arms. Sena frowned, feeling a little guilty for lecturing him in his condition.

‘First off, you have to understand that it’s important that I keep this ability on a level of discretion if I’m going to have the upper hand while using it.’

Sena grunted in response.

‘Then there’s the more personal reasons.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’ Sena folded her arms and frowned.

‘You know what it means. You’ve been through a lot these last few months. Years. There are more important things to worry about. And now the Akatsuki…it’s a lot to handle. Even for a Jōnin.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean? I can’t have one extra piece of information because I might explode? I’m not that fragile, Kakashi.’

Their eyes met, and Sena couldn’t shake off the intensity that came with such a serious look. It wasn’t often she saw Kakashi like that. It was almost intimidating.

‘Sena, what happened on the mission…with the Akatsuki member.’

She was taken back by the question.

‘What are you insinuating?’ She snapped a little too defensively. ‘You don’t trust me?’

‘I’m not insinuating anything. I would like for you to explain before I jump to unnecessary conclusions.’

Sena scowled before averting her eyes from his unwavering stare. It was just like him to read into everything she wanted to keep hidden. The truth was the shame of what she had done took it’s time to reach her consciously. With everything that happened with her and Neji worrying about their situation, she didn’t have a spare moment to think about what had happened on the mission. More importantly the decision she had made despite her better judgment.

She took a deep breath and let it go into a lingering sigh.

‘I assume you are aware of my assignment. The one that was given to me before the Sand Village incident.’

Kakashi nodded.

‘I was put in a rather…unique situation. It was my responsibility to provide assistance on the Team Kakashi mission and rescue the Kazekage while also maintaining the mission to find intel on the very group which kidnapped him. On top of that, Deidara seemed to have no idea that I was alive, let alone “realigned” with the Leaf. In his mind, I had betrayed my village, chosen to be with him
and then suddenly went missing while injured.’ Sena paused squeezing her hands together. ‘So I decided to push it as far as a could while I still had the chance. I pretended that I wanted to be with him. I told him to come away with me, to help escape from the organisation he never wanted to join in the first place. But, as I expected, he didn’t want to be aligned with a village. The chance to imprison and interrogate him, therefore, wasn’t gone. After that, I came back with a different offer. Made it sound like we were running away together. It was the best chance of getting information about the Akatsuki we need. A small part of me thought he might take the bait.’

‘What happened after that.’ Kakashi’s gaze stayed on her, waiting intently.

‘Pretty much what could have been expected.’ Sena shrugged. ‘Deidara declined the offer. That left me with no choice. I had to kill him. He was too dangerous to be kept alive, especially with Naruto there and ready for a fight. From there he figured out the rest, and you know what happened. I was stupid for even attempting to give him a chance, I should have just killed him from the start. I was…weak.’

‘I see.’

The pair fell into silence, the tension in the thick from the anxiety of the situation. They each left the other to their thoughts. They were similar in that way, always internalising everything and leaving little to seep its way to the surface for others to see. Lately, Sena felt as though she was letting too much slip out for others to see. She didn’t like that one bit. It made her feel vulnerable, liable for mistakes to happen.

It was Kakashi who broke the silence.

‘So, is that why you weren’t able to be asleep at this hour?’ His tone became a little lighter, but Sena detected the familiar concern.

‘It’s one of the things.’ Sena rubbed her still thrumming temples. ‘There is a lot going on.’

‘Yes but you have always had a lot going on. What’s causing you to lose sleep?’

‘Nothing major,’ Sena lied. ‘Just nightmares mostly. My own burden to bear.’

‘I see. Anything I can do to help?’

‘Not really.’ Sena tried to change to a more carefree tone. ‘Besides you aren’t exactly the person I would go to for sleeping advice.’

‘Hm.’

‘Can I ask you something though?’ Sena shifted waiting for his reply. Once he nodded she carefully undid the buckle holding the sheath of her sword onto her back. ‘Do your hands still work?’

‘Yes, but I hope that wasn’t the question—’

She tossed the blade without warning, and Kakashi caught it at the last second.

‘Do you know anything about this?’

She watched as Kakashi’s gaze went from her down to the sword, slowly unsheathing it to inspect. Taking a firm grip, he studied it carefully, making sure not to miss any important detail. Sena didn’t miss the way his fingertips grazed over the hilt with a sense of familiarity. At least that’s
what it seemed to be. After a few minutes, he returned it to her.

‘Sorry, it doesn’t strike me as a weapon I’ve encountered before.’ His expression was calm, and voice seemed sympathetic. Sena narrowed her eyes. ‘Perhaps you ought to ask someone who has more of expertise in that area.’

There was something he wasn’t telling her. But whether it was about the blade or not she did not know.

‘Alright, thanks.’ She buckled the strap back around her chest. ‘I should go and let you rest.’

‘You should get some rest too.’

‘I will.’ Sena gave a small wave before retreating to the door and exiting the room. It was then she heard him speak again, just barely making out the muffled words.

‘You’re not weak.’

She shook her head and walked away from the door.

Once she was out of the hospital and back outside she took in the crisp morning air that felt calming compared to the staleness of the room. Now that the intensity brought on by the conversation and remains of the dream were fading she wanted to return to bed. Return to Neji.

After her many confessions and intimate gestures the day before, the pair had laid in silence for what seemed like a lifetime. Then when Kyou returned early from clan business, they decided to retreat to the Hyūga Compound where they intended to talk further. After meals, showers, and report finalising, the two simply didn’t find the time to discuss properly the issues clouding their mind and ended up going to bed instead. It wasn’t long before Sena woke in the early morning in a sweat, gasping for air and comfort from the reoccurring nightmare. The one about her brother. Instead of waking Neji she had decided to go for a walk to clear her mind. As usual, the second she tried to get out of bed his reflexes acted, pulling her back against him, muttering something nonsensical in his slumbered state. It was enough to make her smile, kiss his cheek and whisper that she would return soon. The scene replayed in her mind making her excited to return to the warmth of his embrace.

It was not long before Sena returned to the confines of the compound, passing by the flowing stream and blossoming flowers, light yet pleasant in scent. It always amazed her how beautiful the Hyūga compound was. It was almost enough to allow her to forget her worries. It wasn’t quite enough, however, as the troubled thoughts flooded her mind once again. There was just something she couldn’t quite put her finger on when it came to the blade. More so since her encounter with Itachi and his curiosity toward the manner. Then there was the issue of her memory and the incident all those years ago. Sena decided to ask Kyou about it once she returned later in the day. She wouldn’t take his feigned ignorance as lightly as she had done with Kakashi.

With that matter settled in her mind, she was able to relax her body a little. Sena sighed, exhaling the tension that had built up away. It was time to have the rest her body was begging for weeks.

Reaching her desired destination, she entered the home, immediately heading toward the bedroom as quietly as she could. It was still far too early to be up, and she didn’t want to disturb Neji from his rest. He had so many missions lately back to back she felt guilty for taking so much of his free time. She decided from then on she would make sure he had plenty of time for rest, even if it meant taking a break from spending time together in the village. As long as they were together, she didn’t even mind if it was sleeping.
Her gaze fell on Neji’s sleeping figure, rolled into the centre of the bed an arm stretched where she once laid. Carefully, she undid her weapons and pouches, while also stripping her outer layers of clothing before approaching the bed. There she lifted the sheets and slid slowly beside Neji, letting her limbs slide over his. Then she pushed herself up so that she was hovering above him, hand either side of his head, legs encompassing him completely. A smile came to her lips. She wanted to kiss him. But she didn’t want to disturb him. Weighing her options she settled for a gentle kiss, giving into the idea completely as she leaned forward.

The moment her lips grazed his, Neji’s hands gripped her wrists and rolled her onto her back switching their positions. Now he was on top and very much awake. His grip was tight but not painful on her wrists pinned above her head. The smile returned to her face.

‘Where have you been?’ Neji whispered, gliding his nose against hers with every breath drawn. Still, her smile didn’t fade.

‘Sorry,’ Sena whispered, strategically brushing her lips against his. ‘I couldn’t sleep so I went for a walk.’

‘Are you alright?’

Sena licked her lips, an action that did not go unnoticed by Neji.

‘I am now.’

Neji’s brow twitched, and the emotion reflected in his face seemed to change from concern to something else entirely. An expression she had come to look forward to seeing. He blinked once, as though considering something. When Sena opened her mouth to ask what exactly it was her chance was taken away. Instead, she found his lips on hers, in a surprisingly passionate kiss. It didn’t grow gradually as it usually did but instead exploded into something immediately. His tongue was taking a dominant lead sliding into her already opened mouth, seeking out her tongue and her compliance. And comply she did, reciprocating every motion with her own, every flex with one more aggressive.

There was no time to ask what had gotten into him. Sena was too busy embracing the moment to care. Her hands were still held down by his, but her legs were free to wrap around him and do as she pleased. And she did, pulling his body closer to hers, desperate for his warmth, his touch. Anything that could heighten the moment. He moaned into the kiss when their bodies pulled flush against each other, a noticeable tremor running through her body, one of anticipation and excitement. Neji had never been that forward before, and for a brief moment, she wondered if it was because of what happened between them the day before. The thought was forgotten however at the ever so subtle rocking of his body against hers. When she went to reciprocate, Neji broke the kiss and pulled back to look at her through half lidded eyes. The shallow breaths he took tickled her lips, heightening the tingling sensation she felt.

The sight before her was one she wanted to etch into her mind forever. She wanted to ask why—why he had done it, why he had stopped—but the words seemed to catch in her throat. Whether it was because of the anticipation or the vulnerability of that moment, she did not know, but she found herself staring at him voraciously; As though she wanted to consume him completely with her eyes and store the image away forever. And he looked at her too with a longing that seemed to choke him, leaving them both in silence.

As much as they knew they needed to talk, it wasn’t the time for words. Words were no longer necessary. What they needed was rest. A calm moment before the storm. One that would whirl its way into their lives no matter what they tried to do to stop it.
Chapter End Notes

AH I know I haven't updated in forever but I quickly typed this up so I don't leave you hanging any longer. Shall try and update soon! Thanks for reading :) x
Circles

Chapter Summary

The conversation that collides the past and present.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was dawn when Sena headed toward the Matsura compound. A few shinobi patrolled the streets, each with heavy lidded expressions and hunched over. They each looked relieved once the first streaks of light broke across the horizon, indicating their shift would soon be over.

There was a time Sena dreaded the thought of having to take a night patrol shift but since it was growing harder to sleep, even a few hours, a part of her envied the idea. When Sena awoke in the evenings she found training or researching was the only thing that kept her mind occupied, fearing that if she simply lied there her mind would explode. There were too many unanswered questions for her mind to simply stop and shut off. Even in the early hours of the morning when everything was calm and quiet, the dark thoughts would penetrate her minds eye, longing to take over.

As she walked toward the Matsura compound, loose stones crunched beneath her sandals while the sword loosely fastened to her belt clanked every time it hit her side, echoing into the air. With her mind wandering to the past, the birds singing was swallowed into the background like white noise; it was there but consciously forgotten along with the passing shinobi and villagers. The Akatsuki continued to allude her, no matter their encountering circumstances and it made her to feel a sense of inferiority. Then there were the nightmares of Tsutomu, whether they were real or a trick her subconscious cruelly played on her left a feeling uncertainty. Looking back onto her years travelling away from the village, she realised she had begun as an ignorant wide-eyed girl who was self assured and became someone wiser and uncertain of everything.

Every clank of the sword served as a reminder of her failures and every stone crushed an indication of the risks to come.

There was a certain innocence that Sena had lost but she couldn’t pinpoint when it had happened. Her first thought immediately went to her mother’s suicide but she had still been a child, holding an innocence of sorts even through the trauma. The next went to the fire but she had held onto the naivety that she could save her father then. Could it have been Deidara and submitting herself for the sake of the village? But then she had tricked herself into thinking it wouldn’t affect her as long as it was all for something. What had that delusion really achieved? The Akatsuki remained a threat, Naruto and the village were still in danger and above all she had failed to kill the culprit she had fooled into a faux partnership. Deidara. Just the name had the power to make her skin crawl, remembering his lingering touches and sultry words, all while trapped inside that dark room.

Sena’s heart began to race, her breathing shallowed as she tried to control the tremor reverberating throughout her body. She closed her eyes, attempting several times to take a deep breath but felt herself losing stability. Quickly, she reached out a hand to the nearest building, hunching over while her other hand clutched her chest, fingertips digging into the fabric of her shirt. Breathe, she reminded herself in a scolding manner. Breathe.
‘Just fucking breathe,’ she whispered. Her nails, sharper than usual, digging beyond the fabric and into her skin which gave her incentive to press even harder. Everything seemed to slow down except for her heart beat. She could almost feel the blood pumping throughout her body, all the way up to her ringing ears. It made her want to tear open her skin just to rid herself of the maddening feeling. The thought of her mother flashed in her mind.

‘Get it together.’ Her voice grew more hoarse now as she forced herself to open her eyes and focus on a spot on the ground. **Focus.** The blood drained from her cheeks, making them tingle as Sena forced herself to focus on breathing, hyperaware of her body’s movements and mannerisms at that moment.

**‘Tell me you’re mine.’** Kami, why did she have the hear that voice now. **‘Tell me who you want.’** She was over this already why did she—**‘You know I love you.’** No. She could feel his hands touching her skin, taunting her; the door shutting, clear as day, sealing her in between those four walls. **‘I won’t ever let you go.’** Sena wrapped her arms around her body. **‘You are mine.’** Suffocating. **‘You are my muse.’** Shaking.

‘Stop,’ she whispered, voice shaking.

**‘We were meant for each other…’** was it because she deserved it? **‘Stay with me this time…’** She couldn’t kill him. **‘Don’t you trust me anymore, hm?’** She was weak that’s why she gave him a chance. A **hand on her waist he leant forward.** **‘What about us?’** She could practically feel his lips ghosting hers. **‘Hm?’** It was all her fault.

‘Stop!’ Sena pressed her hands to her ears, falling with her knees hitting the ground. ‘Stop, it’s over now.’ She was begging. ‘It’s over, please just…ugh.’ Her head was spinning, the blood thrumming through her temples. She squeezed her eyes shut and chanted the same nonsensical things on a loop, praying for it all to come to an end.

But instead of stopping the memories continued to haunt her. **Blood. The familiar scene of the burning house.**

‘Father?’ Her innocent calling out. **Tadao on the ground dead. Tsutomu covered in blood. Dead.** ‘Tsutomu?’ Gone. All of them gone.

**‘Girl look at me.’** Hitomi sensei dying instead of her. **‘Don’t let them change you.’** The promise she couldn’t keep.

‘I’m sorry,’ she choked, moving her hands from her ears to her arms. **‘Forgive me.’** She pressed her fingertips against her skin forcing the nails to dig in. The darkness she had attempted to fight off, ignore and starve had returned with a guilt, making her tense and itch. The blood that rushed through her veins, trapped in her limbs, fought for freedom alongside the darkness. She wanted to roll up her sleeves and dig her nails further but even that release she couldn’t succumb to, for it wasn’t what she deserved. And if she had the physical pain to remind her what was real then she would not have to think about the hurt that threatened to take over her mind. It wouldn’t be right.

Sena focused on her breathing, now deepening slowly. The stinging from the pressure was enough to remind her never to forget. The pain was a reminder of the mistakes she had made and the penance she owed. How many more hits could she take before the cracks in her burst wide open and the darkness seeped out? She did not want to find out.

‘Sena?’ Came a soft voice, distorted by her distracted focal point. ‘Sena,’ the voice repeated, deepening and taking on distinct characteristics of familiarity.
She blinked a few times before turning toward it, removing her death grip on her arms, feeling the crescent shapes form and tingle.

There in front of her stood Lee, thick brows knitted together. Sena stood up quickly, causing her to become light headed and clutch her forehead.

‘Are you alright?’ He asked, taking a step forward, arm out to help steady her.

‘Oh, Lee,’ she replied attempting to be as nonchalant as possible. ‘Bad migraine.’ It was a bad lie, she knew that but it was the only thing she could think off to lessen his concern. The last thing she needed was Lee telling Neji about this incident.

‘It must be bad,’ Lee said observing her, ‘If it is bringing out tears.’ He pointed to her cheeks causing her eyes to widen.

Sena didn’t realised until then that she had been crying, feeling that her cheeks were both flushed and damp.

‘Yeah, I haven’t been sleeping properly so the pressure is killing me. I just thought I’d go home and get some rest, you know?’ Sena forced a smile, hoping he was convinced.

Lee hesitated before returning her smile. ‘In that case let me escort you home!’ The familiar enthusiasm returned and Sena couldn’t give him no for an answer.

At least he would serve as a distraction she so desperately needed.

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The sun had risen completely in view by the time Sena had reached the gates of the compound; the villagers started to fill the streets while young children headed toward the academy. Sena had farewelled Lee at the gate, making an excuse that she had to go rest and hoped he wouldn’t read any further into it.

Instead of heading toward her home when she entered the compound, Sena sat beneath the tree in the court yard which had a thick branch to lean against. The shade provided refuge from the bright rays of the morning sun which were beginning to intensify in heat. Her head still swimming with thoughts, shaken by the episode, the kunoichi had only moments prior caused an unrelenting nausea. It had been awhile since her mind had wandered to Deidara and her captivity, her mind lately occupied by family concerns.

It was easy to assume that seeing the blond had set off the memories she had attempted to repress and her uncertainty toward her choices on the last mission had increases her anxiety. Sena shook her head and buried her face in her hands, leaning against her knees. If she allowed herself to get swept up in such thoughts and uncertainties then her darkness would manifest and spread once again, taking over all logic and reason. She refused to break down a second time.

There Sena sat, attempting to keep her mind clear of all thoughts and fears with time passing by. She didn’t know how long she sat there, listening to the wind blow through the leaves, the increase in chatter coming from the crowds passing by the walls of the compound, only to be drawn from the inner corners of her mind when she noticed a figure walk toward her. She didn’t need to look up to see who it was, forcing her gaze to remain on the ground below. The person approached her,
shadow looming over her viewpoint causing their presence to be a distraction.

Sena looked up at Kyou, standing above her with his arms crossed and expression neutral. Without speaking he extended a hand toward her. She looked up at it, hesitated then slowly reached her own hand up to take it. His grip tightened and yanked her up in one swift motion. There he let go and turned, taking a few steps toward the courtyard.

‘Come on,’ Kyou said, glancing back. ‘It’s been awhile since we have trained together.’

Sena opened her mouth to object but before she could get a word out he cut her off.

‘No excuses.’

Sena sighed but complied, shadowing the steps her uncle took until they were in the open space.

‘Weapons?’ She asked, half-heartedly. ‘Ninjutsu?’

Kyou shook his head. ‘I think today calls for some good, old fashioned Taijutsu.’ He gestured to the morning sun. ‘Really gets the blood pumping on a beautiful morning.’

Sena rolled her eyes and took her stance. She was in no mood for jesting and sarcasm let alone a conversation. There was barely enough energy within her for a sparring match but there was no way she would let that stop her from accepting his offer. Sparring with Kyou was the perfect distraction.

‘Before we begin,’ Kyou said. ‘I feel that I should be asking where you have been all night?’ When Sena didn’t reply he continued. ‘I was really looking forward to a heart warming reunion between family members with us both returning from missions and all. Imagine my disappointment when I heard you were at the Hyūga compound!’

‘Let’s just do this.’ Sena insisted, pressing further into her readying stance.

Kyou hummed but did not speak again and took his stance.

There they both stood, stilling against the breeze with eyes locked onto each other like predators watching their prey; any sudden movement would create a rippling effect, tearing them both from observation and into battle. The question, as always in any fight, remained: who would make the first move? Sena was always determined to do the unexpected. If in a match with a partner likely to move first she would force herself to do so instead and vice versa. Her preference was to play it safe and wait but safety didn’t always guarantee victory.

Sena studied Kyou closely, noting the rhythmic movements of his chest (in and out) the twitch of his upper lip and the tremor that ran through his hand as he held his arms in place. He too waited and observed. For a brief moment, Sena wondered what her habits were, what automatisms her body took on every battle without her even knowing. Perhaps she frowned intensely like Neji did without even realising. Neji. The thoughts from earlier threatened to take over again.

She watched a few moments longer and decided to make the first move. Slowly, she took a step to the side and he copied. A smirk found a way to his face and that was all Sena needed to set her off. She launched herself at Kyou with what would have been a striking blow had he not blocked it easily. She tried another to his side but again it was repelled. He chuckled but stayed on the defence.

‘Eager to train today I see.’ He blocked her attack. ‘What possible reason could there be for that?’
Another move blocked.

Sena didn’t reply but instead focused all of her concentration on landing a shot. Kyou, much to her annoyance, continued blocking and dodging, not once making a single attempt to use offensive measures. It seemed he was enjoying it too which only served to make Sena angry.

With time dragging on Sena grew more annoyed and sloppy in her form and Kyou continued his dodging dance.

‘I get the feeling there is something…how should I say?’ He passed and blocked her palm from hitting his chest. ‘Bothering you.’

‘Hm.’ Sena grunted throwing another palm.

‘And knowing you,’ Kyou grabbed hold of her wrist and pulled her toward him, ‘which I clearly do. You don’t want to talk about it.’ His voice had dropped to a whisper.

‘Yup.’ Sena yanked her wrist from his grasp and swept her leg in an attempt to knock his from underneath him.

At the last second Kyou jumped but this time he attempted to fight back.

‘The kid.’ He said, causing Sena to frown and swing at him before he jumped back ‘Oh, I know what that look means, hang on let me translate that beautiful scowl.’ He cleared his throat to put on a shrill voice and placed his arms on his hips in a mocking gesture. ‘That’s none of your business Kyou.’

‘Correct.’ Sena was more agitated and determined now.

It seemed it wasn’t enough to make Kyou stop.

‘So what did he do? Or should I ask what it is you did?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Right.’ Kyou said thoughtfully, continuing to dance around her hits. ‘That means something happened on the mission.’

‘That’s—’

‘None of my business. I know.’ Kyou held up a hand and waved in a dismissive gesture. ‘Do you want to start by talking about it? No? Good, let me talk first then.’

‘Eh?’

Kyou took a step back and retracted his defensive position. Sena still held her stance but didn’t move.

‘Did he propose?’

‘What!?’

‘Alrighty, it was a good start but the wrong direction. Hm, did you propose?’

Sena rolled her eyes.
‘Are you worried about Kakashi?’ She raised her brows and crossed her arms. ‘Yes but that’s not it.’ Kyō began to pace, stroking his chin thoughtfully, more to put on a show than to help him think in her eyes. He always did make things more dramatic than necessary.

Sena did not dignify his prying behaviour with a response.

‘This is good.’ Kyō continued undeterred, gesturing between them. ‘I love when we communicate. I can really feel the family bonding father was always so adamant about. A shame he never really could follow his own sentiments but I digress…’ He waved his hand and stepped toward her. ‘Tell me about the kid.’

‘Can we focus on the task at hand please?’

‘Oh, you have my full attention.’

‘Kyō I swear to—’

‘What could have happened on a mission to Suna with the Akatsuki involved?’ He let out an overdramatic gasp. ‘Could it be?’

‘Stop it.’ Sena could feel the emotions within her, bubbling, waiting for something to set them off so she could finally explode. She balled her fists while the scowl remained etched on her face.

She could see the smirk that Kyō contained; she knew exactly why he contained it. They both knew everything about the situation the other refused to say out loud. But neither knew the consequences of voicing such things out loud.

‘Fine,’ Kyō finally yielded. ‘But I know you’re avoiding him.’

‘Is that so?’ Sena mused.

‘Yes, judging by the way he just walked through the gate.’ Kyō nodded his head in the direction of the compound entrance causing her to spin around, eyes widening.

Kyō hadn’t been lying. There Neji stood, near the tree she sat before, looking toward them and waiting. He didn’t carry his usual aura of contentment either and even Kyō must have seen it too.

‘Whatever reason you have to avoid him,’ Kyō began in hushed tones, ‘If you won’t talk to me about it then you should at least be honest with the kid.’

With that he turned and walked toward the main houses porch, as if to get front row seats for whatever conversation Sena and Neji were about to have. Sena despised him for that.

Letting go a shaky breath, Sena dusted her clothes from the sparring session and walked toward Neji. As his gaze fell onto her expectantly, every step she took felt heavier than the last and something within her begged her to run away. But she didn’t.

Sena kept walking until she reached Neji.

The weight of Neji’s gaze on her up close made her sink further into the ground.

‘You left early,’ He began, hesitating. ‘Why didn’t you wake me?’

‘I didn’t want to deprive you of rest.’ It was suddenly awkward between them. ‘Besides I had to discuss something with Kyō right away and errands to run.’
‘I would have come with you.’

Sena cleared her throat. ‘I know.’ She quickly took a step to the side and gestured to the gate. ‘Anyway I have to go, I’m supposed to be at the training grounds to meet Jiro and Kira and I’m already late.’

Neji stepped forward, opening his mouth to say something when Sena spoke again.

‘I’ll catch up with you later, alright?’ Sena wasted no time running toward the gate as quickly as she could to get out of sight. And she didn’t stop until she reached the training grounds.

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Beneath the shade of the tree in the courtyard, Neji watched Sena disappear beyond the gates of the compound. With arms still folded, he dropped his head and sighed, a frown forming across his brow. Earlier when he had woken up without her beside him, panic was the first feeling that took over. The anxiety wained a little when he ran into Lee in his search for Sena and informed him of her condition something made him uneasy. Sena was hiding something from him, that was clear by the exchange they had shared.

‘Are you going to tell me what that was all about?’ Kyou asked, causing Neji to look up at the shinobi walking toward him.

‘I’m not exactly sure what that was about,’ Neji confessed. ‘The whole thing was just…strange.’ It concerned him greatly but he didn’t want to become overwhelmed with the feeling, not when he wasn’t certain of what was going on.

‘What in the world happened on that mission to Suna?’ Kyou asked, turning to Neji.

‘I’d like to know that myself.’ Neji hesitated before adding, ‘The Akatsuki was there. The one she was more…intimately involved with too.’

‘What?’ Kyou shook his head. ‘That explains why she is distracted and dissociating.’ He let out a long sigh. ‘You know that means we need to keep a close eye on her incase she becomes unstable again.’

‘Are you referring to how she was after the incident with her father?’

‘Yes and no. Don’t get misunderstand me, it was bad but it wasn’t like…’ Kyou trailed off. ‘Before, when she first arrived home, she was sitting beneath this tree mumbling to herself then completely zoning out. It took her awhile to realise I was even there.’

‘Did she tell you anything?’

‘Does she ever?’

‘Hm.’

‘Sena won’t talk to me unless she believes it is necessary. If she thinks that I don’t have the answers she seeks then she will not open up to me. Which is why you need to talk to her.’

‘And if I don’t possess the answers she seeks?’
‘You are an exception to the rule.’

‘Very well, I better go and find her.’ Neji turned to walk away when a hand came to his shoulder, stopping him.

‘Neji,’ Kyou began, ‘I know you will do this without saying but make sure you don’t let her push you away. You know what she’s like.’

‘I understand.’

‘I haven’t seen her this catatonic since…’ Kyou paused, retracting his hand.

‘Since?’

‘Since she had the curse seal.’

Neji felt his heart skip a beat and colour drain from his cheeks. His forehead began to itch.

Guilt quickly overcame him remembering Sena with the mark. He especially remembered how strained their relationship had been and how he easily he had cut himself out of her life. Neji wasn’t around to witness the gruesome moments or to see her sanity slowly deteriorate. And even when their fate came together again he was foolish enough to see only what was on the surface, what Sena deemed fit to show him.

There was much in that period of his life Neji hadn’t forgiven himself for and a great deal of his atonement centred around his past with Sena.

‘Do you think that she will—’

‘Yes,’ Kyou cut in as if unable to hear the rest. ‘If she were left alone she would. But we aren’t going to let that happen.’

Neji balled his fists against the fabric of his pants. ‘I won’t let that happen,’ he added for emphasis.

Kyou removed his hand from Neji’s shoulder allowing them to face each other.

‘I know that my past actions have given Sena reason to doubt my intentions,’ Kyou began, ‘but I hope you will at least see them for what they are.’

Neji studied the man before him closely noticing, for the first time, the flicker of emotion behind his eyes. Despite Kyou’s decisions, Neji had always held him in high regards, mainly for his ability to self sacrifice for his clan and village. Every shinobi was taught that the make of a great ninja was the ability to keep personal grievances aside and purge all emotion while maintaining order through rules. Neji had always pinned Kyou in such a category, even if his actions were questionable, they always were in favour of the village.

But when Neji looked at him he didn’t see a pristine shinobi void of emotion and free of conflicting desires; he saw sunken eyes once blue now greying; he saw a hardened face littered with lines and scars from countless battles. He saw a man who had seen much of the world, who was twisted by guilt and second-guessing every decision, fearing it would be another mistake added to a list of many.

Kyou was filled with emotions Neji knew all too well.

‘I should find Sena,’ said Neji.
'Yes,' Kyou agreed.

With that Neji turned and headed toward the gates of the compound, praying that everything would be alright in the end.

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It was midday by the time Sena reached the training grounds to find only Kira there waiting for her. She didn’t even bother asking where Jiro was, merely rolling her eyes at her teammate hoping he had a good enough reason for neglecting his team. Both Sena and Kira sat waiting in the shade by the training posts, observing the shadows of the leaves moving in the breeze.

Ten minutes later Sena saw Jiro finally strolling toward them, an unfazed expression plastered on his face.

‘You’re late,’ Sena snapped.

‘You left,’ Jiro retorted. ‘For several days might I add.’

‘I didn’t realise you relied so much on my help to perform such simple a task as telling time and individual training.’

Jiro scoffed. ‘Always the tone of superiority.’

‘Always blaming me for your shortcomings.’

‘Yeah well—’

‘Stop it!’ Kira cut in. ‘You’re both acting like children.’

‘And since when are you the leader?’ Sena snapped. Realising what she had said, Sena pinched the bridge of her nose and shook her head. ‘Sorry,’ she muttered. ‘Bad morning. Let’s just get this over with, please.’

Sena expected to see a twisted smirk on Jiro’s face but when she looked at him only saw pity. It made her feel uneasy. She flashed him a look and then continued to instruct them on what training they would undergo. They desperately needed to improve their team dynamic and work on becoming synchronised in fighting situations. There was also room for improvement for all of them individually. They would have to become better if they were to stand a chance against a foe like the Akatsuki. She made sure they knew that.

It was toward the end of the explanation that Sena noticed Neji at a distance, watching them from a low branch of a nearby tree. She paused and swallowed, feeling anxiety bubble up inside of her.

‘Let’s begin, we need to work on our stamina first.’ Sena said, eyes still focused on Neji in the distance. ‘Then also our teamwork.’

The others nodded and began to run through the marked out course while Sena chanced another glance toward the tree. Her eyes met Neji’s, the connection causing a surge of energy to wash through her. She knew that their confrontation would happen at some point that day but she didn’t think it would be so soon. Part of her expected him to follow her to training, as he always did but
another part wished he would wait for her elsewhere.

Sena pulled her gaze from his and turned toward the direction the others headed and followed. When she began running, a familiar feeling overtook her, like the calm before a storm. Something within her wanted to explode.

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Several hours had gone by and Neji still remained perched in the tree top watching Team Hitomi below. His exterior seemed calm and collected but within him burned something with a need for answers and for uncertainties to be dismissed. Time seems to drag on and he observed Sena was stubborn enough to push her teammates to the absolute limit. It was hard to tell if it was a trait of her usual self or that of the trauma she had undergone. Either way it concerned Neji greatly.

Then after what felt like a lifetime he saw the kunoichi dismiss her team and watch them disappear into the distance. Neji stood and jumped down from the branch and onto the grass below, eyes glued to Sena’s back still turned. He waited patiently for her next course of action, wondering whether she would come to him or simply run away. Both were probable possibilities given the kunoichi’s past actions but he hoped that she was done running.

Minutes passed before Sena finally turned to face him, her eyes trailing along the ground at first then lifted to meet his. There was a vulnerability about her, one Neji didn’t dare test, waiting for her to make the first move. And it wasn’t long before she did.

Sena walked towards him until she was close enough for Neji to see the coy smile on her lips, one he had not been expecting.

‘Couldn’t wait to see me, huh?’ Sena said stopping right in front of him, closer than he had anticipated. It almost seemed wrong.

‘What is going on with you?’ Neji asked, unable to hide his concern anymore. ‘Please, tell me.’

‘Nothing, I’m just trying to get my team together.’ Sena sighed. ‘We still have a long way to go.’

Neji couldn’t believe she was actually trying to brush everything off.

‘You know that isn’t what I was referring to.’

‘Then enlighten me, what are you referring to.’ The smile once coy changed into something twisted. Neji hadn’t seen it before.

‘You know what I mean,’ he murmured, shaking his head. ‘You’ve been acting this way since…’ a blush dusted his cheeks at the memory. Her lips on his skin, his curse mark, his lips, his…

‘Since?’ Sena took a step closer causing him to step back into the trunk of the tree. He let out a small gasp on impact, feeling the bark beneath his fingertips.

‘Since?’ She whispered again, taking yet another step closer.

Neji’s mind was completely wrapped up in her and everything about him became irrevocably her’s. It was like being caught in a trance, one logic struggled to break through, outshone instead with a
single desire.

‘Since we came back from Suna,’ Neji whispered feeling her tickle his chin with every breath as she leant toward him. He swallowed audibly when he felt her hands clasp the cloth of his shirt. ‘What are you doing?’ He was almost afraid to hear the answer.

‘What I did when we got back from Suna,’ Sena said, brushing her nose against his, their lips almost meeting only to be separated further again. It all would have been alluring had Neji not known the cause of the sudden change in character.

‘What do you mean—’ Neji gasped unable to finish the sentence once he felt her hand slide down to cup him through his pants. A bold move even for her. There was no holding back the moan that escaped his lips causing her to chace.

Neji opened his mouth to object but she pressed her lips firmly against his while her hand began rubbing up and down feverishly. He couldn’t conceal his eagerness, an involuntary betrayal of his body and mind. Another strangled moan escaped him at her touch while she continued kissing him with newfound aggression, swallowing all of his sounds and protests.

Painfully aware that he was already half-hard and his mind was swimming with lust, he struggled to keep his thoughts logical and unclouded. Even as her fingertips traced the outline of his growing erection, pressing down intently at the base and teasing up to the head he couldn’t submit to the feeling on principle.

He pulled away from the kiss.

‘S-stop,’ he said, words catching in his throat and turning his head to the side.

‘Why?’ She asked impatiently, hand continuing to rub the oh-so-good friction against him. His fingers clenched in an automatism, a reaction to the thoughts he was having.

‘Just stop.’ He pleaded, grabbing hold of her wrist. ‘Why are you doing this?’

‘Because I want you.’ Her smile grew but Neji could see the pain reflected in her eyes. For a moment he remembered Kyous greying eyes and was thankful Sena hadn’t lost her lustre.

‘No,’ he said, firmly. ‘Tell me why you’re really doing this.’ His grip on her wrist tightened when she tried to move it which caused her facade to falter.

Sena looked at him with keen eyes then frowned as if realising whatever she had planned on doing wouldn’t work.

‘What?’ She snapped, tugging her wrist away. ‘Don’t you want me?’ Sena lunged forward first as she always did, sultry in her manner, attempting to brush her lips over his but Neji pulled his head back. He had underestimated how firm her grip was on his shirt and was pulled forward again. As much as he wanted to give in, Neji knew better.

‘Not like this,’ he whispered, shaking his head. ‘Not now when there’s something else on in your mind.’

They scrutinised each other again. Sena leant forward, fingers curling tighter onto the fabric of his shirt and her mouth was impossibly close as she breathed out a ‘fine.’ As if to challenge him, Neji didn’t know where he found the willpower to resist kissing her but he somehow did, knowing it was for the best.
Sena let go of his shirt and shoved him against the tree before turning away in a huff. Neji chose to ignore such an action, dismissing it until he figured out what was going on inside her mind.

He took the opportunity to clear his throat and rearrange himself beneath his pants, cheeks inflamed from embarrassment and arousal. His eyes fell to the ground, considering what to say to her next.

When he heard her move, his head snapped to see her attempt to walk away.

‘We are not finished here.’ Neji said.

Sena paused but didn’t turn back. ‘I’m not in the mood for another heart to heart at the training grounds.’

Neji considered her statement for a moment.

‘Fine,’ he replied walking over and snatching her hand. ‘Then we shall have this conversation in a more appropriate place.’ He pulled her along toward the village and she didn’t say a word.

Silence encapsulated them the whole journey and Neji didn’t dare let go of her hand, fearing she would run away the first chance she got. He had hoped she was finished running but he couldn’t really be sure. There were a lot of things he wasn’t sure of lately. Too many things were unbalanced.

When they walked toward the Hyūga compound Neji swore he felt Sena squeeze his hand which caused more questions to rush through his mind. Had she done it on purpose or was it an involuntary reflex from holding his hand for so long? Perhaps he had imagined it. Did it really matter?

The pain Neji felt in his chest was all too real the moment Sena sat on his bed. What would happen to them after having the conversation? Would it be for better or worse?

He pulled a chair over and sat in front of her. Silence overcame them once again, this time one thick with tension. The sounds that usually served as background noise became apparent to them; people chattering outside; the rustle of sheets below Sena, the ticking of the clock on the wall in his kitchen all became deafening. The moment her eyes flickered up to meet his only to fall to the ground again those noises drowned out again like white-noise. Were they really back to this?

Unable to told back he reached out and placed a hand on hers, giving it a gentle squeeze. Without any hint of rejection she took it and squeezed back. And when their eyes met again they held the gaze neither of them daring to look away.

The afternoon sun broke through the blinds, saturating Sena in light, like the universe casting a veil of warmth around her. Neji only hoped she could feel it the same way he saw it. Even in the light he saw the vulnerability inside her, the same one he had seen within Kyou earlier. Both fearing how their choices would impact others and revealing that they would rather martyr themselves than pull the people they loved down with them. But Neji wouldn’t let her become nothing more than self sacrifice.

‘Please, talk to me,’ Neji begged, softly. ‘Unburden your mind.’

Sena let out a deep sigh and sat back, seemingly considering his plea. She chewed on her bottom lip before nodding.

‘Promise you won’t hate me?’ She asked.
‘I could never,’ Neji assured her.

‘It’s not like you could hate me as much as I hate myself right now anyway.’ Sena shook her head. ‘I did something completely stupid. It seems all I’ve been doing lately is making mistakes that result in horrible consequences for everyone around me.’ She bit her bottom lip again.

‘Suna?’ Neji questioned and Sena nodded. ‘The Akatsuki?’ More nodding. Neji hesitated before asking the next question. ‘Deidara?’

Sena visibly shuddered at the name and closed her eyes before giving him another nod. It was suddenly much more difficult to draw breath.

Neji was somewhat aware of her hand squeezing his but it didn’t pull him back to reality yet. There was an itch forming in his throat from the inside and Neji felt the urge to shove his fingers down to scratch and get rid of the sensation. But he couldn’t just like he couldn’t ignore the conversation.

He squeezed her hand back, an incentive for her to continue.

‘At first I thought I was clever, attempting to hit the Akatsuki with greater numbers,’ Sena began. ‘I knew what my objective was in Suna: to retrieve the Kazekage and if possible, take out the threat. But when I landed on that clay bird and saw Deidara face to face, his cunning smile made me remember something else.’ Her grip tightened. ‘I had another mission, an obligation to get information on the allusive Akatsuki group which were no more than phantoms to us.’ She stopped.

‘Sena,’ Neji said gently, ‘What happened?’

‘I was reckless and thought I could kill two birds with one stone. That I could convince Deidara to turn himself in and in return we would be a step closer to getting the information we needed while also taking down their numbers. Two members including his partner. But when the time came I couldn’t convince him, of course I couldn’t…’ She trailed off.

‘You, what?’ Neji urged her to continue. ‘Tell me.’

‘I wasn’t good enough!’ Sena yelled. ‘I failed my mission because I wasn’t good enough.’

‘That’s not—’

‘Damn it, Neji, you don’t know!’ Sena cut him off. ‘You can’t tell me I’m wrong alright, I fucked up!’ He opened his mouth to speak again but she continued. ‘That’s not even the worst part.’ She shook her head, voice croaking and tears welling. ‘When I was left with no other choice, when it was finally time to kill him and end it all I hesitated. I let my emotions get the better of me and felt sorry for him. A criminal, a major threat to the village that had just killed the Kazekage and I had the nerve to feel sorry for him!’ The tears began to stream down her face.

Neji was left speechless. She had torn her hand away some point during her explanation but he was too absorbed in her words to notice. His brow furrowed, not in irritation but concentration as he processed her words.

‘What kind of person does that make me?’ Sena asked, pleaded. ‘I’m incapable of protecting anyone. I couldn’t protect my mother, my brothers, my sensei, not even my father. And now I can’t even uphold my duty and protect my village!?’ The words pierced Neji’s heart.

He understood everything. Sena was taking on everything herself, shouldering the blame to things beyond her control; things that many people, including himself were to blame. He couldn’t stand to
see her so broken just when they both had begun to heal.

‘Sena,’ Neji began but she cast her eyes downward, sniffling as more tears fell. He stood from his chair, cupped her cheeks and pulled her gaze to meet his. ‘Listen very carefully to what I’m about to say.’ She held eye contact and he took that as concession to continue. ‘Nothing that has happened is your fault. Your mother, brothers and father included. What happened to each other them was not your fault.’ He paused briefly watching the tears well in her eyes again. ‘Hitomi was not your fault. And what happened with the Akatsuki and Deidara is far too big to have been in your hands alone. What happened on the mission is at the fault of many people but not you, Sena.’

She stared up at him with wide eyes, searching his for truths. Another scrutinisation, as though by picking apart what he had said she would find a flaw or error.

Neji waited patiently, as he always did when it came to Sena, struck by how even in that moment he was consumed wholly by her eyes. The emotions expressed within the sapphire depths, whether purposeful or not, gave her away completely.

‘Do you understand?’ Neji asked, soft, as if any indication of harshness would destroy the moment. Her expression remained questioning and uncertain. ‘Tell me you understand.’

‘I…’ Sena began, voice croaking. ‘I do.’ It seemed forced but with wilful intent, a good enough start. Neji exhaled a breath he had been holding and relaxed a little. Some of the tension had finally been resolved but it was only the beginning.

He leant forward and pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry it took forever to update but LOOK! I did it! It only took like a month to write?
His Cause and Effect

Chapter Summary

Following Sena's breakdown and a more intimate side to her and Neji's relationship reemerges.

Chapter Notes

Warning: NSFW content below

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sena leant back against her bed, watching the sun set. She sat there watching and wondering what her life would be like had she been a civilian. The sky would be the same sky she had looked upon many times before but she wouldn't be the same. A question of difference arose to mind, one teasing the answer of a life she longed for.

To a shinobi, civilians were acknowledged as normal and in need of protection; a person who made up the masses, reducing each individual to a statistic, those they had to safeguard. Except, Sena didn’t see them that way, instead she envied their status and freedoms of civilian autonomy. Their lives were simple, with different obligations and toils that were as appealing to the kunoichi as ice water on a hot day.

The days had blurred into weeks since Sena had acknowledged the ghosts that haunted her mind. The guilt continued manifesting phantoms in her dreams while at the same time morphing her reality, creating a mirage in life that linked to a past long dead. Each day the phantoms spoke a little more, whispering tantalising theories until the notion of madness was embedded, like a knife in her mind. But everyday Sena would relay her burdens to Neji, as a means of seeking to destroy such toxic notions.

The discussions began for her sake but were by no means one sided. Sena refused to be the only one who had to reveal her darkest secrets and innermost thoughts to which Neji agreed. The arrangement coincided with a lull in their outgoing missions making it a perfect opportunity but it seemed almost too perfect. Sena had suspected the lull was the work of Neji and Kyou but neither would dare admit it and she would not ask because it meant that they were able to spend as much time together as possible. It would not be long until they had to resume their duties.

It was much to everyones surprise, including her own, that Sena decided to spend the majority of the time at the Matsura compound rather than the Hyūga residence. She knew Neji wondered why but did not have the courage to ask; everyone seemed to walk on egg shells around her. The only exception to his avoidance was during their deep conversations, for it was the only time Neji was comfortable enough to be honest. Sena guessed it was the controlled setting that set him at ease and suspected he rehearsed whatever he wanted to tell her, choosing each word and sentence carefully until it fit his level of perfection.

Sena on the other hand had a nasty habit of thinking unforgivable thoughts and voicing opinions
she would rather not have conjured up at all. It calmed her knowing that Neji too had such thoughts and feelings because it meant that she was not alone. Sena knew that as long as she had Neji by her side then she would never be truly alone. The notion proved to be a breath of fresh air in such suffocating times.

A sigh left her lips as she continued to watch the world move by within the borders of her large window that looked onto the balcony. There hadn’t been many opportunities to utilise the view since it was still a fairly new house but she appreciated how much of the sky she could see at certain low angles.

Sena pulled her body to the edge of the bed and allowed it to slide carefully onto the floor, bettering the angle of the sky. She noted the position of the room calculating that at night it would be the perfect place to see the stars without having to go outside. A cunning smile crossed her face as she pushed herself upright to estimate how much space the floor had then hatched a plan.

The pillows and blanket were tossed onto the ground away from the space in front of the window. Then pushing the mattress upright and onto an angle Sena jimmed it out of the bed frame and onto the ground. There she pushed the other side so the mattress lay flat against the ground completely. She quickly gathered the blanket and pillows, tossing them in an tidy manner onto the newly fashioned bed and let her body fall onto the cushiony surface.

Sena rolled onto her back to test the view from the particular angle she found herself in and derived that it was perfect, just as she thought. Tonight she and Neji would be able to fall asleep beneath their stars. A calming setting for an uneasy conversation ahead. Their deep talks usually made her feel paradoxical, both comfortable and vulnerable at the same time.

It would be awhile until Neji would return home though, which gave Sena an opportunity to snoop around while Kyou was also out of the house. It was rare either of them would leave her alone, except for Sato of course but he was nowhere near as overbearing as Kyou and protective in a different way to Neji.

Harnessing all of her willpower, Sena lifted herself from the comforts of the mattress and set out to investigate the study. With the little opportunities alone so far she had scoped out several other rooms in search of something, anything to make sense of both her dreams and the secrets of the blade she had come to possess. There was something off about them that made her mind compartmentalise and wonder what others seemed to know but she had missed.

Kakashi and Kyou both knew something she did not, of that she was certain. It was the what that concerned her.

Kneeling in front of the first cupboard beneath the bookshelf she began rummaging through the odd books, documents and knick knacks that came her way. Sena wasn’t sure what she was looking for but knew she would recognise it once she did.

Tossing the contents back inside the first, rendering them useless, she continued onto the next cupboard and kept going.

Sena had spent a lot of time in that study during the past year but never had she thought to explore or look through the cupboards, instead completely focused on her duties. She wished she had paid more attention to her surroundings, more so since it was not the same house she had grown up in. There was bound to be secrets buried away, if not by Kyou then at least by her grandmother. She just hoped she found more than sake stashed away.

By the time Sena had searched every single cupboard, she was beginning to lose hope of finding
something. Perhaps it was wishful thinking looking in a room where she spent so much of her time but Kyou was always a fan of the “hide in plain sight” creed. It was his favourite Genjutsu trick.

Closing the last cupboard Sena sighed and lifted herself up onto shaking legs. She had gotten better, truly but the stress still had an effect on her.

Reaching over to the desk she lifted herself onto the chair and let out a heavy sigh. That marked two in the span of thirty seconds, something of a record for her. She tapped her fingers across the desk and thought of what to do next. A loud bang, the result of a door shutting then snapped her from her train of thought.

Rather than dwelling on theories, Sena pushed herself out of the chair and walked across the threshold and toward the door. She stopped about a metre shy of the doorway upon hearing a floorboard creek. It was uncommonly loud for her to notice just now.

Thinking she had been simply hearing things, Sena stepped to the side and then back to floorboard in question only to hear it creek again.

She looked down at the wooden threshold and saw the faintest crack between the floorboards, slightly bigger than it ought to be. She frowned looking intently at the crack, vaguely aware of footfalls echoing up the staircase.

Sena had two options. Wait and see who it was or bend down to inspect it with the possibility of getting caught by the very person who had concealed whatever may lay beneath from her. She chose the latter.

Her eyes glued to the doorway as she heard footsteps lead toward her room, the faint squeak of the door opening, a seconds delay before they retreated in the direction of the study. A few seconds later Sena watched as Neji appeared in the gap of the doorframe, brows raised slightly.

‘Are you going to tell me why the bed is on the floor?’

‘In a minute. Did anyone else come home when you did?’ Sena asked, bending down beside the floorboard for a closer inspection.

‘No.’ Neji replied. ‘What exactly are you up to?’

Sena waved her hand, beckoning him to join her on the ground. He hesitated before letting out a sigh and kneeling beside her.

‘Well are you—’

Sena held up a finger to cut him off before placing her hands on the floorboard below. She dug her fingernails into the gap and wiggled it, feeling it give a little but would need more force to move completely. She turned to Neji who was watching expectantly.

‘Do you have a kunai on you?’

He nodded, fished on out from his pouch and handed it to her without question.

Sena carefully slid the tip of the kunai into the gap and pushed it down and away to lift the plank up with ease. Handing the it back to Neji, she took hold of the floorboard and lifted it off completely to find a small nook in the ground empty, except for one object: a worn key.

Slowly, Sena reached down to pick it up and inspect it, noting the familiar grooves and markings.
‘What is it for?’ Neji asked, softly.

‘Something that I thought perished in the fire years ago. Damnit.’ Her grasp of the key tightened as she frowned. ‘I knew they were hiding something.’

She could once again feel Neji’s curious gaze lingering on her.

‘The sealing jutsu scrolls are kept locked away and protected in a chest. The key is to unlock it.’ Sena explained and Neji nodded.

Her frown hardened and she slammed the key back into the secret hideaway and dragged the plank back over it.

‘Why are you leaving it, isn’t it what you were looking for?’

Sena stood up and crossed her arms. ‘I was looking for something, true. Kyou has been keeping something from me and I wanted to find out what. But I never imagined finding out that the scrolls had survived without my knowledge. Something else is up and there’s no point taking the key when I don’t know where the scrolls are.’

‘What do you propose to do in the mean time?’ Neji asked, standing up beside her.

Sena thought for a moment, mind racing from theory to theory.

‘Nothing, for now.’ She softened her expression. ‘I need to think everything over again now I have new information.’

‘Hm, tactical.’

‘Aren’t I always?’ Sena smiled and coaxed a smile in return. ‘Come on let’s get out of this room.’

Neji nodded and her followed Sena back to her room before she locked the door behind them. A new routine for ultimate privacy and isolation during their discussions. They didn’t always have the luxury of being by themselves.

Sena walked over to the newly positioned mattress and looked out the window, feeling the last rays of afternoon sun warmed her skin. It was getting dark already.

Sena listened to the ritual Neji followed when he came home behind her. He dropped his bag onto the floor against the wall then undid his hitae-ate and put it on the bedside table. Then came the subtle sounds of Neji undoing his loose pony tail and typing his hair up into a bun. It always amused Sena how messy it looked within a few hours despite it’s original neat position.

‘Are you going to explain the relocation now?’ Neji asked.

‘Oh, yes that.’ Sena stretched then turn to face him. ‘I thought we could fall asleep watching the stars.’

Neji raised his brows, seemingly unconvinced. Sena chuckled.

‘Come, I’ll show you.’ She extended him a hand which he took. ‘You need to be lower to see them properly.’ Sena pushed him down, a little more abruptly than planned and his back hit the mattress with a soft huff.

Then she sunk beside him, subtly curling her body against his and pointed toward the window.
‘See you can see the sky perfectly.’

‘Oh.’ Was all Neji said but she could hear the appreciation in his tone.

It was not long before the sun disappeared completely and the stars began to litter the night sky.

Watching the stars together was always one of their better memories. It was something innocent they had shared in their youth and continued on as they matured and grew. It kept them grounded, for when everything around them changed, including each other, the stars remained the same. And a full moon was something spectacular.

Beside her Neji hummed and gently pressed his body closer to her. Sena could feel him relax and watched his expression soften.

They lied there in silence for awhile, the moonlight beginning to shine bright, letting the moment drag on until they knew it was time to talk.

‘Do you trust Kyou?’ Neji asked, his voice quiet, almost a murmur. There was nothing absolute about his question, only a vague inclination.

‘That’s a broad question,’ Sena replied. ‘Do I trust him not to kill me and keep me safe? Perhaps. But do I trust him to be honest with me and treat me as an equal? That remains to be seen.’

‘Not that I always agree with keeping secrets but have you considered that it might be best that he hasn’t told you anything?’

It was something Sena had considered before, to the point where she went through a period of thinking that she was leaving well enough alone but she could not shake it off so easily.

‘Yes and were I to think it in everybody’s best interest, I would let it go but there’s just something about the dreams and the secrets. My gut tells me to follow this instinct and find out the truth. I honestly wish it didn’t.’

‘Alright.’ Neji turned to face her, their noses almost touching. ‘Then I’ll help you if you wish.’

‘Thank you. But in the in the end it will be between Kyou and I.’

Neji nodded and wrapped his arm around Sena and pulled so they were facing each other. His hand rested on her side, stroking soothing motions up and down while her hand stretched up toward his cheek and glided up to his forehead. He no longer flinched at the contact when she touched his curse mark.

‘Did you train with Hinata today?’ Sena asked, continuing to caress his forehead and cheek.

Neji shook his head, looking exhausted. If it wasn’t from physical exertion then perhaps it was mental.

‘Tell me.’

‘She was called away on a mission.’ He hesitated before adding ‘My uncle requested to speak with me.’

‘Are you alright?’

‘Yes. We talked about a lot of things but mostly clan business.’
‘He asked your opinion on things?’

Neji nodded and adjusted his hand on her side to have a firmer grip.

‘We also…talked about you.’

Sena’s hand came to a stop on his cheek. She had feared this, the possibility of Hiashi influencing Neji when it came to her relationship. They were both from prestigious and powerful clans and in the past it was not usual for them to be so…close. Her mother and father were proof of that, although times had changed even from when they were young. Her father had always pushed for the village to unite as one rather than be divided by clans. But the Hyuga clan, though allies to him, needed more convincing.

‘What did he say?’ She asked, dreading the answer.

‘Nothing of negative consequence.’

Sena raised her brows and Neji gave her a soft kiss, something to reassure her. She hummed and smiled.

‘But what did he say about me?’

‘Nothing much, yet.’

‘Yet? What do you mean by that?’

‘Hm. I think it’s the beginning of further discussions.’

Sena relaxed a little. ‘He’s not exactly forthcoming with most topics I guess.’

‘I promise to tell you when I know for sure.’

‘It sounds like you know something already. More secrets, hm?’

Neji smiled. ‘Only good ones.’

‘Yes, I’m sure.’ Sena his smile.

It was enough for Neji to give her another kiss, this one as chaste and as sweet as the first. But when he pulled away, something in his expression changed, something that resembled the look of someone who had just realised something.

Before Sena could ask what he was thinking, Neji had placed is hand on her cheek and pressed his lips against hers with much more desperation than earlier. Sena was stunned but did not hesitate long before letting her eyes gently shut. Neji pulled away for only a second to shove the bunched up blanket between them out of the way then pushed her down further onto her back and reattached their lips with fervour. It was rare for him to initiate such an act but even more to take such control.

Sena couldn't help but moan and lace her fingers through his hair as Neji let his hand slide down her neck, her chest, trailing until they reached her waist with a firm grip. She happily shifted her legs apart to accomodate Neji more comfortably against her and opened her mouth to encourage his tongue to meet hers. He had not kissed her like this for weeks and she had greatly missed the physical intimacy.

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Neji’s mind clouded with lust. Three weeks of restraining himself from her enticing advances and openings proved to be far too long and the desire to make up for lost time, to touch the beautiful woman he loved quickly drove out all reason for waiting. Something inside both of them had changed, that was clear and he was not so willing to reject it all this time.

Neji could feel Sena’s grip on his hair tighten as he pushed himself further into the kiss, slowly dragging his fingers across her shirt until he could feel the cool touch of her skin. He pushed the garment up, allowing the tips of his fingers to trace her skin before a wanting buck of her hips against him caused a more carnal desire to take over. It seemed they were both refusing to hold back.

He practically growled into the kiss and pushed harder, his tongue taking control as the repressed lust he had kept at bay all too long pushed to the surface and consumed him.

The kunoichi gasped and gripped his hair tighter, conveying the pleasure that sparked between them, making him dizzy from the sheer intensity. The self control Neji prided himself in vanished as he ground his hips against hers, happy to feel Sena returning the actions with such eagerness, causing him to harden quickly. Touching himself could never compare to this; nothing would ever compare to being with Sena.

There was a bang from downstairs, immediately breaking the pair out of their lust-induced trance.

Neji immediately pulled himself off Sena, slightly disoriented as rational thought slowly returned to him. Sena followed suit, sitting up with spacey look that mirrored his own and his eyes could not help but lock onto her plumping, slick lips. His gaze broke once her hand found his chest, eyes racing from one corner of the room to the other as she concentrated.

‘I don’t hear anything,’ Sena finally whispered, brow furrowing slightly, ‘Can you see anything?’

‘Let me check.’ Neji said, his voice breathless. He was suddenly grateful they had decided to lock the door whenever they participated in their heavy discussions. The two of them were in no state for company, their flushed faces, disheveled clothes and positioning, not to mention his obvious erection would have raised suspicions, to say the least.

Neji activated his Byakugan to see someone on the lower level outside the house walking toward the heart of the Matsura Compound. He relaxed a little.

‘It’s just Sato leaving, probably finished for the day.’ Neji could feel Sena’s body relax and lean into his, a relieved sigh escaping her lips causing him to divert his gaze once again.

The terrible sinking feeling in his chest released and Sena gave him a lazy smile with half-lidded eyes. It was enough to make him smile back.

‘I’m sorry,’ he whispered and cleared his throat, desperately trying to look away from his arousal and Sena all at once. ‘My actions they… got the best of me.’

Neji half expected a scowl but what he received was another smile, this one warmer and without any inclination of annoyance.

‘You don’t have to apologise,’ Sena murmured, ‘I’m glad we get to have these moments, especially the talking. I think it’s really helping you know?’ She shrugged. ‘I don’t mind sticking to that for now, if that’s what you want.’

Was it what he wanted though? They had been dancing around this level of intimacy for months and he had imagined it happening several times but every time he felt he was ready another
obstacle would be thrown in their path.

Timing was never their strong suit but lately he felt like he was on the one holding back and not the other way around. In the beginning it was always Sena keeping her desires at bay for his sake, easing him with patience and understanding while he would always retract and cut things short. That all changed once they returned from Suna and her advances were misguided and...desperate. He made a point of resisting for her sake. It wasn’t right to be with her in that vulnerable state.

The real question now is had that all changed?

Neji’s brows knitted together as he shook his head.

‘We shouldn’t yet.’

Sena’s expression fell a little but she shrugged it off, smile still evident.

‘I’m getting better,’ She brushed her nose then lips against his flushed cheek and gave him a quick kiss before retracting completely to lie beside him.

‘It’s up to you.’

Neji’s eyes widened as he drew a quick breath. Sena was not pushing or making advances? She was leaving the decision up to him completely?

Sena really had changed from the person she was with a few weeks ago trying to have her way with him against a tree.

A weight lifted from his shoulders and all the reservations he had toward the matter now vanished.

Neji smiled and leant forward to kiss Sena again.

He intended the kiss to be chaste but found he just could not pull away. It only took a couple more seconds for their previous neediness to resurface and soon the fervour returned and Sena’s shirt was being pushed up over her head. They broke their lips away so Sena could sit up and completely pull her shirt off as she smirked at Neji, clearly pleased by the change of heart.

Sena cupped Neji’s cheeks and brought their lips together so they were together but not quite touching.

‘Are you sure?’ She asked, clearing the last of the uncertainty from the air.

‘Yes,’ Neji breathed against her lips and then he pushed against them again.

The one thing he was certain of was that he wanted this; he had wanted Sena his entire life and would likely continue to want her for all of time.

Neji kissed her quickly, hungrily, coaxing moan after wonderful moan out of Sena before gently pushing her down against the mattress, his hands landing either side of her head. He leant over her panting, gazing down at the delectable figure that lied beneath; his eyes following the way her raven hair curled and sprawled across the pillow, the way her cheeks flushed in arousal and how her supple fingers, now unravelled from the tangled strands of his hair, flexed and grazed across her chest beckoning his to replace them. And how he wanted to run his hands over the shapely contours of her body, to caress and map out the entirety of her curvaceous figure, to make her feel as good as she had made him feel.
Sena stared up at him with expectant eyes, her chest rising and falling, a crescendo leading to the climactic event yet to come.

Adrenaline bubbled within him when he thought of the next steps to take in this situation, ones he had not planned nor thought through. He had imagined her beneath him many times, wriggling and writhing in ecstasy but he had never really known certain specifics required to reach such a peak.

His fists balled against the pillow cover.

‘Neji?’ It was a soft and inviting voice, enough to break him from his trance.

He was very much aware of his heartbeat when his eyes flickered down to her chest for but a second before finding her eyes again, an action wanting to be concealed but undoubtedly seen. Their minds were no longer separate entities but together as one with thoughts and feelings after the same need, rendering concealment no longer possible or necessary.

The response to her question was another kiss, this one greedy and lingering, the essence of the moment mixed when their tongues met yet again. This kiss was not the main goal but rather an objective with more to come, following with the redirection of his lips to her neck. Neji wasn’t one for leaving marks but he would not pass up the opportunity to taste her. The purpose served more than taking as it was also intended to give. He wanted to make her tingle all over to the point she squirmed beneath him—for him.

With a determined will and planned path Neji trailed kisses down her chest, covering all grounds of skin save for that concealed by her bra. Sena shivered once he reached just beneath her navel, letting go a shaky breath. Neji smirked, lips still against her skin.

To say that Neji knew what he was doing would not exactly be the truth but he knew what he wanted to achieve. Pressing a kiss to each thigh he then sat up to admire her once more, breath catching as he observed how her skin seemed to glow in the moonlight. Perhaps moving the mattress by the window had indeed been a genius idea.

Leaning down he placed a hand on her cheek and caressed it gently before sliding it down her body slowly and carefully, making sure to take in every little detail beneath his fingertips. His eyes never once left her face making sure to note all the reactions, however small, that ran across it. He watched as she bit her bottom lip once his hand glided over her chest and the way she gasped once his hand went lower again. The movement alone was enough to make her throw her head back, sending the sweet scent of lilacs into fill the air and overtake his senses.

His body trembled, giving away the uneasy thoughts he had been trying to bury but now he was very much aware of how low his hand was getting. Too nervous to watch his own actions Neji held her gaze, watching the way her eyes lit up when his fingertips brushed over the fabric of her underwear. The fabric was already damp.

There he paused, looking down at her with questioning eyes. They both wanted to do this but he couldn’t deny the tremor running through his hands and wondered if it was the same for her, in spite of her prior experience. He had never done this before and the weight of taking such a step now crashed down upon him. It was not what Neji had intended to do when he came into her room but now that he thought about it, he realised he did not want to miss such an opportunity.

‘I never did repay you for that time,’ he whispered, thankful that his voice remained steady.

Sena smiled and hummed in reply.
An image of her came to mind, one of her bobbing her head and sheathing his entire length in her mouth completely. Neji shivered recalling the memory.

There he made a bold move and pressed against the fabric covering her entrance, rubbing his fingers down firmly and causing her body to jolt. There was a hint of a smirk on his lips once he saw the reaction he got, savouring the high pitched moan she exuded.

Sena bit her lip and wriggled against the fingers still ghosting her underwear. Neji could practically see the impatience in her eyes but she did not voice it, seeming to want to wait and see what he would do. And the things Neji wanted to do to her.

Moving his fingers he repeated to motions again and again, hearing her breathing quicken, until the fabric had come so damp they were beginning to press into her folds with his firm actions and he knew he would have to remove them. Neji practically gulped when he curled his fingers around the elastic of her underwear but forced himself to continue once Sena lifted her hips to help him removed the hindering garment. He slowly and carefully pulled the undergarment down her trembling thighs then gave it a gentle push down to her ankles watching them slide gracefully off her flexed foot.

Neji repositioned himself over Sena once again onto shaking arms, attempting to steady himself before bringing his right hand toward her now unclothed entrance.

Placing his hand beneath her navel he repeated his actions from before, slowly dragging his hand down her opening with firm intent. Sena shuddered and inhaled a sharp breath once he dragged his fingers back up again. Neji could feel the heat nestled beneath the confines of his briefs stir at the sight, almost losing his breath at the feeling. He needed to take care of it badly but he was determined to ignore it until he finished the task at hand.

Sena stirred beneath him, her breath turning to panting as he continued his actions, increasing in speed and pressure. But it wasn’t enough, plain to see.

While Neji debated what to do next, Sena gasped and threw her head back as his fingertips brushed over a seemingly sensitive nub. He found it he hadn’t even known he was looking for.

Neji paused, eyes locking onto her body and repeated the action, hypnotised by the sight he saw beneath. Sena wriggled, her limbs shuddering the more his faster actions picked up and the harder he pushed. The sight was intoxicating and he didn’t want to stop.

Changing tactics, Neji kept his thumb circling Sena’s clit while he ran his fingers over her entrance at a slightly slower pace. The reaction was better than he could ever have imagined in his fantasies, loving the way her thighs fought of clenching together and how her torso rocked into his touch, practically bucking into his grasp.

If only it was against more than his fingers.

The intensity of the moment made his cock twitch, knowing full well pre cum was leaking from the head, begging for some kind of friction or release. Neji quickly used his free hand to palm himself down the front of his pants before leaning onto it again for stability. Every thing was heated to the point he felt like his skin was on fire.

Sena whined as one of his fingers teased entry against her slit and he could feel the wetness of her arousal coating his hand. He glanced down to look at the action then turned back toward her face, enjoying the way it contoured and creased in pleasure. The glimmer in her eyes, a combination of the moonlight and the moment, stared up at him with an intense emotion he couldn’t quite
She looked so beautiful like this, beneath him writhing with passion and need.

For a spitting moment he wondered what thoughts were crossing her mind.

‘Do you think of me?’ Neji asked, voice slightly tense as he realised he voiced his thoughts aloud.

Sena gave a breathless chuckle. ‘Do you?’

‘Hm,’ was all he could manage to reply. He leant closer so their breaths mingled, certain there was vulnerability in his eyes.

‘Yeah, I think of you,’ Sena grabbed his hand and took control, ‘while I do this.’ She guided his finger over her clt, down her slit then pushed down firmly so the wetness slicked both of their hands. Neji held her gaze intently as he allowed her to take control.

‘I think about you while I do this,’ Sena grabbed his other hand and cupped her breast, continuing the motions of the other hand against her, ‘and this,’ she moved his hand to the other breast and squeezed. Neji’s breath hitched at the contact, cupping the mound he was bidden to touch.

‘But most of all,’ she continued between bated breaths, ‘I think about you when I do this.’ She let out a moan as she pushed one of his fingers inside of her then removed her grasp on his hand to let him continue.

Neji’s eyes widened feeling her wet heat around his finger. He turned and buried his face in Sena’s neck letting out a soft moan. He began moving his finger inside of her feeling her clench around it.

‘Ah, you…’ Neji could barely get the words out feeling his cheeks heat up, ‘you make it so hard to concentrate saying things like… that.’ She wasn’t even touching him and his body was tingling all over.

Sena gave another breathless chuckle. ‘You just asked so nicely and ah you touching me feels ah… amazing.’ She let out a louder moan once her inserted another finger.

Neji groaned, pushing his face further into her neck, pressing a gentle kiss there and increasing the speed of his movements. While his fingers continued to slip in and out of her, his thumb maintained the small motions against her sensitive nub. The action allowed his fingers to curl deeper inside which caused a high pitched whine to escape Sena’s lips.

Her hips began to rock in time with his fingers, creating move friction and firmer strokes between them. Neji shifted his head to the side and just lied there, struggling to breathe normally as he practically watched Sena thrust herself onto his fingers.

This was actually happening, he thought feverishly, he was actually doing this to her.

His erection was becoming a painful problem now, his body too on edge with arousal to just sit back and watch. While he continued the ministrations with his hand, Neji repositioned himself onto his stomach, propping himself up with his free hand so that he stared down at Sena who was looking at him through heavy lidded eyes. Neji began to rock his hips slowly, rubbing himself against the mattress in an attempt to relieve himself, even if it was just a little bit.

Sena was close, Neji could tell by the way the rocking of her hips became messy and spasmed along with the string of never ending moans that escaped her lips. He increased his speed as much as possible and focused more pressure toward her clt. That seemed to tip her over the edge because
not long after that her whole body spasmed and she let out a single cry before she came over his hand.

Stilling in shock, Neji watched as the evidence of the orgasm rippled through her body and then slowly settled, limbs once twitching now settling back into the mattress. He removed his hand and rolled onto his back beside her, blood thrumming his heartbeat through his body and seeming to focus on one area in particular—the obvious tent bulging in his pants.

Trying to ignore the temptation Neji blindly reached out for the towel beside the mattress and wiped his hand clean before discarding it again.

The room was filled with the sounds of Sena panting, slowly regaining her breath and the Neji’s heartbeat, inescapable even with the white noise of the moment. The heat took hold of his body and he had to sit up and remove his shirt just to relieve it. He shivered as the cool air hit his skin.

Then before Neji could process what had just happened, Sena was on top of him, arms around his neck and sitting right on top of his erection. He moaned at the contact, overly sensitive from being neglected and incredibly aroused.

They sat there, her forehead pressed against his and their hot breath mingling.

Sena gave a precise and firm roll of the hips that caused Neji to hiss as a shudder ran through his entire body. It was good to finally have some friction.

‘You don’t have to.’ Neji said honestly, knowing the look on his face gave away how much he enjoyed the attention.

‘We both want me to.’ Sena whispered, brushing her nose against his.

Feeling his mouth going dry, Neji nodded fervently gripping her waist and bucking his hips against her, Sena giving a soft laugh before she kissed him and began rolling her hips, making him gasp in surprise. And all to quickly she pulled away, tongue quickly flicking over her lips and she watched him bite his lip with a soft, shaky moan.

At her touch he felt a surge of lightning inside somewhere deeper, a hint of something more, like a spark of a feeling that would soon become a rush and continue until the electricity sent waves through out his entire body. The need Neji felt for Sena was fierce.

He watched as she planted her hands on his core and pushed herself up, slowly dipping down and lifting her backside into the air to give him a pleasing view of the naked form in front of him. The sheen of her skin, worked up during their activities, gleamed in the moonlight, making Neji yearn to touch.

She continued to work her figure down his body, swaying her hips to and fro in the air why she gave him a coy smile.

Painfully aware of the heat in his cheeks once she reached the obvious erection, strained beneath the fabric of his pants, Neji used all his willpower not to look away. The look of eagerness on her face reflected the same intensity he felt within. And it took only a moment after Sena reached her desired destination that her fingers were hooking beneath the waistband of his pants, briefs included and was tugging them down aggressively, not bothering to wait for him to move to assist her. The sight alone was enough to make him ball his fists against the sheets, overwhelmed with anticipation.

The now free erection leaked pre cum onto his stomach, aching to be touched and longing for
release. Neji glanced from it to Sena, smirking slightly once he saw the excited look on her face, wondering what she had planned for him this time.

She placed a hand on his hip while the other ghosted fingertips over his stomach, down his torso, feeling the neatly kept hair there, until finally she held his cock with a firming grip. Neji shivered at the contact feeling jolts of electricity surge through his body at her touch. He would never tire of that feeling.

Sena gave a gentle, experimental stroke upward, forcing him to bite back a moan.

‘You really did get yourself worked up.’ Sena teased then, before Neji could respond, took the head of his leaking erection into her mouth and sucked hard.

This time Neji couldn’t hold back, letting the moan slip out a lot louder than he had intended. Sena hummed around his head then pushed down and deep throated him completely for a few seconds before retracting. The feeling was too much for his sensitive cock. His whole body to shuddered.

It was sweet torture and Neji couldn’t decide whether he wanted her to continue to the point he came or to savour the moment. There was no thinking clearly, not now when his mind was clouded with lust and pent up tension.

Before he could decide for himself, Sena bobbed her head down again, taking him completely in wet heat of her mouth, tip hitting the back of her throat. His limbs tightened and spasmed against the sheet of the bed, his hips forcibly bucking, barely restrained by her grip. She was surely doing this to him on purpose and he was loving it.

Just when Neji was on the verge of returning to his previous debate, Sena pulled herself off him completely, instead placing her hand at the base of his shaft while she licked the underside, dragging her tongue firmly up his length at a maddeningly slow pace. When she reached the tip Sena swirled her tongue playfully, eyes locking on his slitted ones which he barely managed to keep open. It was surreal to watch and feel everything all at once.

Suppressing another shudder, Neji watched as Sena once again sunk down until her lips ghosted the head of his cock. She blew lightly on the tip, causing Neji to tremble and grip the sheets. Kami, she was to good for him.

Just when Sena was about to sink completely onto his erection again she stopped and spoke.

‘You never did answer my question,’ her voice was husky, hand squeezing his shaft just enough to make him gasp, ‘even after I answered yours to your liking.’ She squeezed a little more and dragged her grip a little up his length and stopped again.

Their eyes met and Neji was stunned into silence.

‘Well?’ Sena asked, smirk growing and she dropped to a whisper, ‘Do you think of me?’

The question struck Neji to the core. The hesitation gave away his answer.

‘I…yes.’ He admitted, cheeks burning.

It seemed to satisfy Sena and she began to stroke him at a slowed pace.

Sena positioned herself over him once more, ready to take him into her mouth again.

Without thinking Neji whispered, ‘I’ve…I only think of you.’
He wasn’t sure if it was the vulnerability of the moment that lead to his honesty but he knew the weight of his words.

It was enough to make her freeze and consider his words for a moment before she gives him a warm smile.

‘I know.’ She murmured and lowered her head once more.

She took more of his erection into her mouth until her nose was touching a small patch of hair. She then swallowed around the length and Neji let out a strangled moan, fisting the sheets so tight his grip almost numbed. He felt her cheeks hollow as she began to move up and down his length, speed increasing faster with each stride. At that moment, all that existed was Sena and the way she worked her amazing mouth.

Neji was reduced to a mess of moans and gasps, biting down hard on his bottom lip to try and get some sense of control but it was pointless. He was bucking his hips with her every movement to the point he couldn’t hold back anymore.

‘Sen-ah.’ He whispered breathlessly.

He could feel heat pooling in that wonderfully familiar way and the pleasure increase exponentially to the point he knew he wasn't going to last much longer.

Sena took his one worded plea as concession to increase both her pace and depth, deep throating him with such aggression he thought he was going to explode. His chest heaved and his thighs twitched. Their eyes locked, sparkly sapphire meeting soft lavender. And with one hard suck and dip of her head Neji was pushed over the edge.

With a drawn out moan and arch of the back he came, hard. His climax seeming never-ending as Sena continued to bob her head, riding him through it until Neji finally collapsed against the mattress, his body electrified and tingling.

And it was the happiest Neji had ever felt.

Sena detached herself from his length and he gave her a soft smile. She gave a playful smile in return and slowly inched herself up Neji’s body, limbs encapsulating him on either side. Then she leant forward to kiss him, Neji happy to open his mouth to let her tongue in, not minding that he could taste himself. He wouldn’t allow anything to ruin this moment.

They continued to kiss lazily, feeling each movement drag out while their skin pressed and melted together. When they finally pulled apart Sena gave him a sleepy smile then wrapped her naked body around his, face pressed against his chest while he lied on his back, arm wrapped around her, his hand settling on her waist.

The cool touch of her skin again his was enough to let his guard down and relax.

They both lied there, listening to each others breathing against the back drop of the night, becoming white noise against their own thoughts.

Sena’s fingertips drew circular patterns on his chest while his kneaded the skin above her hip.

‘I’m the only one, hm?’ Sena asked, breaking the silence with a slightly teasing tone. Neji merely sighed in reply but nothing could wipe the smile off his face, not even a not so subtle comment from her. If anything it only cemented the moment more into reality.
Neji pulled the sheet over them, tugged her closer and tightened his arm around her with a protective grip. There they fell asleep wrapped in each others arms beneath the stars with all their troubles seeming far away.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for taking so long to update! Hope you enjoyed this chapter!
Sena tries to piece together information while avoiding Kyou and as a result, avoids herself.

From the view of the balcony there was a jagged array of buildings against the backdrop of the mountainous walls of the valley with the trees and greenery overlapping in between. They were sitting on the mattress moved to the floor the day before, tangled in a mess of sheets and limbs. From their point of view, things are smoother through the window over looking the balcony, more subtle in their transition from land to horizon. Sena’s fingertips lingered on the glass of the window, her gaze focused on the sky. Neji let out a soft sigh, watching her from the other side of the mattress.

Sunlight reflected along Sena’s profile, casting a shadow along the slope of her nose and below her lip. It seemed to highlight the glow of her skin and the shine of her raven hair. The sight of her naked form, barely covered by the white sheet brought forth memories of the night before.

The silence between them was pleasant but Neji couldn’t help wanting to break it. Balling his fist against the sheets, he felt the material slide effortlessly between the gaps of his fingers.

‘What’s the matter?’ Sena inquired as she settled back from the window, gaze still focused on something beyond the balcony.

Neji shook his head. ‘Nothing.’ He murmured, his voice sounding like he needed a drink of water. He cleared his throat and offered a smile even with her looking away, ‘I was just wondering what you were looking at.’

Sena hummed and thought for a moment before replying.

‘The sky is really clear today.’ She shifted and resettled in a different position, ‘I was just lost in thought.’

His fingertips eased his hand back open, sprawling as he ran his palm against the sheets. He stared at her profile, watching the way her eyes seem to narrow at something in the distance. There was something on her mind, that was clear. Neji knew by now the little quirks and mannerisms Sena revealed when she was hiding something.

The silence now felt altogether different, like they both were waiting for the other to decide whether to continue or change the mood. Neji was determined to wait because for once he had nothing to confess, nothing weighing him down that they had not already discussed. But Sena he knew had something to say, a new thread to unwind that was made clear the day before when he caught her snooping in the office for that key. It had stayed in the back of his mind since but Sena was relentless, bottling everything inside and knew exactly how to keep him distracted.
Neji blushed remembering the distraction in intimate detail.

‘Would you trust Kyou?’ Sena asked, clearing her throat. ‘If you were in my position, would you trust Kyou and let it go or would you seek out the scrolls?’

Neji considered her words. He didn’t pretend he knew what she was going through but he did have a little experience when it came to distrusting family members. It’s one thing to be sure of them but it was an entirely different situation when new facts began contradicting your previous thoughts and opinions. It was worse when it happened just when you considered finally trusting them. That was how it was with Neji and Hiashi.

‘You’re wrong to think they are the only choices you can consider,’ Neji admitted. Sena finally turned to him with questioning eyes. Neji held her gaze and noticed the way her lips twitched upward slightly.

‘That’s a very diplomatic response,’ Sena said, the hint of a smile residing on her face. ‘Go on then, what are my other options?’ Her tone was challenging but it didn’t make him uneasy—on the contrary it was a trait of hers he admired.

‘I think that you should talk to him and simply ask him about the scrolls.’

‘I don’t know about that,’ Sena admitted, letting out a heavy sigh. ‘He isn’t exactly forthcoming with his secrets.’

‘And do you think you’re any different sneaking around the house and investigating the study behind his back?’

Sena’s eyes widened at that but Neji knew he had to be honest, otherwise there would be no moving forward. The relationship between Sena and Kyou had always been rocky and Neji knew that communication wasn’t their strong suit. That would have to change if they were to make any progress forward.

‘My point is,’ Neji continued. ‘One of you has to make the first step if you’re going to trust each other. Are you so sure of what he would say were you to come to him?’

Sena regarded him with a stunned expression before pinning her gaze to something in the left corner of the room, presumably mulling things over in his head. There was tension sizzling between them.

‘I don’t know,’ Sena finally admitted. ‘I have to find out the truth.’ Sena cast a final sullen glance at him before looking away.

‘I know,’ Neji replied. ‘I’ll do whatever I can to help you.’

‘Thank you.’ Sena replied softly with smile.

The tension seemed to lift in that moment and Neji felt his body sink back against the bed frame, his arms once again aware of the silken sheet below. Leaning back and he closed his eyes and let his body relax. It was still early and they weren’t due to report in for any missions. With their discussion weighing over Neji, he was almost ready to fall asleep again but that wouldn’t dare waste a day.

Somewhere in the haze of his subconscious he became aware of the shifting weight on the mattress, slowly coming toward him. Neji opened his eyes slowly, finding Sena right in front of him, crouched on all fours with her limbs either side of him. There was a menacing smile on her
face, infectious enough to make him return it. In one movement she leant forward to plant a kiss on his lips while lowering herself to sit in his lap. The kiss lingered, tingling his lips and there he noticed that there was nothing separating them but the thin sheet.

His hands found her waist and began sliding along the smooth skin up toward her back. She leant forward and gave him another kiss, this one with more fervour and intent. Neji sank into the kiss but then all too quickly Sena pulled away. Her hands glided up his chest and wrapped loosely behind his neck.

‘Don’t even think about going back to sleep.’ She whispered before kissing him again.

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At one side of the training ground stood Sena slightly hunched over, sweating and panting while maintaining a firm grip on her sword. At the other side stood Jiro, not in any better shape as he forced his battered body upright again from his crouched position. Taking a staggered step forward he leant over and spat on the ground.

‘Attack me again!’ Sena called.

‘Are you crazy, Matsura?’ Jiro called. ‘Are you trying to get yourself killed?’

It was one of his empty threats he often unleashed in their training together since it was easy to get frustrated. This time Jiro was actually expressing concern, Sena could hear it in his voice. It only made her more irritated.

‘Again!’ Sena yelled, feeling herself grow hot. ‘Attack me again!’

Jiro groaned but lifted his kunai and took his fighting stance anyway. Sena followed suit, lifting her blade in a defensive manner. Her grip on the hilt tightened almost painfully to the point she could feel her hand pulsating. She ignored it and focused on her teammate in front of her.

It wasn’t long before Jiro launched another attack coming at her in full force, kunai at in hand and ready to catch her off guard with a sweep of his legs. Sena was prepared for this and successful in deflecting the attacks before attempting one of her own. He repealed her attacks with the same fluidity. They continued that dance for awhile but by now they were both growing exhausted from the many attempts before.

Finally Jiro managed to graze Sena’s arm with his first but she was able to move without much impact. It didn’t stop the frustration from taking over and she began coming a Jiro twice as hard as before. Jiro obviously struck with surprise tried to defend and deflect as best as he could but it was no use. In seconds he was disarmed pushed to the ground with her foot on his chest and blade raised high in a striking position.

‘Sena what the hell?’ Jiro asked, eyes wide and hands raised.

Sena froze in the striking position, the blade high above her head, still with a firm grip. There was no mistaking the sensation reverberating within her—adrenaline. The type you got in battle before delivering the final blow. Sena had been ready to land it and not just for training. There was real anger within her and she couldn’t figure out why.

‘Let’s take a break.’ She finally muttered, removing her foot and sheathing her blade.

Suddenly all the heat and anger she felt dissolved and all she was left with was exhaustion. Jiro was right, what the hell was that?
As Sena walked away she looked down at her hands to find them shaking with red and white marks from the pressure of her grip. It wasn’t like her to have such a death grip on her weapon because she knew better than that. Perhaps she was simply having an off day given everything on her mind—yes that had to be it. Reserving her actions to the stress of the moment, Sena decided to let it go for now and headed toward Kira. Jiro insisted on continuing to work on his new water jutsu.

It had been early afternoon by the time Sena met up with her squad at the training grounds but now it was heading toward sunset. She had not been informed to return to active duty yet but she didn’t want to dwindle away time lying around. The world around her hadn’t stopped and the dangers had not vanished. Sena knew that they needed to get stronger for the missions that would eventually come. They all needed to learn from each other in order to grow and most importantly, to survive.

Sena and Kira sat beneath the shade of a tree while Jiro practiced the jutsu he claimed he would master. Sena was glad his resolve had not changed that much since their Genin days despite everything else that had changed for them. She watched as he repeated the hand signs over and over while she absentmindedly buried her fingertips between the blades of grass below and pulled out clumps of earth. Beside her Kira took a sip from her water bottle before offering it Sena who refused by shaking her head, eyes still glued to Jiro.

‘What’s up with you today?’ Kira asked, tossing the bottle onto the grass beside them.

‘What’s not up with me today?’ Sena asked, groaning and falling back onto the grass. She blew the her bangs that were long overgrown, out of her eyes. ‘Life is hard.’ She muttered more to herself than anyone else.

‘Yeah life is hard and then you die, get over it Sena.’ Kira said, plonking herself down to lie beside her. ‘It’s not like you to feel sorry for yourself and in such a pathetic manner.’

‘My you’re a feisty one, Kato.’

‘What can I say? I guess you are rubbing off on me.’ Sena hummed at that but Kira didn’t stop there. ‘Not to mention you’re sounding old and depressed just like sensei.’

‘Hey, now I’m not that bad.’

‘That’s debatable.’

They both chuckled. It was nice feeling the familiarity of her friend and their typical banter. Sena knew she was sulking but she couldn’t help it when she felt useless and out of control. There were things beyond her grasp she wasn’t sure she wanted to reach for yet.

Sena rolled over onto her stomach and looked at Kira who had closed her eyes to avoid the few spots of sun breaking through the leaves. She had a serene expression on her face that almost made Sena want to leave her be. Noticing her gaze Kira cracked open an eye to observe Sena before quickly closing it again. The serenity disappeared.

‘What is it?’ Kira asked.

‘I want to ask you about medical ninjutsu.’

‘Wow isn’t that new,’ Kira’s voice was dripping in sarcasm. ‘You realise I do know other things right?’

‘Nothing useful.’
Kira swung a blind punch and hit her arm.

‘I’m kidding,’ Sena assured. ‘This is different to what I normally ask you to teach.’

Kira opened her eyes and considered her with an all to obvious expression. Sena had seen that look on her face too many times to count. She was reading her, trying to discern her intent. After a few moments she sat up and sighed.

‘Out with it then.’

Sena smiled. ‘I’ve been thinking…I know there’s medical ninjutsu that we perform utilising chakra but are there other kinds of healing methods?’

‘What you mean like traditional medicine? Bandages and ointments?’

‘No, nothing like that. I mean are there other ways to utilise our chakra to heal people? Something we could utilise before the person is injured then administrate it when they do get injured. Sort of like a quick backup.’ It wasn’t the best explanation but Sena didn’t want to be too forthcoming with her curiosities if they had no merit.

Kira leant back against the trunk of the tree, bringing her hand to her mouth, presumably considering her question. Sena knew that if anyone outside her clan would know of such a thing it would likely be a medical professional like Kira.

‘The only thing I can think of the fits that description would be chakra seals, specifically for medical ninjutsu.’

‘Can you use them?’

‘Well, that’s the thing. It’s not exactly a common medical practice in the sense I’m describing but more things we use to specifically focus our chakra.’

‘So, there’s no way of having a seal work on it’s own accord?’

‘I mean I couldn’t say for sure but it’s not something that we really practice.’

‘I see.’ Sena leant forward and wrapped her arms around her legs.

Perhaps her gut intuition had been wrong about the seals Kyou had hidden away. It wasn’t often she followed her instincts and she came up empty handed but she couldn’t deny that she was human and it did happen. She also couldn’t hide her disappointment.

‘I have come across texts before that mention the use of seals in my time studying,’ Kira admitted. ‘I’m not sure if it’s what you’re looking for but it’s something worth checking.’

Sena quickly jumped to her feet and looked down at her with a smile.

‘Then that’s what we shall do.’ She extended a hand toward Kira. ‘Come on, we are going to the library.’

‘Right now?’ Kira asked.

‘You got something better to do?’

‘Well I…’ Kira’s eyes darted from Jiro to Sena.
‘Yeah I don’t think the library is the place for Jiro but if you really get lonely you could always come back. You know he’ll be here until nightfall.’

Kira blushed and shot Sena a look muttering an acceptance to her offer.

‘Then it’s decided.’ Sena turned back toward her other teammate. ‘Hey Jiro! We’re going to the library, see you later!’

Without so much as a glance, Jiro gave them a thumbs up before immediately returning to his weaving hand symbols. Sena’s gaze lingered on him for a moment before she shook her head and turned away, setting out in the direction of the village.

‘Come on Kira we have got a lot of research to do.’

Kira huffed in reply and began walking alongside Sena in silence. It didn’t take long for them to return to the populated part of the village and head toward the library. Sena wondered whether they would find what she was searching for or even anything that proved useful at all. She just couldn’t shake the idea it was important.

Sena felt Kira’s gaze on her profile but she didn’t turn to face her, keeping her eyes focused on the crowds ahead.

‘Why do you want to know about these types of seals anyway?’ Kira asked.

Sena considered the question for a moment, deciding how much information she wanted to reveal. It wasn’t that she didn’t trust Kira but rather she had no idea what she should tell her. That she was grasping at straws to prove to herself that she wasn’t crazy? That once again her uncle proved untrustworthy? No. But she didn’t want to lie either.

‘Just following a hunch.’ Sena said, deciding that the shorter the answer the better.

‘Right, but aren’t seals your clans specialty? Why can’t you just ask them about this?’

‘I’m running out of family members to ask.’ Sena knew it was a cruel response but it didn’t make it any less true. And although Kira had a point, it wasn’t something Sena wanted to hear now, especially since she already got the same damned logic from Neji earlier that day. She hated when they were right.

The rest of the journey to the library was made in an uncomfortable silence, one that had to be broken once they reached their destination. That didn’t mean either of them jumped at the opportunity. It seemed they both were stubborn.

‘Alright,’ Sena surrendered. ‘Show me these texts you spoke of.’

The tension in the air was broken and Sena turned her focus back to the task at hand.

‘Find a desk and I’ll find the books.’ Kira said before disappearing amongst the array of bookshelves.

Sena observed her surroundings and after doing a turn of the room found the quietest, secluded corner in the building. It wasn’t hard considering the few people frequenting at that time of the day. Not many shinobi had the luxury of pastimes or research with the growing threats and build up of missions.

A pile of books was dumped before Sena breaking her from her thoughts. Behind them stood Kira
panting and resting her arm on the tall stack of reading materials. Sena’s brows raised at the prospect of the reading in front of her but she kept her lips shut reminding herself that it was her idea in the first place.

‘Where do we begin?’ Sena asked, eyes glued to the spines of the pile.

Kira handed her the one from the top of the pile.

‘Start with this one, find the chapter that discusses cross chakra theory and continue on from there. Look for anything that mentions seals, marks or fusing jutsu then let me know.’

‘Fusing jutsu? Like two people combining chakra?’ Sena asked, opening the book and flipping to the contents page.

‘Yes, that’s one of the aspects of it but it goes deeper than that.’ Kira opened her own book and began scanning the chapter index. ‘Remember a lot of these texts are about theories and not necessarily things doable in practice so don’t get carried away and just focus on what we came here to find. Otherwise we will be here all night.’

‘Got it.’ Sena replied, turning her attention back to the book in front of her.

It was time to find out whether or not her intuition was correct.

Chapter End Notes

I know it’s been a lifetime since I updated. Forgive me I was extremely burnt out. I have a lot of chapters planned out and had inspiration it’s just finding the energy/will to write is a little harder these days. However I’m starting to feel it again and think I’ve finally got my groove back. Please let me know if you want to see something particular as we continue. Thanks to those who like and comment and continue to support this fic. I truly appreciate it! x
The more Sena read the more clear it came that she would not find answers easily—at least not from books. Every time she picked up a new book her concentration fell and the information became harder to absorb. Studying for academy tests with general strategic guides and shinobi creeds came easily to her but researching in general, especially when she had no idea what she was looking for, did not come easy to her at all. The reading part wasn’t the issue but rather maintaining focus after hours of skimming through theories she didn’t comprehend and notions that were morally questionable at best had quickly became tedious.

Sena groaned and let her forehead hit the open page of the book in front of her.

‘Why must academics theorise in such complicated language and with little to no meaning?’ Sena whined.

Kira sighed. ‘The same reason you decided to read their theories.’

Sena raised her head and looked at Kira with a questioning glance.

‘Because they can.’ Kira said, returning her gaze to the book.

‘I thought we were going to find what I was looking for sooner.’

‘It’s only been a few hours.’ Kira let her book thump down against the desk, ‘Did you really think we would find the answer in five minutes?’

‘No. I don’t really know what I expected.’ She paused before adding, ‘I guess I expected results.’

Sena leant forward and rested her chin in he palm while her gaze drifted to look out the window. The sun had almost set completely and nightfall was upon them. It wouldn’t be long until Neji came looking for her but she wasn’t ready to just give up for the day. Sena couldn’t shake the feeling that the answers she was looking for were in her grasp and she just had to keep searching until she found them. It was easier said than done.

Looking back down toward the table and the piles of books, Sena let out a heavy sigh. Her eyes
darted around the room then landed on her sheathed sword, resting against the end of the table. She was reminded of training with Jiro earlier that day and the anger that had swelled within her so easily and suddenly. It had felt so heated and furious, in a way she had not experienced since she played host to the curse seal. That was a fact she could not ignore easily.

Then an idea formed in her mind and Sena stood abruptly causing Kira flinch.

‘You keep going with these books, I’m going to have a break to look for something else that might help.’

Sena turned and began to walk towards the other end of the library.

‘Wait, where are going?’ Kira called

The kunoichi looked over her shoulder and called, ‘To get different books.’

Sena looked ahead and continued walking until she got to a section she was more familiar with which held information specifically about weapons and relics. Running her fingers along the spines of the books, Sena skimmed the names of the titles then pulled out anything that could have information about her sword, the elusive Amaterasu blade.

It wasn’t long before a large pile formed and once it was stacked high enough she carried them back to the table. When she reached it she dropped the stack with a loud thud and Kira’s eyes widened, flickering from the books to her teammate.

‘Are you planning on staying here all night?’

‘No, but we have to start somewhere and what we don’t get through we will resume with tomorrow.’

‘I take it that I don’t get a say in this?’

‘You always have a choice.’ Sena said then opened a book and began scanning the contents.


Sena smirked but quickly turned her attention to the text in front of her.

With a new sparked focus enveloping her Sea began furiously flipping through the pages, skimming sentences and examining images for any information about her blade. There was something about the weapon that made her feel uneasy but she also couldn’t find the courage to give it up since it was something important to her father before his death. She was determined to find out why. There was also the fact that everyone else in her life seemed to know more about it than she did but refused to tell her.

It wasn’t long before Sena had made it through half of the stack and by that point the sun had disappeared entirely. It was well into the night and Sena wouldn’t have even noticed if Kira wasn’t there. Her focus had overcome her to the point she almost didn’t hear her friend speak.

‘Sena, we should call it a night,’ Kira said, placing a hand on her shoulder. ‘We can come back tomorrow so let’s clear these away.’

Sena nodded as she began picking up the scattered books back into a neat pile and worked towards putting them away. Some of them they set aside for the next day and checked them with the clerk so they didn’t have to search for them again. Then they were outside in the fresh air, walking
through the village before they said their goodbyes and went their separate ways.

It wasn’t until she was alone that Sena realised how tired and stiff she was. It had been a long time since she had been so focused on researching something. As she walked the roads back home she yawned, craned her neck from side to side then wrapped her arms around her core, feeling a chill in the air. She mused at the prospect of the new day and wondered what was going to happen at training in the morning and whether or not the research would give her any leads. Then her mind drifted and she questioned whether she should confront Kyou when she got home but decided it would be best to wait until she had the right questions.

It wasn’t long before she walked through the gates of the Matsura compound and turned toward her home. From the courtyard she could see the lights shine through the windows of the upper level, coming from her bedroom window. Sena smiled at the thought of Neji and decided to bypass the formalities with her uncle and jumped straight to her balcony. She paused in front of the door when she got a glimpse of Neji lying on her mattress which he had fixed, pushing it back where it belonged away from the balcony. He was reading something, his eyes focused and his expression serious. Sena indulged herself in the sight a few moments longer before sliding the door open causing his gaze to fall on her, his eyes widening a little.

Neji sat up and put the book on the bedside table. Sena regarded him with a warm smile.

‘Where have you been?’

Sena sighed and walked across the room, removing her weapons and pouches before sitting on the edge of the bed. She kept her eyes trained on the wall in front of her, deciding where to even begin.

‘I was at the library with Kira.’

She interlocked her arms and lifted them into the air, stretching.

‘I’m assuming there was a reason you were at the library so late.’

Sena turned to Neji with a small smile and let her arms fall back down.

‘Worried?’

‘I’m always worried.’

‘I know.’ Sena climbed onto the bed and crawled toward him. ‘You really need to relax a little more.’

She reached out and gently cupped his cheek but Neji didn’t so much a flinch or smile but instead looked at her intently.

‘Does it have anything to do with what we discussed this morning?’

Sena sighed and slid her hand down his neck then took it away completely.

‘Yeah, it does.’ She turned away again. ‘I was looking for some answers about what might be hidden away.’

‘I see.’ He paused. ‘Did you find anything?’

‘No, but I’m going to keep looking and Kira will help me so I won’t go overboard.’

Sena leant back against him and he moved his arms around her, allowing her head fall back against
his chest.

‘We should talk about this another time anyway. I think Kyou is back.’

Neji nodded and kissed the top of her head.

‘What did you do today?’ Sena asked, rubbing her fingers over his arm gently.

‘The usual.’ There was a long pause. ‘I saw Kakashi today.’

A million thoughts rushed to the forefront of her mind but she squashed them all down with an audible swallow.

‘Oh?’

‘He asked about you and wondered how you were doing.’

‘And what did you tell him?’

‘The truth, at least, a simplified version of it.’

‘I see.’

There was another pause and Sena could feel Neji tense against her.

‘He wanted to know if you had found what you were looking for?’

‘What?’

‘That was how he phrased it, like he was trying to gage my knowledge about it.’

‘I asked him questions about the sword,’ Sena explained at cautiously slow pace, ‘There was something he wasn’t telling me.’

‘Kyou, Kakashi, the secrets—it’s all linked isn’t it.’ Neji tightened his grip and pulled her closer.

‘I’m not sure yet but I think it is, I’m still trying to figure it all out.’ Sena turned in his embrace to look at him. ‘I’m not trying to hide anything from you this time, I promise.’

Neji returned her gaze with intensity.

‘I believe you.’ He said, softly and pressed a kiss to her forehead.

‘Good, I’m glad you do.’ She turned back to her original position and sighed. ‘Tomorrow, let’s return to your place and stay there for awhile.’

‘Alright.’ Neji agreed without objection or question.

Sena hoped he knew the reason. She needed to be in a place where her mind could relax and forget about all the theories and secrets. The days she was spending trying to uncover them and the nights she was spending in her house full of them. Neji’s house would prove a refuge away from all that.

Sena pulled away and stood up undressing her outer layers, letting them fall to the ground. There she turned back to Neji, leant over and kissed him gently.

‘I’m going to take a shower.’
When Sena woke the next morning it was raining hard and the chill from the evening before was still in the air. Still she rose from the bed, changed into her shinobi attire and headed for the training grounds. Hitomi Sensei’s rule of training whether it was rain, hail or shine would prevail and prepare them for all conditions of battle. As a Genin she had loathed the idea but as a Jonin she found the method behind the madness.

By the time she had reached the training grounds the rain had wained but the field was muddy and there were puddles everywhere. The others had arrived shortly after her, Jiro with a smart-ass comment and Kira looking entirely indifferent but without complaint.

‘I think in weather like this it’s appropriate to warm up the way we used to,’ Sena began while stretching her arms. ‘We are going to run lengths and then work double time on our laps.’

Jiro rolled his eyes but took the starting position straight away. Kira lined up next to Sena waiting for her mark and then all three of them were off. And it didn’t take long for them to warm up and almost be thankful for the sprinkle of rain that fell onto them. By the end of it they were hunched over and huffing but full of praise at the time they made.

Sena paired Jiro and Kira up first to spar while she opted to be the solo. There was something that she need to investigate and wanted to do it before training with them in combat. She walked a fair distance away but not enough to raise suspicion then unsheathed her blade with a firm grip. Looking down she examined the weapon and found it was balanced and not too heavy. Tracing the same engraving in the hilt she had seen several times with her fingers she frowned then lowered her hand. It seemed like any other sword or antique aside from the curious detail on the hilt.

Sena considered other possibilities. Perhaps it was something within the blade itself like feeling it gave her or perhaps she simply didn’t have as much control over her emotions as she thought. Sena huffed and looked at the blade again. She wracked her brain for ideas on what to do, theories bursting to life then killed with logic. Then she decided to try something different held the blade upright between her hands and closed her eyes. There she took a deep breath attempting to clear her mind then another and another letting her mind drift and relax.

After awhile Sena was considering giving up when she felt something she couldn’t quite name. It was like an itching feeling in her mind, like someone was peering into her thoughts and manipulating her emotions. It was prickling and burning all at the same time, much like when Inoichi had searched her mind in interrogation to make sure she was telling the truth and hadn’t been manipulated by the Akatsuki.

Sena quickly opened her eyes and the feeling was gone but she was left shivering from the sensation. She looked up realising it had begun to rain even harder than before. With a sigh she turned away and headed back to her teammates to finish their training but the experience plagued her mind for the entirety of their session. They ended up finishing early and Kira once again accompanied Sena to the library.

‘Shouldn’t we go home and change first?’ Kira asked.

‘No time.’ Sena marched on. ‘Besides we would only get wet again anyway.’
'I was more concerned with the thick coat of mud.'

'It'll be fine.'

Kira’s protests fell silent at that but Sena could feel the annoyance radiating from her. She paid it no mind, her thoughts still focused on figuring out what was going on. It felt like she was going mad all over again and she would be damned if she let herself fall again.

They approached the counter and checked out there books but not without an unimpressed look from the clerk before finding their table in the back. Sena continued with her books on weapons while Kira with ones concerning medical theories.

The was a new fire burning within Sena that needed to know answers. She flipped through each book quickly, fingers running along the page and eyes searching for something specific: information about hilt engravings, ones like hers in particular. The only thing relevant she found was the fact that in the past different clans had their own particular type of engravings for sword hilts but it didn’t specify what or why. It was beginning to look hopeless again from where she sat and the fire began to turn back to embers, her focus waining.

Sena stretched her arms in front of her before turning her head from side to side. Then she began rubbing at the tense points in her neck before rolling her shoulders.

‘Why are you so invested in this anyway? And don’t try and play it off like it’s nothing, I know there’s a deeper meaning behind this that you aren’t telling me.’

Sena met her gaze and saw the serious look on her face.

‘There are things I need to find out, important things.’

‘Alright, this is where you give me specifics.’

Sena bit her lip and thought for a moment.

‘Seals are my clans specialty and I need to find out about specific ones that I believe are in our possession but have suspicions about them that I can’t let certain people find out.’

‘How eloquently articulated. I daresay too eloquent.’

‘There is also this.’ Sena gestured to the sword. ‘There’s something strange about this that other people seem to know about but refuse to tell me. I’m worried it’s dangerous.’

Kira’s eyes widened.

‘So yesterday…with Jiro, you think that—’

‘Had something to do with the sword? Yes, it felt all to familiar but you can’t speak of this to anyone not even Jiro, you got it?’

‘But why not? He could help!’

‘No, Kira.’ Sena slammed her hand down. ‘I have no idea what we are dealing with or how deep this all goes so don’t tell a soul.’

‘Alright, alright.’ She sighed. ‘I’ll keep your secret.’

‘Thank you.’ Sena exhaled, the tension lifting. ‘Let’s call it day, we spent a lot of time here
yesterday and we can continue tomorrow again.’

‘I’ll stay.’

Sena raised her brows.

‘Are you sure?’

‘You said it was important for you to find out, right?’

Sena nodded.

‘Well then I’ll stay. This is nothing compared to what I had to research and learn when I applied to the hospital.’

‘Thank you, again.’

Kira smiled then gestured her hand for Sena to leave.

Suddenly, Sena was very glad to have Kira as a friend. After all these years she was still underestimating her strength and loyalty. It was time to stop doing that, especially since she had helped her so much already.

Sena left the library with a smile and stepped right into a storm. She looked up as the rain poured onto her face and drenched her clothes. Her shoulders slumped forward, her arms around her core as she began to run. Her speed increased as the water drenched to her bones and caused her to shiver. She fantasied about the warm shower she was going to have when she got home.

A voice called out to her causing her to stop and search through the thick curtain of rain impeding her vision.
A voice called out to Sena causing her to stop and search through the thick curtain of rain impeding her vision.

‘Sena!’ The voice called again allowing her to spot the person.

It was Neji, running toward her and he was also drenched from the downpour.

‘What are you doing in the rain?’ He asked pulling her into a wet hug.

‘I could ask you the same thing!’ Sena replied with a laugh as she pulled away.

‘I was looking for you.’

‘How reckless.’

With that simple remark their regular repertoire became laced in tension and underlined suggestion. It wasn’t intentional on her part but as soon as the tone presented itself she didn’t want to push it aside.

‘Come on,’ Neji said, taking her hand. ‘Let’s go home.’

Sena squeezed his hand and began running alongside him.

It didn’t take them long to get home but by the time they did Sena was a drenched and shivering mess, her clothes clinging to her frame barely leaving anything to the imagination. Neji wasn’t any better.

He dragged her into the warmth of the bedroom and turned to survey her appearance. His eyes flickered down her body. At once they widened then shot back up. He froze as if the sight of her caused him to become suddenly aware of the thick tension between them. Then in a flustered manner he quickly grabbed a towel from the cupboard behind him and forced it into her hands.

‘Go and shower,’ He ordered. ‘I don’t want you to get sick.’

‘What about you?’ Sena asked, using her towel to pat her cheeks dry.

Neji turned quickly and proceeded to get another towel from the cupboard without turning back around. Sena could see his back tense.

‘I’ll be fine. I’m just wet from the rain so I can dry.’ He wrung the towel tightly in his hands before
adding. ‘You’re covered in mud.’

‘Alright,’ Sena agreed, with a little reluctance. ‘I won’t be long.’

Neji nodded and she chanced a glance toward his back before heading into the bathroom and shutting the door.

The kunoichi smiled to herself, analysing the situation before a cold shiver ran through her. It was too cold for her to think about the possibilities awaiting her on the other side of the door so instead she contented herself turning on the hot water and stripping out of her wet clothes. She was aware of something cold still against her chest. Looking down she saw her necklace and removed it at once to place on the counter.

Stepping beneath the warm stream felt like a dream compared to what she had fantasised during her journey through the cold rain. The room began to fog over and the tension began to disappear, allowing her body to relax. After taking a long moment to thaw out, Sena got to work washing the mud off her skin and out of her hair. She hadn’t realised how dirty she was until she had to scrub the muck off.

Although she felt like she could spend hours in the shower below the warmth of the water, Sena forced herself to shut it off, reminding herself that Neji was also soaking wet and would likely want to shower. She picked up the towel which Neji had forced into her hands earlier and dried her body and hair. Then she changed into some clean clothes and then examined herself in the fogged over mirror.

Her cheeks were red from the heat and her damp hair was sticking to her neck. She considered blowdrying it but decided it would be too much of a hassle and instead gave it another once over with the towel before hanging it on the rail to dry. Then she discarded her dirty clothes, switched off the light and opened the door where she was met with an unexpected sight.

Neji was sitting on the edge of the bed expectingly, in fresh clothes and wet hair pulled up into a bun. He stood quickly at her entrance. Sena’s eyes looked around the room to find the blinds drawn and a few candles lit on the windowsill. Her eyes quickly came back to Neji who was standing as stiff as a board.

‘Neji?’ Sena asked, breathless.

Neji quickly glanced from the candles back to her with his arms crossed in that way people could assume was standoffish. Not her though because she knew better—he was doing something far outside the realm of his comfort zone.

‘I just thought they’d help you relax.’ He said quickly, like he was a criminal trying to cover up a guilty act.

‘Relax?’

Neji gave a swift nod.

Sena took a moment to examine the room again and realised that she couldn’t hear the rain outside anymore. There was no background noise, just her and Neji. Her gaze met his and she finally understood what he was trying to say.

Her lips pressed together in an attempt to suppress a smile as she took a cautious step forward.

‘Are you okay with relaxing?’ Sena asked, understanding the hidden meaning behind the word.
Neji cleared his throat.

‘I am okay with relaxing,’ He agreed before adding, ‘together. With you.’

Another smile dared to cross Sena’s lips except this time she did not conceal it.

Neji still looked at her with keen eyes as though trying to discern her reaction. Sena took a few controlled steps forward until she stood about a foot away from him. With her head tilted upward to hold his gaze, she leant forward and cupped his cheeks. They were warm beneath her touch.

‘Are you sure?’ Sena asked.

‘Yes.’

The certainty behind his answer was all it took for Sena to crash her lips against his. Neji stumbled back a little before grabbing her waist and kissing her back with mirrored ferocity. Sena’s hands slid from his cheeks and into his hair pulling hard and effectively pushing his face further into the kiss. He returned with the same unhunged need, fisting the material of her shirt between his fingers while actively pulling her body against his. It was a familiar rhythm of passion they had accustomed themselves with but this time it was accompanied with a lust induced haze and without the usual boundaries.

Opportunity called with the new found concession. Sena wasted no time slipping her tongue into Neji’s mouth, coaxing him to do the same. They found a comfortable flow which allowed their hands to roam each other. Sena’s ran down Neji’s chest, her fingertips pressing down hard before they made their way around his neck for stability. His hands roamed from her waist to her back, stroking, grabbing and groping as they made their way toward her backside, stopping with a noticeable hesitation.

Sena quickly pulled away the kiss.

‘Don’t hold back.’ She begged before pressing her lips against his again.

Neji took that as concession to continue, daring to drop his hands lower and squeezing her backside. Sena moaned into the kiss. He had never given in to his own desire so quickly before and Sena took this new found confidence as a good sign. She couldn’t help wanting more.

Sena hoisted one of her legs over his side and pushed against him. His breath hitched, the sound just escaping between kisses. Neji in turn groped her backside even harder, kneading the flesh through the fabric of her shorts and pulling her flush against him. Then with one aggressive buck of her hips they were fell against the bed with his back against the mattress and Sena on top of him.

Sena suddenly broke the kiss and stood away from him.

‘What are you doing?’ He asked desperately, sitting up to follow her.

Sena offered him a smile and began removing her clothes. One garment after the other was thrown to the ground with haste.

‘Getting these out of the way.’ She replied, standing in nothing but her underwear.

Neji’s eyes were trained on her face but Sena saw his brow twitch. She placed her hands on her hips, stood tall and chuckled.

‘You are allowed to look, you know?’
Neji gulped audibly without breaking his gaze.

Sena sighed. ‘Well at least stand up, it’s your turn to undress.’

In compliance Neji stood, almost a little too quickly and with his fists clenched at his side. Sena offered him another warm smile then walked toward him. Her hands graced his cheeks again, noting that they had grown even warmer.

‘What’s wrong?’ Sena asked, caressing him. ‘Why are you standing there still like a statue?’

Neji exhaled and brought his hands gently to her hips as he looked down.

‘I haven’t done this before so…’

‘So, that means it’s a really big deal and you are nervous?’

Neji looked up a little startled.

‘Not exactly.’ He said with a blush.

‘I see.’

He looked down again. ‘Maybe a little.’

Sena could honestly say she had never seen Neji look this way before. It was as though he were a little bashful. She needed to make him feel more comfortable.

‘Well,’ Sena began, ‘it’s a big deal for me since it’s my first time with you. I’m also nervous.’

Neji lifted his head to meet her gaze with wide eyes.

Sena leant forward to give him a chaste kiss. She could see Neji relax a little as his hands came to rest on top of hers. Gently he pulled them away from his cheeks and nodded. Then he pulled his shirt over his head and stepped out of his pants so that all he was left in was his briefs. Neji stood tall with his fists still clenched as he stared directly at Sena.

Taking this as a means to continue she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him into another heated kiss. Immediately, Neji was kissing back and his hands came to rest on lower back as encouragement for Sena to pull herself up and wrap her legs around him. His hands moved to her backside for stability as he carried her to the bed and placed her down and climbed on top of her. Sena, still wrapped around him, pulled Neji as close as possible so that they melted into each other and became one.

Sena’s hands were once again seeking out his hair and his were running along her chest and groping her breasts. There was more desperation behind each touch and caress. It felt like they would fade away should they leave each other’s embrace. With every touch and every kiss Sena would buck her hips up to meet his and grind their bodies together when they refused to separate.

Sena then slowly slid her hands down his sides for extra control where she felt his prominent bulge rising against her. Feeling this, Sena tightened her legs around him and forced him even closer. With the heat between them building at an almost unbearable rate Sena felt Neji shudder at the contact, forcing his arms to move either side of her for stability. His clothed erection was pressed hard against her damp underwear, right against her clit. He had broken the kiss and was above her panting above her with flushed cheeks. Sena knew she wasn’t doing much better. Her damp hair was disheveled and sticking to her shoulders while her mouth hung open exuding shallow breaths.
It was overwhelming.

There they stared at each other for what felt like an eternity, exchanging longing glances and silent affirmations that this is what they both wanted.

Sena grabbed Neji and rolled him over with a huff to escaping his lips as his back hit the mattress. Grabbing his wrists, she pinned his arms above his head and looked down at him with a seductive smirk. Then she gave him a passionate, drawn out kiss. He didn’t attempt to break her hold as she continued to ravish him, trailing kisses down his cheeks, neck and over his chest. With every kiss she pressed a little harder and kept them against his flushed skin a little longer which made him to push into her touch.

Sena loosened her grip on his arms and slowly but forcibly racked her fingertips all the way down his body. Then she looked down to admire her handiwork from the lines that ran down Neji’s chest to the red marks across his neck. Her was then drawn to his face which had darkened with lust, his eyes reflecting the anticipation from within. Licking her tingling lips at the sight she then drove them down to crash against his while rolling her hips at the same time.

At that moment, Sena was reminded of the end goal and put as much force into the rolling of her hips as she could, making sure to grind hard against his clothed cock. Neji’s hands quickly found hips and used them to push her down and add to the maddening friction. The intensity of the motion was almost dizzying.

Neji was panting and moaning, his hands sliding firmly down her backside. On top of him Sena wasn’t doing much better, taking sharp inhales of breath each time he grazed her sensitive clit. She could practically feel it throbbing, begging for the friction of the fabric to be removed and her need satisfied. But she didn’t want to stop.

All of their making out sessions now seemed timid in comparison to this.

A strangled moan escaped Neji as his whole body shuddered and his hips bucked. Sena stopped her motions as she watched Neji squeeze his eyes shut and attempt to maintain composure. If it weren’t for the heat of the moment Sena might have chuckled and teased him but instead she leant forward and gave him a firm kiss. Then she rolled off him and took a few shallow breaths in a feeble attempt to regain her composure.

Neji turned his head to look at her. Sena met his gaze and drifted her hands down toward her underwear in a teasing manner. When she touched garment she could feel that it was completely drenched. Neji’s eyes intently followed her hands, watching as she slowly pealed the fabric off her hips and down her legs in seductive manner, lifting them into the air for an advantageous view. She wanted to give him every possible moment she could to enjoy it. His gaze flowed along her body and back up to meet hers. Turning her body toward him, she traced her finger in circular patterns over his chest.

‘Your turn.’ She beckoned in a husky voice.

Neji stared at her in awe before the hint of a smile appeared. His hands found the waistband of his briefs but then he stopped and turned to face her again.

‘What?’ She asked. ‘Oh, you want me to do it? Is that it?’

Before he could confirm or deny she was climbing on top of him again, her fingers tucking beneath the waistband and aggressively tugging them down his thighs. Neji quickly lifted his hips to assist her before she pulled them off and threw them onto the floor. His brow furrowed at that.
Sena then climbed off Neji and curled up beside him.

When her hand returned to his chest to trace his flushed skin, Neji turned his head to face her. Sena smiled before running her hand up to his face and pulling him in for another longing kiss. Neji shifted and pulled her flush against him. In return, Sena brought her leg over his side in an attempt to push her body even closer, their faces practically touching.

Sena waited a moment before her hand worked it’s way down his body seeking out his erection. When she felt her hand graze it she wasted no time finding the head which was leaking pre-cum and down his shaft. He moaned a little at her touch before she took hold of the base of his length with a firm grip. Then Sena gave a few hard pumps, her hand slick enough from the pre-cum to slide along it nicely. And once she picked up her momentum she experimented by adding more pressure around the head with her thumb. It wasn’t long before he was shuddering again and moaning again. Then Neji quickly grabbed her wrist.

‘It’s fine,’ he said, breathlessly, ‘let me prepare you.’

‘Okay.’

Sena rolled onto her back and allowed Neji to move above her. The moment his hand came to rest on her stomach she could feel it shaking. She smiled attempting to reassure him but it didn’t stop his hand shaking. Still, Neji continued, bending down to place featherlight kisses down her chest making her body tingle in anticipation.

Despite his obvious nerves, Neji persevered, his hand sliding down her body. It wasn’t long before he found her clit and began rubbing it in slow, circular motions. Sena moaned at the contact, feeling extremely sensitive from friction of their clothes before. Without warning his fingers then delved deeper and pushed along her entrance causing an uncontrolled buck of her hips. Sena bit her lip at the sensation. It was satisfying and overwhelming all at once.

Neji smiled as he turned to face her and press a kiss to her cheek before a serious expression appeared. His concentration fell back onto his hand. Using his thumb to circle her clit he pushed another finger against her entrance. She wet enough for it to slip in halfway already. His finger began pumping inside her. And the he was adding a second finger and adding more pressure to her clit. Sena moaned and bit down on her lip hard while her hand fisted the sheets beside her.

Just when Sena thought it couldn’t get any better, Neji repositioned himself and put his free hand on her stomach. Then he pushed the two fingers inside her in a straight motion and thrust them inside while pushing the hand on his stomach toward her at the same time. It managed to hit a sensitive spot inside she hadn’t known she had and caused a shudder to echo throughout her body.

‘Keep doing that!’ She called between bated breaths.

Neji looked at her, stunned for a second before complying and repeating the motions. He continued it again and again, adding more speed and force every time her hips bucked. The pleasure was unlike anything she had ever felt before and she could barely control the sounds coming from her.

‘Where did you learn that?’ Sena practically yelled.

Neji turned to her, continuing at a slightly slower pace.

‘I don’t know, I just—’

Sena had grabbed his face and pulled him in for a feverish kiss before he could finish. Without thinking she pushed her tongue against his with such ferocity he slowed his fingers moving inside
of her. Neji pulled away uncertain as he stilled his motions completely.

‘I’m prepared enough,’ Sena declared, ‘I want you, now.’

His eyes widened slightly as he removed his fingers.

‘Are you sure?’ He looked down between them then back to her, ‘I don’t want to hurt you.’

‘You won’t.’ She slapped her hands onto his cheeks and brought his face even closer to hers. ‘Trust me.’ She begged, biting back the *I’ve done this before.*

Neji nodded quickly and Sena could practically see the anticipation in his eyes.

‘How do you want to—’

‘Why don’t you go on top?’

‘Are you sure?’

Sena nodded, knowing it would be easier for him to get used to it as well as feel a little more in control. That was something that he would need in this new experience. She could tell he was feeling vulnerable—Neji was always insecure when it came to intimacy. Then there was also the fact that she wanted to be able to see his face the entire time and discover his new expressions and mannerisms especially for her.

Neji shifted so that he hovered on top of her, hands resting either side of her face. Sena shifted her legs wide and open in order to accompany him between her. She then bent her knees and pull her legs back enough to have enough elevation for her to move once they started.

Neji looked down between them and lifted one hand down to take hold of his erection while Sena placed a hand on his hip to help guide him to her entrance. Neji quickly looked up.

‘Are you ready?’ He asked, voice wavering a little.

‘I’m ready,’ she confirmed. ‘Are you?’

He was shaking above her.

Neji gave a quick nod before looking back down at his erection. Slowly, he began pushing it in. Sena let out a soft gasp as his tip entered. It was a little sensitive and tight but it didn’t really hurt.

Neji went carefully, pushing it deeper and deeper, making sure not to move too fast for either of them. Then when most of it was inside her, he moved his hand back beside her head and pushed in the last inch of his shaft. He shuddered against her.

Sena held him tight. She could feel Neji still trembling against her and looked up to find his eyes squeezed shut. She lifted her hands to cup his cheeks and rub her thumbs over them in an attempt to soothe him. She knew that look. He was trying to keep control.

‘Don’t move.’ He begged in a strangled voice.

‘I won’t,’ She soothed, ‘I still need to adjust.’

She carefully moved her hands up around his neck and gently pulled him down toward her until he was on top of her completely, his hot skin flush against hers. Neji was incredibly tense to which Sena attempted to rectify with gentle stroking motions up and down his neck and back. Wrapping
his arms tightly around her, Neji buried his face in her neck. She pressed soft kisses to his cheek then slowly he began to relax beneath her touch.

Some time past before Neji pushed himself up again. He opened his eyes and looked into hers, hovering above her once again. Sena was taken back with the emotion she saw behind them and suddenly she was feeling vulnerable. All the emotions and feelings she had buried inside of her for Neji came rushing to the surface threatening to burst.

The prospect of sex, even during her first time, had never quite felt like that before.

Neji leant forward and brushed his lips against hers.

‘Sena.’ He whispered.

‘Neji.’

And then he was kissing her. Not with haste but with long, drawn out movements that made the world stop and drew the breath right out of her. They were controlled kisses, ones Sena could feel the words he was trying to communicate with a simple flex of the mouth. Using her hands she pulled him deeper into the kiss.

Neji then broke the kiss, lingered for a second then pulled away.

‘It’s alright to move.’ Sena assured him as one of her hands slid down to find his waist.

Neji nodded. Then his eyes flickered down to her lips and back to her eyes, his mouth opening like there was something he wanted to say. Sena’s finger glided over his lips then across his cheek as a sign of encouragement.

‘I love you.’ He breathed.

Sena’s breath hitched.

She had heard him say those words to her a dozen times but this was different. It was as though Sena finally felt the weight behind those words as the weaved their way into the broken crevices of her heart. And finally Sena understood the depth of his feelings for her. Her eyes began to water.

‘I love you, too.’

Neji smiled softly and rearranged his hands beside her head.

‘I’m going to move now.’

Sena nodded keeping one hand on his face while the other clutched his waist.

Slowly, Neji moved his hips back and pulled his erection out of her. Then, very carefully, he pushed it back in with a groan. He was sensitive.

Neji then repeated the action and then again and again, increasing the force and speed each time. Eventually he gained a rhythm and although his strokes were still a little stiff and awkward, Sena started to feel good.

The hand Sena had on his waist slid to hold his hip, giving her the anchor she needed to lift her hips to meet his. The first time she did this his hips stuttered and a moan escaped his lips. Sena smiled at the pleasing response and continued. She caressed his cheek as she watched him struggle to keep his eyes open.
Neji was panting now. Sena could see his arms wanting to give. She began pushing her hips up as fast and hard as she could, feeling his erection burry deep inside her. A familiar tingle coursed through her. Moans spilled from her lips and Neji continued to rock his hips with fervour until his arms finally gave out and his body fell onto her.

His sweaty forehead pressed down against hers causing their noses to brush with every pant.

‘Wrap your arms around me.’ Sena commanded into his ear.

Neji pushed himself up and kissed her. Then he obliged, wrapping his arms around her and burying his face into her neck. There he resumed thrusting into her with added force and the increasing desperation from his fumbling hips. With every thrust she brought her hips up to meet his, adding more intensity and friction. Neji grunted softly into her ear with each motion. It felt like a dream.

Sena pressed kisses to his shoulder every now and again when she felt his grip around her body tighten. Then suddenly he stopped and pulled one arm from behind her and pushed it above her head so that his face was ghosting above hers, lips almost touching with every breath. Their bodies flushed and covered in a sheen of sweat.

Neji resumed his motions, pushing into her while maintaining eye contact with every stroke. The intensity behind his gaze was clear and only encouraged her to push her body closer, to feel a little more of him inside her. She slid her hands around his neck, wrapped her legs around his core and aggressively rocked her body even harder against him than before. She needed to feel more.

Neji let out a strangled groan and pushed on, his motions becoming more uncontrolled and needy.

‘Harder.’ Sena called.

Neji complied immediately and with enthusiasm. His body practically jolting against hers. He was close but she could tell by his gaze that he wasn’t going to finish easily without a fight. That only pushed her further, working her hips and hard she could.

Sena moaned and arched. She was reaching for him and pushing her hips as far forward as she could, allowing him to thrust into her as deep as possible. Then Neji let his himself slip down closer to her, his thrusts un rhythmic and wild. It would happen soon.

‘Neji.’ She moaned like a mantra, repeating it for good measure along with added encouragements, ‘Feels good. Just a little more.’ Her voice was husky and her throat was dry but she didn’t care. Having Neji inside her felt amazing and she wanted it to last just a little bit longer.

Suddenly she was overcome an overpowering the feeling of attachment and decided she only wanted Neji for the rest of her life. She never wanted to let him go. Her grip on him tightened so her hold was almost suffocating. He didn’t complain or stop. He continued pushing his cock inside of her.

Sena felt her toes begin to curl and her body tingle more. But now Neji was rocking uncontrollably and she knew he couldn’t hold out any longer. It was already too much for him.

‘I can feel you inside me,’ Sena whispered, ‘you don’t have to hold back anymore.’

Neji grunted as if objecting.

Sena knew she needed to take the edge off. Her hands stroked up and down his neck.

‘Neji, let go.’ She whispered. ‘Cum for me.’
That was all Neji needed to hear before he completely lost control, his hips stuttering in a continuous stream as he finally came inside her. Sena continued rocking her hips through it, her hands back onto his cheeks in soothing motions. Neji’s eyes squeezed shut completely as the last signs of orgasm flowed through him.

Sena hugged her arms around him. Neji was still sheathed inside her, breathing uneven and his body hot against hers. As she felt him calm down against her, his arms found their way under her and into his embrace. His face was burning against her neck.

He squeezed her just a little bit too tight but she didn’t protest, instead returning the gesture. She never wanted to let him go.

They lay there letting their hearts settle and their breathing return to normal. Then slowly, Neji peeled himself off Sena and rolled beside her. Sena smiled, biting her lip as she realised they had actually done it. She couldn’t believe it.

Neji brought his hands to his face causing her to turn her gaze toward him. He sighed then turned away from her.

A feeling of dread emerged within her.

‘Neji, what’s wrong?’ She asked, turning toward him.

His hands slid down from his face but he didn’t turn to look at her.

‘Sorry.’ He muttered.

‘It wasn’t what you expected?’ She asked, deflated.

He quickly turned back to face her with wide eyes.

‘No! It felt…’ Neji blushed, ‘too good, I couldn’t…’ He trailed off.

Sena’s doubts and concerns were quickly put to rest as she realised what was wrong with him. She placed her hands onto his face, pulling so he would keep looking at her.

‘It felt amazing, being with you,’ Sena whispered, ‘But if you’re worried about this one time then you should know I plan on doing it many more times with you.’

Then Neji wrapped a hand behind the back of her head and pulled her in for a deep kiss. The tension of the moment seemed to vanish in an instant.

Sena chuckled, pulling away.

‘Next time it will be even better.’ She promised.

‘Alright.’ Neji agreed, pulling her into his embrace.

They laid there silently in each others arms, fingertips stroking affectionately while searching each others eyes.

‘When did you decided to do this?’ Sena asked.

‘Awhile ago.’

‘Did you plan it like this?’
Neji cleared his throat. ‘No, this was more the spur of the moment.’

‘Candles are your spur of the moment, huh?’ Sena raised her brow. ‘I’m impressed.’

Neji shrugged. ‘You took a long shower.’

‘I’d like to see what you actually had planned.’

‘It was nothing.’

‘Oh?’

Neji paused. ‘I did imagine we’d go to dinner first.’

‘What a shame, I would have liked that.’

Neji let slip a laugh. ‘I know.’

Sena nudged his arm. ‘Next time.’

‘Next time.’

Neji pressed a kiss to Sena’s nose and smiled. It was no ordinary smile but that rare one which Sena had been fortunate enough to witness and even luckier to be on the receiving end of a few times. As she continued to study his face she came to the conclusion that she loved Neji smiling above all else. Sure, his flustered nature did bring out her teasing one but she would have his happiness over her own. That was the one thing she was sure of when it came to him. She wondered if he felt the same.

‘What are you thinking about, Hyūga?’ Sena asked, brushing her nose playfully against his.

‘Nothing you need to know just yet.’ Neji squeezed his arms around her and teased his lips against hers in the same playful manner.

‘So, you’ve resorted to teasing and secrets?’ Sena sighed, ‘I think I’ve rubbed off on you a little too much.’

‘Is that so?’

‘Depends.’

‘On what?’

‘On if you tell me what you were thinking.’

Neji hummed. ‘One day.’

‘Well, in that case let go of me.’ Sena pulled away with a dramatic tug, doing her best to hide her smile.

Neji seemed to see right through it.

‘Never.’ He whispered, pressing a kiss to her lips.

‘Fine.’ Sena relented.

‘Don’t pout.’
Neji pressed another kiss to her lips then to each cheek and her chin.

Sena chuckled. ‘I could get used to this.’

‘Maybe I could too.’

Sena froze at these words but Neji simply kissed her again as if what he had said was as normal as telling her he wanted to make tea. But it wasn’t a simple matter at all. Sena had spent a better part of her life getting Neji to open up to her and here he was serving up his heart earnestly as if it were nothing. No, not nothing but rather he was finally doing it with ease. Neji was not affectionate often but perhaps the past months had seen a change in him. The thought of that warmed her heart.

‘What are you thinking?’ Neji asked, softly.

‘Hm, I’ll tell you one day.’ Sena smiled coyly, running a hand up her neck.

Neji sighed. ‘Fair enough.’

Sena’s hand came to rest on her chest then her eyes widened and she shot up suddenly.

‘What are you—’

‘Necklace!’ She quickly said, jumping out from bed and into the bathroom.

Sena could hear Neji calling to her from the other room as she picked the pendant off the bathroom counter and clasped it around her neck. The moment the cool metal touched her skin she sighed, the weight of the guilt lifting from her. She couldn’t believe she had forgotten something so precious like that.

Taking the pendent in her hand she squeezed, physically telling her mind that I was alright, she had it. Then turning away from the counter she returned to the bedroom to find Neji sitting on the bed with the stunned expression.

Sena climbed back into bed and laid beside him.

‘Sorry, I forgot this,’ Sena gestured to the pendent. ‘I took it off to shower.’

Neji relaxed, nodding as he laid back down beside her.

‘Don’t scare me like that.’

‘Sorry,’ she said, feeling the familiar teasing urge return to her, ‘What did you think I was doing?’

Neji frowned. ‘I didn’t know what to think.’

‘Is that so?’ Sena curled up beside him and pressed a kiss to his chest. ‘Don’t worry, I wasn’t running away.’

‘Is it special to you?’ Neji asked ignoring the last part as his hand drifted toward it.

Sena watched as he cautiously traced the metal pendant with his finger.

‘It was my mother’s,’ Sena explained. ‘She got it from her parents when she was child and it bore the Uchiha crest. When she decided to marry my father she surprised him by getting the Matsura crest engraved on the other side.’
When Sena had first heard the story as a child she thought it was the most self sacrificing gesture a shinobi could make. To have such strong love like her parents did seemed like something out of a dream back then and declaring in such a way seemed like the height of romance. But now things were different.

Neji’s eyes met hers with an intense stare. She almost blushed at the idea of him reading her thoughts but she knew the stare wasn’t because of that. Neji of all people knew the weight behind the decision her mother had made by marrying into another clan. And he also knew what it felt like to be betrayed by the clan he was born into.

‘It was on my father the night he died,’ Sena continued, feeling Neji’s hand move from the necklace to her collar bone delicately. ‘Kyou returned it to me.’

Neji frowned. ‘I see, I had wondered where it came from.’

Sena arched her body into Neji’s touch as his finger tips ran across her chest and delved up her neck. His touch was intoxicating and she never wanted him to stop.

To add more encouragement she reached out for his arm and began tracing patterns along it. Again they fell into a comfortable silence, feeling for and pushing into each others touch.

‘Can I ask you something?’ Sena asked.

Neji pulled away from their trance and sat upright.

‘Of course.’ He replied.

‘When did it change for you?’

Neji frowned. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean us. When did it change to you wanting to be with me.’

‘Are you actually asking me when I feel in love with you?’

‘Yes, I am.’

A blush returned to Neji’s cheeks and he crossed his arms.

Sena laughed and pressed a kiss to his arm.

‘Come on, tell me please?’ Sena whined. ‘I’m curious.’

Neji swallowed audibly.

Sena knew she would have to coax it out of him using more than just words. Pushing herself up, Sena climbed on top of Neji so that she was straddling him. He uncrossed his arms on impact and gave her a questioning look. Sena simply smiled and placed her hands gently onto her shoulders.

‘Tell me?’ She whispered, planting a kiss to his cheek, ‘Please? I just want to know how long you’ve felt differently.’ Then she placed a trail of kisses down his neck. ‘I don’t need all the little details.’

Neji sighed, bringing his hands to rest on the small of her back.

‘I don’t know. When I think about it now it just seems like I have always felt this way.’ He
Sena hummed in reply and started planting soft kisses across his chest. ‘There wasn’t a moment?’ She asked between kisses.

‘One moment?’ Neji repeated, seeming to mull over her words. ‘I guess there are some moments when I realised it.’

Sena began to kiss up his neck again on the opposite side. Once she reached his lips she pressed a firm kiss to them then pulled away.

‘What moments would they be?’ She asked.

‘You aren’t going to let this go until I explain, are you?’

‘Oh, Neji.’ Sena pressed a kiss to his nose. ‘You know I’m stubborn, in fact I’m probably more stubborn than you.’

Neji raised a brow, seeming completely unamused.

‘Fine,’ Neji conceded taking a deep breath, ‘You remember when they transferred the curse seal from you to your father.’

Sena nodded, remembering the process in vivid detail but the aftermath was a blur.

‘While transferring it I took a kunai to the side,’ she recalled, ‘and afterward you and Shikamaru took me to the hospital while the adults finished the process.’

‘Right, well, I remember feeling something then.’ Neji looked away from her gaze. ‘I remember knowing that no matter what happened, I couldn’t lose you. I didn’t know what I’d do without you.’

Sena’s hands caressed up his neck. ‘You were only 14?’ She questioned, softly.

‘I told you it’s like I’ve always felt this way.’ He met her gaze almost timidly.

Something inside her stirred at this confession and she couldn’t help but want to know more, no matter how selfish she felt. It had turned from something she wanted to hear to something she needed.

‘What were you expecting?’ Neji asked.

‘Oh, I don’t know.’ Sena took a moment before adding, ‘Perhaps it could have been around the time you started hating Jiro or when I kicked your ass in training.’

Neji scoffed. ‘I have no idea what you’re referring to.’

Sena hummed, letting her thumbs caress his skin. ‘I believe you said moments? Plural.’

Neji nodded and took a deep breath. ‘When you left the village I worried you might not come back but then every time you did it confirmed something else I feared. I still felt this way about you, no matter how much time passed or how much I tried to deny it.’

The more he spoke the more at ease he seemed with the topic.

‘You’ve changed since then.’ Sena assured him.
Neji looked at her with uncertain eyes. ‘Have I really?’

‘Yes, you’re not the same boy you used to be.’

He looked at her with a gaze full of regret and Sena couldn’t help but caress him more.

‘I’m sorry for the boy I was back then,’ Neji began, ‘Sorry for not telling you that I loved you when I knew I did. And for making you go through everything alone.’

Sena took a deep breath acknowledging the weight behind his words.

‘Well, I don’t think the girl I was back then was ready to hear those words.’ Sena pressed a soft kiss to his lips. ‘And for the record I wasn’t alone, I still had you and you showed me you cared, in your own way.’

‘But I was wrong to lie to you for so long; wrong for the way I treated you in the past.’ Neji clutched onto her waist with a firm grip.

‘Timing has never really been our strong suit.’ Sena’s hands caressed up to his cheeks, the same secure spot she had sought to comfort him all night.

‘The man you are now proves you can change because you aren’t that boy anymore and that’s what is important.’

‘It doesn’t change everything I did in the past.’

‘Neji?’ Sena called softly while stroking his face.

Neji’s eyes fixed on the sheets beside them. He took a deep breath before continuing.

‘My uncle had always treated the branch family like we were lesser—like we were weak. And in the moments that it mattered most I was. I had been pushing myself to prove him wrong and to honour my father’s memory but I was pushing you away.’

‘I don’t think you pushed me away because you couldn’t handle death or scrutiny of the main branch. I think it’s because you couldn’t handle feelings.’ Sena cupped his face. ‘But you aren’t like that anymore. You care about people, including me. You’re becoming a man in a way that your father never got the chance to and I think there’s honour in that.’

Neji nodded still refusing to look up at her as Sena pressed a soft kiss to his forehead.

‘Neji?’ She called again, finally coaxing him to look at her. ‘The boy you used to may never have told me he loved me but the girl I was should have known from the start.’

Neji gave her a soft smile and began caressing his hands up her back.

Sena leant forward for another kiss, this one deeper and with more fire than the last. Neji slid his hands into the small of her back and opened his mouth to accompany her tongue. It was a slow kiss but filled with love and understanding. Then Neji pulled away.

‘The stars.’ He said quickly.

‘What?’ Sena asked, baffled.

‘The first time you made me stay late at the training ground to watch the stars. You took me by the hand and pulled me to the ground. Then when you pointed up and I finally looked at the stars like
it was the first time I’d seen them. I remember thinking that you were the only person I ever
wanted to do that with.’

‘Neji.’ Sena said softly, examining his serious expression. She would have never have guessed that
their nights watching the stars meant as much to him as it did to her.

Sena smiled fully, her eyes watering at his honestly. Before Neji could say anything more Sena
grabbed his face and kissed him again. It was a kiss that conveyed the feelings threatening to burst
out of her chest. And she kissed him with ferocity and fervour, wanting their bodies to merge and
become one. Then the kisses continued with a fiery need and Sena was rocking her hips against
Neji feeling the results instantly.

‘I want you again,’ Sena whispered, ‘please.’

Neji nodded. ‘Alright.’ He agreed, his voice breaking.

Sena grabbed his hardening cock and gave it a few good pumps to bring it completely back to life.
It didn’t take long for him to get hard, his grip on her hips became almost painful. He was sensitive
still.

‘I’m going to put it in like this.’ Sena explained, waiting for confirmation.

Neji nodded, quickly his grip returning to her sides.

Sena lifted herself up, using one hand on Neji’s shoulder for stability while she used the other to
grip his erection and guide it to her entrance for a second time. The moment the tip entered she
winced, feeling a little sensitive but after a few moments she pushed down until he was all the way
in. Sena took a sharp intake of breath. Neji shuddered once fully sheathed but he didn’t squeeze his
eyes closed or tense up like the last time.

Sena waited to adjust while taking shallow breathes. Then when she was ready she gave him a
chaste kiss.

‘I’m going to move, alright?’

Neji nodded and grabbed onto her hips. Sena then lifted herself up all the way until only the tip of
his cock was inside her then quickly slammed back down. Neji groaned and his fingertips pressed
down hard into her sides. Sena bit her lip in pleasure. It felt good, too good and she needed more.

Without wasting time Sena clutched down onto Neji’s shoulder and lifted herself up again,
repeating the slamming motion down. Then she continued the action again and again until Neji let
out his loudest groan of the night and let his head fall back against the headboard. Sena stopped for
a second to examine his face contouring in pleasure before continuing.

It wasn’t long before the strain began to creep up her neck and she let herself fall back, her spare
hand coming to rest behind her on Neji’s thigh. Digging her nails in for stability she let her head
fall back as she continued to ride him.

Neji began lifting his hips to meet Sena’s with every thrust forcing his cock deeper inside. His grip
on her sides was so hard her skin began to tingle but she didn’t care, instead she took it has
incentive to push down harder. She whined at the numerous sensations vibrating through her,
clutching even tighter onto Neji. In turn he pulled forward and began littering her chest with messy
openmouthed kisses.

Just when she felt like she was about to explode, Sena pushed forward and grabbed onto both of
Neji’s shoulders forcing his back against the headboard with a thud. He looked up at her wide eyed and his mouth hanging open and in a second her mouth was on his in a messy kiss. Her hips were working double time and he pushed his hands into her lower back, helping stabilise her.

Sena felt numb and electrified all at once. A familiar warmth was brewing within her threatening, the coil of self control threatening to snap and release. Just when she opened her mouth to beg for more Neji snaked on his hands between them and began rubbing her clit. Moans spilled from her lips instead.

‘What about you?’ Neji asked between staggered breaths.

‘W-what?’ Sena asked, attempting to maintain the motions of her hips.

‘When did…it change,’ Neji let a groan slip, ‘for you?’

Sena slowed her hips and dug her nails into his flesh, feeling the tingling sensations work through her abdomen.

‘You’re asking this… now?’ She could barely breathe and talk at the same time.

‘Yes.’ Neji replied with a wicked smile.

Sena narrowed her eyes and tried to think. It was a question she had asked herself many times, when Neji had became someone she was in love with rather than simply someone she loved. There was an answer hidden within her, from a story that felt as old as time but her mind was clouded by the lust of the moment and unlocking it proved difficult.

‘My beloved Hyūga,’ she replied, her chest heaving, ‘such a…ro-romantic.’

Neji removed his hand from her clit causing her to whine.

‘Neji!’

‘Fair is…ugh fair.’

‘Damnit!’

Sena knew this was payback for when she coaxed an answer out of him the last time they were intimate and she cursed herself for that.

‘Before the fire!’ Sena practically yelled. ‘You waited for me after…mission…oh…the last mission. We went to get—’

‘Tea.’ Neji finished.

They both stopped suddenly and looked into each others eyes. Sapphire met lavender, both darkening with lust as everything else melted away. There was something within them they had both been keeping buried deep inside, some uncontrollable desire that a simple word had just unlocked. And they knew this had been their destiny from the start

In an instant Neji had grabbed Sena and flipped her onto her back with her knees flung over his shoulders like pants hung out to dry as he pressed himself into her again. She let out a yelp, feeling sensitive from the attention before. A trembling hand shot out to grab a fistful of his hair as she strained to pull him closer to her so that she could crash her lips against his. The kiss lasted but a few heated moments before he pulled away to continue thrusting into her.
Sena moaned and moaned, no longer bothering to hold it in. Every touch, every thrust overcame her senses until all she could feel was that tantalising pleasure only Neji could bring her. Still she wanted more.

‘Harder.’ She commanded through strained breaths.

‘You sure?’ Neji puffed.

‘Harder!’ This time she yelled, getting her firm point across.

And Neji began thrusting even deeper and harder than she felt possible. In all the times she committed this act it had never felt like this. She was torn between wanting to cum and never wanting to stop.

‘Neji!’ She called. ‘Don’t you dare stop!’

He didn’t, if anything it only spurred him on further, pushing her legs as far down as he could to get that deeper angle. And it felt like everything she could have hoped and more. With a loud and long moan Sena finally came, feeling Neji continue to move inside her as she did. She fistèd the sheets, the waves of orgasm overcoming her. And then Neji was coming inside her. The combination of their shared orgasm rippling over them in one sweep of pleasure, tingling to each point of their bodies.

Neji fell against her, allowing her legs to fall to the sides and envelop him. As Sena came down from her high she listened to their joined heartbeats reverberating within the silence around them. Their bodies were overworked, covered in sweat and cum but neither of them bothered to move.

Sena pressed a kiss to Neji’s cheek and tangled her fingers in his hair, stroking soothingly. He hummed in response.

It was then, after a few moments of taking it all in that Sena heard thunder from the storm outside rumbling. With a content sigh she listened to the rain pour once again. For once she didn’t mind the rain for it had brought her that moment.

Chapter End Notes

I would just like to say: thank you for sticking around for 53 chapters! I know it was a real slow burn but boy oh boy so I hope it was worth it! I plan on continuing this fic still so fear not.
Sena woke to find Neji’s sleeping face beside her. He was lying on his stomach facing her with a peaceful expression. She crawled on top of him with a smirk then nuzzled her face into the back of his neck.

Neji stirred a little and moaned softly, pressing further into the pillow. Sena took the opportunity to litter kisses down his back and caressed his exposed body as she did. When she reached just above his backside she gently bit the skin and sucked, giving him a hickey. Then she went lower bit one of his cheeks through the fabric of his briefs.

‘Sena,’ he grumbled. ‘I don’t find that amusing.’

Sena chuckled. ‘But how can I resist?’ Then she bit the other one with more ferocity.

His whole body jerked into the mattress then he quickly turned over with a frown. There was nothing he could do to hide his blush from her. It practically ran all the way down his neck.

‘In that case,’ Sena climbed on top of him again, ‘I know something you’ll enjoy much more.’

She kissed him hard and passionate, restraining his arms above his head. Then there was more kisses down his body. Before he could utter a word she pushed down his briefs and went down on him. Neji gasped the moment her lips touched the head of his cock.

Sena wasn’t patient. It was hard and fast with no time wasted on teasing. The moans that spilled from Neji’s lips were both loud and constant. He didn’t have time to think about controlling himself. He became completely undone. It wasn’t long before he came and when he did his whole body thrusted forward and his body spasmed in pleasure.

They spent the next three days following the same routine. There were the quick moments in the morning where they grasped for whatever intimacy they could. During the day Sena continued to train her team and look for answers at the library while Neji attended missions around the village. The evenings was when they found each other again in same heat of passion as they had the first time they gave themselves to one another.

It was on the fourth morning that Neji could feel her eyes on him.

‘You’re staring.’ Neji murmured against the pillow.

‘I am.’ Sena mused, snuggling closer.
‘Stop it.’

‘Why?’

‘It’s distracting.’

‘Distracting you from sleeping?’

‘Exactly.’

‘Well, in that case.’

The bed dipped as Sena moved and Neji felt the covers slide from his body. He half expected her to climb on top of him as she had done all those mornings before. He held his breath bracing for impact but it never came. Instead he heard the soft thuds of her footsteps walking away from the bed.

Neji opened his eyes and turned to find Sena standing at the window. She was wearing nothing but the sheet they had tussled in the night before, draped around her like a loose fitting gown. The sight was enough to take his breath away. In the euphoria of the moment he almost forgot that they couldn’t stay there all day in their own world.

With a squeak from the mattress he sat upright. Sena turned to face him with a calm smile. His eyes blinked in to focus, his lips parted slightly as he took in her radiant form. It was so strange to be able to be there with her without repercussions. The personal objections that used to push to the forefront of his mind now mellowed, allowing him to simply be.

Sena had been watching him watch her. With an exercised sultry she slowly approached the bed, freeing one leg from the white sheet and extending it onto the mattress. Neji had but a moment to admire it before she stepped up in one fluid motion. The mattress dipped then evened when the other one foot stepped to the other side of him. There she looked at Neji—really looked—like she could read his every thought and live his every moment.

‘You were looking at me.’ She said in that Sena way, the one that told him he could lie but she would still know the truth.

Silently he looked at her, his gaze communicated yes, yes I was looking, I will always look at you.

As though testing that theory she slowly opened the sheet to reveal herself in full, letting the makeshift garment rest on her shoulders like a cape. Sena knew exactly what he wanted. More. As quickly as it had settled she let the sheet go. Neji watched as it cascaded in a waterfall like motion down her back and out of sight.

Looking back up, Sena stood tall and looked down at him keenly. He extended his hand toward her. The second she took it he pulled her down on top of him with a firm tug.

Neji smirked when she yelped and kissed her. He kissed her hard and with purpose, to communicate the words he could not. Words were never his forte when it came to expressing those particular emotions.

‘You tease too much.’ Neji said, pulling his lips from hers.

‘Perhaps I do.’ Another smile found her. ‘Perhaps you enjoy it too much.’

Neji took her by the waist and flipped them over, pinning her against the mattress.
‘Perhaps you need a taste of your own medicine.’ He chastised.

Sena’s eyes fluttered closed as she bit her bottom lip. There was a stifled moan she let slip. It had to be the most seductive thing Neji had ever seen. It made him crave more.

‘I think that might be for the best.’ Sena teased, opening her eyes as if to dare him.

Then Neji was kissing her with a new found fervour. It exploded inside him like a hunger. More, more, more. He moved from her lips to her jaw, trailing passionate kisses all down her core. There were old marks littering her skin from the times before but he deemed they weren’t enough. The taste of her skin didn’t satisfy the hunger but intensified it as he continued further down. More.

‘What are you—’

Sena gasped. Neji yanked her legs over his shoulders and pressed a kiss to her inner thigh. A shiver ran through her body, reverberating into his own.

He watched as she bit her lip again. More. She was watching him through heavy lidded eyes. There was a longing there, exchanged between them with a glance.

A new found confidence surged through Neji, one that told him that the most important thing right then and there was to give pleasure to Sena like never had before. He couldn’t forget the teasing though. Utilising his lips he pressed gentle kisses to her inner thigh, slowly getting closer and closer to the end goal. Neji took his time, he caressed her outer thigh while experimentally grazing his teeth over the inner flesh. It took everything not to get lost in the moment.

Sena moaned and arched her lower back of the mattress. Then she looked at him. That daring look still there, telling him to continue. More. And continue he did.

‘I could get used to this.’ Sena chuckled. ‘A bold Neji…A teasing Neji. Why don’t you ahhhh—’ Sena moaned losing track of her thoughts as Neji ran his tongue against her entrance.

Neji made her cum twice before allowing Sena to return the favour. And when they were done he pressed a kiss to her head and pulled her into his arms. They sat like that while they came down from their high and back to reality.

‘Have you found what you were looking for?’ Neji finally asked before adding, ‘At the library.’

‘Just a whole lot of theories I don’t fully understand.’

Neji hummed.

Sena began tracing circles against his chest with her finger.

‘There was something I found that was interesting in some artefact books.’

‘Artefacts?’

‘I found it while I was browsing ancient weapons. I needed a break from all the healing theory so I decided to look into weapons.’

‘What did it say?’

‘It was more a series of similarities. Little coincidences between different weapons and stories. There are ones that are said to trap people, a gourd said to take chakra, a scroll that can seal people away. It’s all heavily rooted in stories but it got me thinking about sealing jutsu, especially our
clans scrolls. Maybe there are more objects that are hidden away with our scrolls.’

Neji hummed, considering her words. ‘Do you think that could be the reason Kyou hasn’t said anything about them?’

‘I want to believe that there’s a moral reason behind his decision but with Kyou I can never be sure.’ Sena sighed and pressed her cheek against Neji.

Neji tightened his arm around Sena and pressed another kiss to her head.

‘Can I ask you something?’ Sena asked, sitting upright.

Neji caught her eye. ‘Of course.’

Then she shifted to the edge of the bed and reaching for something. When she shifted back she revealed her sword to him.

‘Does anything about this blade seem strange to you?’ Sena handed it over to Neji who took it.

Neji focused on the detailing of the sheath, the feel of the hilt and the weight. Then he felt Sena’s hand weigh it down as she removed the sheath and revealed the shining metal beneath. It truly was a remarkable weapon but it was also the root of a lot of Sena’s pain. Neji couldn’t forget that fact as he looked at it.

‘Nothing strange.’ He finally commented.

‘What about with your Byakugan? How does it look then?’

Neji’s gaze caught Sena’s for a moment as he tried to discern her worries.

‘Are you sure you’re not so caught up with finding something that you’re getting…’ Neji trailed off.

‘Paranoid?’

‘I wouldn’t have gone that far.’

‘I know it’s strange, I just can’t help but feel something about this sword ever since the day I got it. Then there’s my uncle and Kakashi knowing more than they let on.’

‘I understand. I’ll take another look.’

Without further delay Neji activated his Byakugan and carefully observed the sword again. He followed from the hilt down to the tip then back up again. Making sure he looked at every inch there was but Neji concluded the same.

‘Still nothing strange.’ He sighed.

Sena took the sword back with a sigh. ‘There’s something about it that feels familiar somehow.’ She shrugged then lifted the sword toward the sheath.

That’s when Neji saw it.

‘Wait!’ He grabbed the hand that held the sheath. ‘Lift it up again.’

Sena lifted the blade upright but he couldn’t see anything.
‘Are you channeling chakra through it right now?’

‘No?’ Sena’s eyes widened. ‘What do you see? Chakra?’

‘It’s…no I don’t see anything anymore. I thought for a second I saw something but I think we are just getting too worked up about this.’

‘Damnit.’ Sena looked down with a forlorn expression. ‘Let me try something.’

Sena closed her eyes and held the sword up again.

Neji watched as her chakra extend itself from her body and channeled through the blade. It practically lit up.

‘See anything now?’

Neji looked carefully. ‘No, all I see is you.’ Then he looked toward Sena. ‘Do you feel different?’

‘I don’t think so but…’

‘But?’

Sena quickly sheathed the sword.

‘Maybe you’re right. I’m getting all these ideas in my head and seeing things that aren’t there.’ There was another sigh. ‘I think it’s time I spoke to Kyou.’

‘Do you want company?’

Sena gave him a sweet smile.

‘Thank you but I think it’s best to talk alone.’

Neji nodded then gave her a chaste kiss. ‘I hope you find some answers.’

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Sena entered the Matsura family home and was met with silence. An old memory she had long hidden away pushed itself to the surface. It was when she and Tadao were younger and would play outside until the sun went down. When they ran back into their family home it was bustling with life. Her family talking, laughing and arguing. No matter the time of day there was always someone to welcome her home.

Now, this new home held no heartwarming memories of her family together. The building was empty and no one was there to greet her. It didn’t even hold ghosts of memories.

With a sigh Sena made for the kitchen. Upon entry she found Saio sitting at the table reading a scroll. Next to him was a glass of water half eaten piece of toast. With a creak of the floorboard she had stepped onto, Saio turned to face her.

‘I’ve come to see my uncle.’ Sena said softly. ‘Is he home?’
‘Not yet, I’m afraid but I am expecting him back any moment now.’

‘Thank you, I’ll go wait upstairs.’ Sena went to step away when she hesitated. ‘Is he coping with the duties alright?’

‘Yes, coping very well.’ His lip twitched. ‘His punctuation could be improved but other than that.’

Sena cracked a small smile. ‘Is he drinking?’ There was reluctance in her question.

She could tell Saio sensed it by the way he smiled a her.

‘Some but not a concerning amount.’

‘Good, please tell me if that changes.’

‘Of course. Would you like some breakfast?’

‘No, thank you. I already ate.’

Saio nodded.

Sena gave him one last smile before heading toward the stairs. As she ascended the second floor of the house Sena realised she had been wrong about the home being empty. There had been someone to greet her after all. Saio was always there when she needed someone to rely on and he probably always would be. It warmed her heart knowing she wasn’t alone. Perhaps that also meant she had been wrong about Kyou, that he had his reasons for keeping things from her.

When she reached the study Sena took a deep breath and stepped inside. Her eyes immediately fell to the floorboard she had found the key hidden under days ago. On instinct her lips pressed together and forced herself to walk over it. She did not want to think about it until she had spoken to her uncle properly.

Instead of letting her thoughts turn to worry Sena took a turn about the room. She studied the books on the shelves, judging which ones had been touched by the uneven dust patches, some covered so thick you’d think they’d been there for years. Others she was surprised to find used. She wondered if her uncle had picked up a reading habit. A smile found her lips at the prospect of leadership actually becoming a positive change for him.

When Sena did a complete circuit of the room she walked over to the desk in the centre of the room and sat in the main chair. The room was barely furnished, stripped to the bare essentials, saturated in white light from the window behind. It felt so different to the one of her old home. The forgotten place burnt down to the ground long ago.

Her fingers glided over the wood of the desk tenderly as though she was seeing an old friend. It had been the one spot in all the building she had felt connected to home however the desk from then had been neat and organised. On the desk in front of her there were documents sprawled in disarray and scrolls scrunched up and tossed to one side. There was even a dirty, ink brush laid dried up against a scrap of paper.

‘Untidy as ever.’ Sena mumbled, pushing the paperwork to the side.

Then she remembered a time before when she had been in the study with Jiro.

‘I wonder.’ Sena said to herself, fingers coming to rest against the bottom drawer.
With a squeak, Sena opened it. There she rummaged through it to find a half drunken bottle of sake and the same bottle of spirits from that evening drinking with Jiro. She chuckled remembering how ridiculous that evening had been, how ridiculous she had been. Then her eyes fell back down to the drawer where she found a black box with red flowers poking out at her.

Sena frowned and retrieved the box, placing it on the desk in front of her. It hadn’t been there the last time she looked in the drawer. At least she hadn’t noticed it back then. Either way, the box seemed familiar as her fingers traced the carvings. Then on the lip of the lid she saw it. *Sayuri* was engraved there. A soft gasp left Sena’s lips as she realised it belonged to her mother.

For awhile Sena just stared at the box wondering about the possibilities. The questions both intrigued and scared her. What was inside? How did this survive the fire? Why was it here? The possibilities were endless. The main question on her mind remained; should she open it?

Then it wasn’t a question anymore. Her fingers reached the sides and lifted the top carefully. There was a pause, a hitch in her automatisms before she leant over and peered at the contents. Inside she found a stack of letters, the first which had Sayuri inked on the front. As she carefully sifted through them with a profound numbness, Sena found several of them were addressed to her mother but there were also others addressed to her brothers and finally she found ones addressed to her name.

The moment Sena found her stack she dropped the letters and fell back into the chair. Pinning her gaze to something in the left corner of the room, Sena frowned and attempted to drown out the waves of nausea in her gut. That familiar tremor ran through her hands which she attempted to remedy by clutching the arm rests and closing her eyes.

‘Not now.’ Sena muttered. ‘Not now.’

The walls she had carefully put up had come down again. Her heart was pounding. Her nails pressed down into the wood hard enough to splinter.

*To stop the thoughts from consuming you, something else needs to be let in as an anchor.* Hitomi’s voice rang through her mind

‘Easy for a deadman to say.’ Sena muttered, regretting it instantly.

*Tell me your mine.*

Sena slammed her fist against the desk. *Breathe.* She reminded herself.

‘Wind,’ she began to whisper in an attempt to control herself, ‘Lightning, Fire, Water and Earth.’ Something tugged in her chest that told her to repeat. And repeat the mantra she did, over and over until she felt her breathing steady a little.

Sena grabbed the bottle of spirits and opened it. Without pausing to think she took a long swig and slammed it onto the table. With a pronounced *ahh* Sena took a deep breath and turned her attention to the letters in front of her. Her eyes fell to the one with her name. Then when she couldn’t fight it anymore, Sena tore open the letter and read the first line.

*Dear Sena, our darling granddaughter*

The colour drained from Sena’s cheeks. Then her eyes darted from the first line the the last.

*Love always, you grandparents.*
Sena could hear the thumping of her heart ringing in her ears. Her grandparents had written to her and she had no idea until that moment. Everything that she had been taught told her that this couldn’t be true. It had to be some trick or genjutsu. Her grandparents banished their only daughter—her mother—and they never contacted them again. That was what she was told so why were these letters here?

Sena placed the letter to the side and started looking over the other envelopes. They were all sealed except the first one that was addressed to her mother. That meant that none of the other letters had been read save the one she had just opened.

Looking back to the letter she had opened, Sena picked it up with a shaking hand lifting it to read. But Sena found she couldn’t bring herself to read it. Her eyes wouldn’t focus. Her mind was too stimulated, too wound up by the questions. She quickly shoved the letter back into the box and cradled her head in her hands.

‘I don’t understand.’ Sena whispered.

Looking at the letters everything inside Sena screamed. It was more secrets her family held, more lies. It was too much to handle. She stood up, sending the chair backward as she began pacing around the room.

There had to be a reason. There had to be. Her heart was racing as the adrenaline pumped through her. She knew she needed to keep a cool head but the information was too sensitive. Sena ran a shaky hand through her hair. She debated whether or not to confront Kyou. Breathe.

‘Anchor, anchor, anchor.’ Sena kept reminding herself. That familiar mantra found her lips.

Time passed and although her brain didn’t stop thinking, her heart managed to stop pounding and return to a steadier pace. She had calmed a little by the time she heard Kyou’s footsteps coming up the stairs. Sena took her position behind the desk, leaving the box in plain sight and waited for her uncle to enter.

The creaking of the door revealed a slightly disheveled Kyou. There was a grin on his face, one that faded once he entered and saw the look on her face. He paused in the doorway like a deer caught in a spotlight. Then his eyes found the box on the desk and his expression dropped completely.

‘Where did you find them?’ Kyou asked, carefully.

‘Where you hid them.’ Sena replied, jaw clenched. ‘Why didn’t you give these to me?’

Kyou sighed walking over to the chair opposite Sena. His hand ran across the top, fingers lingering on the wood before sliding down the armrest. His gaze was fixed on something in the distance.

‘Our family was not on speaking terms with your grandparents.’

‘Some of those letters are addressed to me,’ Sena attempted to keep her voice calm, ‘Others are addressed to Tsutomu and Tadao. They had no right to hide them from us.’

‘They had a right, Sena.’ Kyou said finally looking at her. ‘Your parents did not want you speaking with them, kami, your own mother wanted it more than anyone.’

‘And you?’
‘I was merely following their wishes.’

‘What about now? You wanted me to keep believing that my own grandparents didn’t ever want to see me? That they wished I never existed?’

‘Of course not, it wasn’t up to me. Besides you don’t know the full story.’

A familiar rage swelled inside Sena, one that made her want beat down walls, kick and scream but she knew it wouldn’t be worth it. Instead of caving to the anger Sena took a deep breath and quelled the rage inside her.

‘Then tell me.’

‘Sena.’ Kyou groaned, standing as he rubbed his temple. He then gestured for her to sit which she ignored. ‘It’s not a short story. There’s a lot of things you still don’t know. A lot of things that well, frankly, I’m not sure you’re ready to hear.’

‘After everything that’s happened…’ Sena trailed off and took a deep breath as she considered his words. ‘Full fucking circle.’ Sena finally snapped and snatched the box of letters from the desk, brushed past Kyou and out the door.

Sena rushed out the house and through the compound ignoring everything and everyone around her. Clutching the box like it was the only thing that mattered she kept walking and walking until she found herself at a familiar place. The training grounds.

When she looked up she saw her team was waiting for her and the reality of her responsibilities crushed down on her. A nausea overcame her whether from the alcohol or the anxiety she wasn’t sure. The responsibility outweighed her need to read the letters or maybe she just wanted to distract herself from reading them. Either way she shoved the box into her pack and headed toward her team with a fake smile.

‘You’re late!’ Jiro called with a grin.

‘I didn’t realise you needed me to hold your hand while you trained?’ Sena called back feeling the nausea swirling in the pit of her stomach.

Jiro expression dropped. ‘Just hurry up would you!’

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‘I still think we deserve a break!’ Tenten said.

‘Perhaps a trip to the bathhouse?’ Lee suggested.

‘I’m not sure.’ Neji commented, gaze pinning on something in the distance.

‘Come on, Neji!’ Tenten begged. ‘We’ve had back to back missions and you’ve been stuck doing missions here. I say we deserve this!’

Neji stopped to consider the idea. His old teammates had decided to get together since they had all finally been in the village at the same time. They had dragged him to the main bustling shopping district of the village. Normally he wouldn’t have minded but he had been distracted since the
morning conversation he had with Sena. It was more worrying there wasn’t anything he could do to help her. He was tired of feeling helpless.

Then he was pulled from his thoughts by Lee.

‘So, Neji are we going?’

Before Neji could answer someone else called out to him. When he turned he found Saio hurrying toward them. His heart sank a little at the sight.

‘Is everything alright?’ Neji asked, attempting to remain calm.

‘Of course,’ Saio gave a quick smile, ‘Lord Kyou wanted a word at the compound if you are available.’

‘I’ll go now.’ Neji turned back to his old teammates. ‘Sorry, I’ll go to the bathhouse with you next time.’

With a final farewell, Neji accompanied Saio to the Matsura compound. The entire trip Neji had a gnawing feeling inside him. He knew it was presumptuous to jump to such worrisome conclusions but with everything that had happened to Sena, he simply couldn’t help it. At the same time he reminded himself that he had only been with Sena hours before so it likely would be something to do with the conversation she was supposed to have with Kyou. That calmed him a little.

When they finally reached the main family house, Neji felt like he could breath again.

‘You’ll find him waiting in the study.’ Saio gestured toward the staircase.

Neji nodded. ‘Thank you.’ Then he hurried up the stairs.

When he opened the door he found Kyou staring out the window at the back of the room. He didn’t turn to face him Neji when he entered, he simply kept staring at something in the distance.

To Neji he seemed like a ghost and if he blinked he would simply fade into nothing. And he realised Kyou had been looking that way for awhile now. Neji recalled their last serious conversation when had first noticed Kyou’s hardened features and sunken eyes.

‘You wanted to speak with me?’ Neji asked, taking a step into the room.

‘I did.’ Kyou said, quietly.

His fingertips came up to the glass of the window. The tips of his fingers touched it softly then glided down before he removed his hand altogether and turned to face Neji. There was that familiar tired look on Kyou’s face. He looked disheveled, rugged like he had returned from a month long mission in the middle of nowhere. That wasn’t true of course, he had been in the village and Neji didn’t know if that was any better.

‘Please, sit.’ Kyou gestured in front of him with a weak smile.

Neji nodded and took the seat directly in front of the desk. A silence fell between them as Kyou approached the desk. Neji watched him closely. Kyou avoided his gaze altogether, pinning it on something on the floor while his hand pressed against something in his pocket.

‘What’s going on?’ Neji asked, unable to take the silence anymore.

Kyou didn’t answer right away instead he reached down to open the top drawer of his desk. There
he retrieved something rectangular and wooden and held it in his hand. It was a photo frame, one Neji could only see from behind. Whatever the picture was, Kyou looked at it with an intense gaze.

‘What do you know about Sena’s mother?’ Kyou asked, placing the frame down on the desk, photo still facing away from Neji.

‘What?’ Neji asked.

Kyou reached down behind his desk and retrieved a small porcelain cup. Then he grabbed the sake bottle on his desk and gestured toward Neji.

When he shook his head, Kyou proceeded to pour a cup for himself. Then he swallowed it one go and their gaze finally met.

‘Sena’s mother,’ Kyou repeated, ‘What do you know of her? Does Sena speak to about her?’

Neji frowned and considered the question.

‘Yes but not often.’ He finally answered.

‘I see.’ Kyou poured another cup of sake. ‘Tell me, what you do know.’

Neji’s frown deepened.

‘Relax, this isn’t some game. I know you don’t want to betray Sena’s trust but honestly I’m just figuring out a way to help us both.’

Neji took a deep breath and nodded.

‘I know that before she was a Matsura she was Sayuri Uchiha, a renown kunoichi who possessed the Sharingan. Then she married Osamu and was disowned by her family. Together they had three children Tsutomu, Tadao and Sena. When Sena was a child Sayuri received the curse mark from her your father on accident. Then she took her own life as a consequence of that.’

When Neji looked up Kyou was smiling at him.

‘That’s a very concise and academic answer.’

Neji stared at him silently.

‘Anything else?’

‘It’s often said that Sena resembles her mother other than her eyes.’

‘Her father’s eyes.’

Neji nodded and thought harder about everything Sena had confided in him. Then he remembered something from that night, not long ago. ‘There’s a pendant which Sayuri’s parents gave to her. It bore the Uchiha clan symbol and when she agreed to marry Osamu she had the Matsura symbol engraved on the other side.’

‘Two sides of the coin.’ Kyou commented, taking a sip from his cup. ‘As Sena is beginning to find out. I’m just not sure how to tell her.’

Neji gave him a questioning look.
'You’re right you know? When you said Sena resembles her mother.’ Kyou picked up the frame and turned it to Neji. ‘Not just in appearance either, the mannerisms and fire too.’

Neji looked down at the photograph. It was a picture of Sena’s mother who looked almost identical to her. There were the little differences of course. Sayuri had dark eyes, a slightly longer nose amongst other minor feature differences. It wasn’t just appearance though, the presence held a familiar quality. The stance held the same confidence and smile the same warmth.

‘Sena isn’t just like her mother though, there’s a lot of her that’s like her father. Which is good. It means she didn’t get as many of their failing qualities.’

‘Why are you telling me this?’

‘Because I need to know how deep this goes. How long I’ve got before…’ Kyou trailed off and shook his head. ‘I need to know what information she already knows.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘She’s looking for answers, yes?’

Neji nodded.

‘How badly does she need them?’

Neji stopped, considering what to say. ‘Didn’t she come to talk with you this morning?’

Kyou nodded. ‘I guess that explains why she came here but we didn’t talk much. Rather she found something and took off before I got the chance.’

Neji’s eyes widened and he made to stand.

‘Sit.’ Kyou waved his hand. ‘She’s at the training grounds with her squad, I had Saio check on her before fetching you so don’t get yourself worked up.’

There was hesitation but Neji finally sat back down.

Kyou rubbed his eyes and sat back against his chair.

‘What did she find?’ Neji asked.

‘Something from the past. Something her parents kept from her. That I continued to keep from her.’

‘Why did you do it?’

‘Because telling her meant bringing up things from my own past that I wasn’t ready to relive.’

‘And now?’

‘What is she looking for?’

Neji sighed. ‘Answers, all she wants is answers.’

‘Then it looks like I’ll have to give them to her.’

‘Is that all you wished to discuss?’ Neji asked, rising from his chair.
'It is.' Kyou gave him a small nod. ‘Thank you.’

Neji returned the gesture then turned to the door.

‘Oh, Neji.’

He turned back to face him.

‘I know you’ll do so without me saying this but look out for her. Do a better job than I did.’

Neji nodded and went to turn back but something in him hesitated. Instead of turning he watched Kyou pick up the frame and look at the picture. The look in his eyes changed and betrayed a new emotion, a look he knew all too well. That was the moment Neji finally understood Kyou in a way he had never expected.

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Sena was lost in a daze thinking about the the wooden box that remained tucked away in her bag. The more she thought about it the less real it seemed. At moments it felt as though she had imagined it. That the reality of a box of letters from grandparents long dead was too unreal it couldn’t be true. And her mother keeping them from her like that. Even Tsutomu hadn’t known about them.

‘Sena,’ Kira called, pulling her out of her thoughts, ‘are you alright?’

‘What?’ Sena replied, shaking her head.

‘I asked if you were alright?’

‘Oh, yeah.’ Sena nodded. ‘I’m fine, I just remembered there’s something I’ve got to do.’ Sena turned and ran to where her pack was. ‘We can finish early alright and don’t worry about the library today.’ She quickly swung the pack over her shoulder and ran.

The others called out to her but she ignored them and continued to run. Sena didn’t stop until she was toward the outer territory of the village. There was one destination was drawn too, one she felt she owed herself to reach. The contents of her bag weighed heavier the closer she got.

Sena then finally reached the Naka Shrine of the Uchiha Compound. As she looked up at the double door entry to the main hall a breeze blew through her hair. On instinct she closed her eyes and spread her arms, taking in the moment. Then just as quickly was gone. There was that familiar feeling she got when she stood in the wind.

‘Mother.’ Sena whispered with closed eyes. ‘What did you hide from me?’

Sena opened her eyes again and walked to sit on a step at the side of the shrine. Her view overlooked the forest dense with trees. She took a moment to admire it and take in the sounds of the rustling leaves. Then without further delay she opened her bag and retrieved the box.

An uncertainty still churned inside Sena. Opening the box would be something there was no going back from but Sena wasn’t sure if she would be able to move forward either if she didn’t go through with reading the letters. Then her hands moved, making the decision for her as she picked
up the letter she had opened earlier and read.

‘Dear Sena, my darling granddaughter

Today is the day you came into the world and I am sad to say we weren’t able to witness it. There are a lot of reasons for this, errors we made in the past but these are concerns for your elders not for you little one.

Such joy overcame me to hear my daughter, my only child, was finally blessed with a daughter of her own. I’m sure you will inherit the same Uchiha fire your two older brothers before you have. Should you ever wish to one day learn about your Uchiha heritage do not hesitate to visit.

Sena trembled, clutching the letter in her hands. Tears welled up in her eyes and before she knew it Sena was opening another letter.

Dear Sena, my darling granddaughter,

Congratulations on making it into the Academy. I never doubted your chances for a second. I hope you grow up to be strong and intelligent kunoichi just like your mother. Remember to listen to your teachers and should you need help with shuriken or fire techniques you know where to find us.

She began rushing through them, needing to consume more of the words her grandparents had written.

…

Happy Birthday, your grandfather and I wish you all the happiness in the world.

…

My dear Sena,

Sometimes I want to help your mother but due to our past she thinks it is best that we leave her alone. I hope that she can fight off the mark that plagues her and lets us finally visit you soon. Just know that we will always love you.

…

The tears spilled from Sena’s eyes as she continued to read the letters from her grandparents. Each birthday, celebration was accounted for with well wishes and love. There were concerns for her safety, congratulations for her successes, a heartfelt letter following the death of her mother until finally they stopped. Sena didn’t have to guess to know why.

That was when it hit Sena that her family still had a power over her even after they were gone. And so she put the letters back into the box and cried. She cried and cried until she couldn’t any longer. And after the tears dried up her eyes puffed and nose became blocked Sena looked at the trees in front of her.

There, Sena sat at the very shrine her grandparents and mother had once walked. The place where they had been people who lived and were full of life but out of Sena’s reach. Now they served as nothing more than a ghost of a memory full of questions rather than answers.

‘Hey, kid.’

Sena turned to see Kyou stand behind her with a somber expression.
'Thought I’d find you here.’

‘How’d you know about this place?’ Sena asked with a sniffle.

‘Your mum took me here once.’

‘Oh.’

Kyou took a step closer and sat beside Sena.

‘Did you read them?’ He asked, softly.

‘Yeah, mine anyway.’ Sena hugged her knees to her chest.

‘And?’

‘It turns out my grandparents were nothing like I had imagined…they loved us.’ Sena forced a laugh. ‘And I don’t know if that should make me happy or sad.’

‘A little of both makes sense.’

‘Yeah.’ Sena turned to Kyou. ‘You don’t sound surprised? The letters were sealed so I know you didn’t read them.’

‘I found out about the letters a long time ago but I also had the pleasure of meeting your grandparents.’

‘Right.’

They fell into silence, indulging in each other’s company while looking out toward the trees in the forest. The sun was beginning to set and the birds flew above them.

‘It’s beautiful here.’ Sena mused. ‘It feels so familiar yet so new.’

‘You came here when you were a lot younger.’

Sena’s gaze snapped to Kyou. ‘I’ve been here before?’

‘Your mother brought you a couple times.’ Kyou shrugged. ‘I figured that’s how you ended up here; memory.’

Sena shook her head.

‘I don’t know, maybe it was memory.’ Sena looked forward and recalled walking there, the tremor that ran through her body. ‘It was like my body was called here and brought me along on it’s own accord.’ Sena turned back to find Kyou observing her thoughtfully. ‘Lately I’m not sure what’s real.’

‘Memory is a funny thing.’ Kyou reached forward and grabbed a clump of grass and unrooted it. ‘I’m sure you realise that there’s still a few things you don’t know—about your family and our past.’

‘I’ve been gathering that for awhile.’

‘I know,’ Kyou let go of the grass and smiled, ‘Sharp as ever just like your mother.’
‘I’ll have to take your word for it I’m afraid.’ Sena sighed. ‘Turns out I didn’t know her as well as I thought.’

‘She died so long ago, it’s only natural that you learn new things as you grow.’

‘But my father too. I can’t believe he kept this from me even after she died. After they all died.’

Kyou sighed. ‘Sena, I know you have these idealised versions of your parents like any child does but you have to understand that you were so young when they died, or in your father’s case, left.’ Kyou gave her a sympathetic look. ‘It never gave you the opportunity most others have; You never got to see them for who they really were. To see them as the imperfect humans we all are. They made plenty of mistakes just like everyone else.’

Sena turned to him with watering eyes.

‘I just wish I’d known when they were alive.’ Her voice wavered. ‘I wish I knew why my mother didn’t tell me. I wish I’d known a lot of things.’

‘I know and I’m sorry.’ Kyou placed a hand gently on her shoulder. ‘I can’t change the past but there is something I can do.’

Sena looked at him expectingly, tears trailing down her cheeks.

‘I think it’s time I told you everything that happened in the past.’

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for supporting and sticking with this fic. There is lots more to come! Much love x
There was a heavy silence in the air, lightened only by the occasional intake of breath. Two full cups sat on the kitchen table. Green with hints of jasmine that would only be noticeable to those familiar with the brew. In the centre sat a plate of sweet bread that remained untouched. A clock ticked in the background occasionally drowned out by the restless shifting of Kyou’s hand.

Sena sat back in her chair staring at him. Her arms were folded across her chest. There was an itch beneath her eyes, dry from the many tears she had shed earlier. In front of her sat the opened box of letters, the engraving Sayuri shining as it caught the light. The box itself had lost its lustre from the years of handling but the pattern, though faded, still held colour. It had once held brilliance much like Sena’s idea of the world.

Kyou sat across from Sena, chair pushed back from the table while his restless hand lay by his cup. He met her stare with equal measure but he was impatient. Kyou was always impatient.

Sena knew that Kyou feigned control when it came to her. That knowledge made her a little uneasy.

‘I want to know.’ Sena said, breaking the silence.

The corner of Kyou’s mouth twitched.

‘Alright.’ He cleared his throat. ‘When would you like to start.’

Sena watched as his fingers shifted, coming to rest of the teacup but not moving it to drink from. She narrowed her eyes.

‘Now.’ Sena noticed how dry her own throat felt.

‘Are you sure you don’t want to wait until tomorrow?’

‘No.’

‘Very well.’

The chair squeaked across the floor as Kyou stood from it and headed out of the kitchen. He didn’t turn back toward her.

Sena stood and followed him, certain he would leave her behind at the opportunity. As she walked she tried to put herself in his position but she didn’t know what position that was. Kyou harboured
a dark secret, perhaps one that rooted to the very core of who he was. A tiny voice warned Sena to be careful what she wished for but there was a louder voice that told her she needed to know whatever her family was hiding. She couldn’t stay ignorant forever.

A profound numbness over came Sena as she ascended the stairs. The revelations of her late grandparents were but the tip of the iceberg for family secrets. She could tell by the way Kyou was acting. He had said he wasn’t sure if he was ready to tell her. Perhaps neither of them would ever be truly ready.

The creaking of the stairs pulled her from her thoughts.

Kyou was in front of her, his footfalls heavy against the wooden floor. He turned at the top of the stairs and walked towards her room. When he reached the door he placed his hand on the knob and glanced over his shoulder.

‘In order to show you it’s best to be comfortable.’ He said, waiting for compliance.

Sena nodded, once again aware of her dry eyes as she blinked.

The door opened and Kyou walked in, stepping to the side to allow Sena to pass. When Sena walked through she observed her room was exactly how she left it, untouched and tidy. It felt strange being there without Neji. She guessed it would be awhile before these revelations would be over and she could be at ease with him again. She yearned for the bliss they had shared earlier that day.

The door clicked shut and Sena sat down on the edge of the bed.

‘How is this supposed to work exactly?’ Sena asked, turning to Kyou. ‘Are you going to tell it to me like a bedtime story?’ She didn’t bother hiding the sarcasm.

‘I’m going to show you.’ Kyou said, plainly as he walked over to the window. ‘Lie down and I’ll explain in a moment.’

Sena watched him through narrowed eyes.

Kyou drew the curtains closed then walked over to her vanity where he pulled the chair out and placed it beside the bed. Then he sat down and looked at her with an uneasy expression. He gestured his hand toward the bed brows raised.

Sena sighed, swinging her legs onto the bed to lie down fully.

‘There.’ Sena said, with emphasis. ‘Now, explain.’

‘I’m going to use genjutsu to show you.’

Sena’s eyes widened. ‘What?’

‘I’m going to use genjutsu to show you everything I know, like you’re seeing my memories. That way you know the whole truth without any qualms.’

‘You can do that?’

‘Of course but it’s not a simple task.’ Kyou ran a hand through his hair. ‘It takes up a lot of chakra for one and two I can only do it if you let you guard down. Naturally you’ll want to repeal genjutsu as you are trained to do so but instead I’ll need you to relax and let me in.’
‘I need to trust you?’ Sena murmured, unconvinced.

‘Basically.’

‘What happens exactly?’

‘Well, I’ll activate the genjutsu and focus the attention on your mind and what you see. Doing this will have a temporary paralysis state on your body.’ Kyou raised his hands defensively when Sena gave him a look. ‘Relax, the second I drop it, it’ll wear off. It’s more of a safety thing so we don’t walk off unsupervised.’

‘Right.’ Sena wasn’t convinced but she didn’t have a choice.

‘Are you ready?’ Kyou asked, leaning back in his chair.

‘As ready as I can be.’

‘Alright, where should I begin.’

‘Are you seriously asking me that?’

‘No just thinking out loud.’ Kyou sat back and contemplated before his eyes lit up. ‘Let’s start with something simple. Let’s start with my own humble beginnings.’

‘Alright,’ Sena sighed. ‘Let’s do this.’

Sena closed her eyes and felt Kyou’s chakra change. Then something enveloped her like a cloak of warmth. The genjutsu. Her instincts were to fight it off but instead she focused on reading her body. She thought of seeing her family again and allowed the sensation to take hold of her.

‘Sena,’ Kyou called faintly, ‘Sena, open your eyes.’

Sena blinked her eyes open to find herself standing in front of her old family home. She gasped at the sight and took a few steps forward, arm outstretched, wondering if it could be real. Once her hand came into contact with the door she took a deep breath. She could still feel the wood beneath her touch like she was a child again, hurrying home to where her family was waiting.

Taking a moment to remind herself that this was a mere memory she turned back to Kyou. He looked back at her with a sad smile.

Then Sena heard something, the sound of clanging metal and the crunching of stones. She was sure she had heard a soft grunting sound. Someone was fighting nearby. Quickly, Sena followed the noise around the back of the house to find two small boys sparring.

Their movements were fast and skilled. The taller reminded Sena a lot of Tadao when he had been around 8 years old. The younger boy looked similar. They had to be brothers.

‘It’s my father when he was young.’ Sena commented, eyes glued to the sparring boys in front of her. ‘And you too.’

‘Correct.’ Kyou chuckled. ‘I did say it was my humble beginnings after all.’ He took a step closer and circled the boys with a look of nostalgia. ‘Watch this. I always went for the undercut and Osamu was always ready.’

Sena directed her attention back to the boys and watched. Sure enough, the younger Kyou had slid beneath and gone for a lower attack and Osamu deflected him with ease.
‘Don’t worry,’ Kyou called, ‘I was clever even when I was boy.’

The boys continued sparring until Osamu frowned mid attack and hesitated. Kyou had an opening, finally and managed to land a blow. Osamu was sent to his knees and Kyou was cheering beside him.

‘What happened?’ Sena asked, looking to the older Kyou. ‘He just fell?’

‘Genjutsu.’ Kyou smiled, slyly. ‘I haven’t been blessed with much in this life but genjutsu, that was always a gift. I remember thinking, finally, this will make me as good as Osamu, now I have a chance.’

A loud voice boomed before Sena could reply.

‘Kyou!’

Sena turned to find her grandfather, Satoru, at least half the age she had remembered him. She also noticed that he looked absolutely furious.

‘What do you think you’re doing? Cheating in a match like that!’ Satoru picked him up by the collar then threw him to the side. ‘Answer me boy! Doing that to your only brother! Have you no shame?’

‘It was nothing.’ Osamu insisted. ‘I got distracted that’s all.’

‘Quiet, boy!’ Satoru turned back to Kyou. ‘You expect me to believe my son fell like a common shinobi? You are a Matsura and Matsura do not fall in battle.’

Kyou scowled. ‘I didn’t cheat!’

‘No? Then what do you call those mind games and tricks?’

Kyou huffed and turned away, unable to maintain eye contact with his father.

Sena could feel her heat leaping in her chest, she had never been scared of her grandfather before. It made her feel nauseous.

‘You ought to be practicing your ninjutsu or your taijutsu not wasting your time with second rate tricks.’ Satoru’s voice calmed a little as he turned away. ‘Come on Osamu it’s time to for your duties.’

Osamu spared Kyou a sympathetic looked before following his father into the house. The younger Kyou huffed and picked himself up. With a heavy sigh he began running through some basic taijutsu forms Sena recognised from her time at the academy.

‘I bet you’re confused.’ The real Kyou reached her side with a curious smile.

‘I don’t understand,’ Sena breathed, ‘why was he so…’

‘Different? Cruel?’

Sena nodded.

‘It was in his nature. The shinobi world took a toll on his patience and war made him spiteful.’ Kyou shrugged. ‘At least, that’s my theory. I’m no expert on the man.’
‘But what about my father? He just stood there!’

‘True but he did what he could. He was still a child after all.’ Kyou looked toward the house where they had disappeared into. ‘My father had his favourite. Nothing Osamu said or did would change that. It was set in stone the day I entered this world.’

Kyou turned back to Sena with a smile.

‘Best not to dwell on the past you cannot change.’ He walked toward her. ‘Come on, let’s find a better memory. An important one.’

‘Okay.’ Was all Sena could say as she felt speechless and uncertain.

Then Sena felt herself shift and realised she was standing on a thick tree branch in the middle of a forest. She stumbled backward at the shocking change of scenery when something caught her arm.

It was Kyou, pulling her up next to him.

‘Careful, we’ve got things to do and places to see.’ He said, with a smirk.

‘Funny.’ Sena replied, regaining her footing. ‘Will this memory explain my mother or the letters?’

‘It will be awhile before we reach that point I’m afraid. In order to get there there’s things you need to understand, things you have to see.’

‘Alright, why are we here then?’

Before she got a reply Sena heard voices coming from below and peered over to investigate. She just hoped it wouldn’t be another rude awakening about a beloved family member. Relief flooded her when she spotted three shinobi crouched around the base of the tree.

After taking a moment to focus she recognised the younger Kyou and two other young shinobi. They looked bit older than the boys in the last memory, Sena guessed they were around graduation age.

Then one of his teammates spoke.

‘I’ll draw their attention on the right,’ a young girl with auburn hair began, ‘Makoto, you take left. Kyou you be ready with genjutsu.’

‘Right.’ They both replied.

‘Who are they?’ Sena asked, turning to Kyou.

There was a smile on his face. ‘That’s my squad.’ He pointed to the girl. ‘That’s Kana, don’t tell me you don’t see the resemblance?’

Sena squinted, trying to get a good look at her. ‘She seems familiar but…’

‘I mean your sensei wasn’t as much of a looker but hey there’s similarities.’

Sena swore her heart stopped beating. ‘Sensei’s daughter?’

‘Yep, a real spitfire of a kunoichi too.’ He chuckled. ‘Maybe you’ll have an easier time recognising Makoto.’
Sena turned back to the squad and watched Makoto remove his hood. She closed her eyes and sighed. She would recognise that face anyway.

‘Jiro’s father.’ Sena said, softly. ‘You knew them before…’

‘Yeah, I knew them better than most.’

Their death was something of a shadow in Sena’s life. While it hadn’t impacted her directly she had been a witness to the aftermath. Hitomi had lost purpose in his life. Jiro had never really known his father. The two of them had shaped her life without even knowing.

‘You alright?’ Kyou asked.

‘Fine.’ Sena dismissed. ‘You mentioned this being the beginning of something important.’

‘Patience, everything has a purpose.’ He jumped down to the branch below. ‘Moving along then.’

The scene dissolved and twisted into something different.

‘Like most shinobi squads, we worked well together.’ Kyou began. ‘We had our ups and downs but ultimately we thought we were unstoppable together.’

As Sena and Kyou walked the scene in front of them changed from moment to moment. The flashes of Kyou’s memories played around her like she was experiencing them herself. There were moments of training, moments during battle and moments of bonding. It reminded Sena of her own team.

‘Of course some of us got along better than others.’ Kyou said with a little too much enthusiasm.

Sena then saw what he meant.

A soft memory Sena was sure. She saw an older Kyou holding Kana in his arms as they watched the sunset on the mountain top of the Kage cliff. There were only three Kage etched into the cliff face.

‘You ought to go home before your father scolds you.’ Kana whispered, pressing her face against his chest.

‘Let him scold me.’ Kyou said, stroking her arm. ‘It’ll be worth it.’

Kana sighed and closed her eyes.

The scene was moving enough to tug at Sena’s heart. What a privilege, she thought, to witness something so personal. It almost made her feel guilty for willing her uncle to tell her everything.

‘You loved her.’ Sena said, softly.

‘That I did.’ Kyou replied. ‘With all of my young, stupid heart.’

Sena’s gaze snapped to his. There wasn’t anything in his expression to make her doubt his words. It was the most sincere Kyou had been when it came to the past.

‘What happened?’ The words tasted bitter in her mouth.

Kyou smiled and shrugged. ‘Life, I guess.’
The scene in front of them changed back to the Matsura compound, in the old family home. They were in the living room but the furniture was different to what Sena remembered. The colours were more dull and the room felt less comfortable, despite the well lit fire in the fireplace.

There was a loud bang, causing Sena to jump back. She looked up to see her grandfather and uncle fighting. Unease sat in the pit of her stomach.

‘My fool of a son!’ Satoru roared, slapping Kyou across the face. ‘We are in a war and all you can think about is some girl. You were supposed to be home hours ago!’

Sena felt the colour drain from her cheeks as she brought her hand to her mouth.

Kyou fell to the floor clutching his cheek. ‘Well what would you have me do father?’

‘I’d have you act like you’re worthy of the name Matsura! I would have you stop playing games at our expense! Be a notable shinobi worthy of the village!’

Kyou laughed, bitterly. ‘Be more like your first born you mean. Be like the son you actually wanted.’

‘It would be a start if you were half the man Osamu was! At least he’s out there risking his life for us while you’re doing god knows what with some low rate kunoichi.’

‘Don’t speak of her that way!’

Another slap across Kyou’s face.

‘You forget who you are talking to boy! You dare disrespect me this way?’

‘You dare speak to your son this way?’ Kyou yelled back, ducking the third slap.

‘Get out of here!’ Satoru roared.

Kyou complied, throwing the door shut behind him as he ran out of the compound.

Sena felt a shiver overcome her body as she watched him. Much like before, the man she had seen did not resemble the grandfather she knew. Sure, she had known her grandparents had treated Kyou unfairly but she never quite knew it was to this extent. She couldn’t bare to look at the real Kyou beside her so she contented herself watching the Kyou from the memory run until he reached somewhere safe. And then he was in Kana’s arms.

In that moment Sena was very thankful for Kana and although she had never met her, she was glad she had been alive when Kyou needed her.

‘How could you bare it?’ Sena asked, voice croaking.

He let out a soft laugh. ‘My father hated me my whole life, I didn’t understand why until his death but don’t dwell on it Sena. Honestly I debated showing you that but before I knew it the memory exposed itself. Genjutsu tends to latch onto strong emotions.’

‘But why did he do that to you?’ Sena asked, her throat constricting and tears filling. ‘How could he do those horrible things? You were his son!’

Kyou smiled. ‘Don’t worry about things beyond your control Sena. There’s a reason for it but it doesn’t change the fact that it happened. I promised to show you everything and unfortunately that moment is a part of everything.’
Sena nodded and quelled the tears. The lump in her throat remained but she clutched her shirt, a physical attempt to soothe it.

When she looked up she saw Kyou, Kana and Makoto, no older than she was standing in front of the third Hokage and two other shinobi. One of the shinobi she didn’t recognise but noticed he had a distinct scar over his top lip. When she looked to the second she knew immediately who it was—her old sensei except he wasn’t old yet. He also didn’t appear inebriated.

‘In short,’ the Hokage spoke, ‘I’m recommending this squad for Hitomi’s division in a branch of the anbu. You will be taking on highly ranked missions that will be crucial in the war to come. Do all of you accept?’

The squad bowed in acceptance.

‘Very well, Hitomi, you can take it from here.’

Hitomi stepped forward handing each of them a folder. Sena watched each of them take the folder and briefly skim over the contents. Then their gaze lifted to Hitomi who walked across the room along with the scarred shinobi.

‘Along with your new gear,’ He began, leading them out of the office, ‘You will be operating using code names. You are no longer a leaf shinobi you are a shadow. You are the backbone to our forces.’ Hitomi reached the end of the hall and opened a door that lead to a staircase. ‘The tasks you are given with will require you to gather intel and intel is worth more to us than the air we breathe. If we don’t breathe then we die. If we don’t get the intel we need then hundreds die. It’s as simple as that.’

They reached the bottom of the staircase when Hitomi opened another door that lead to a locker room. He entered the room and stood in the centre waiting for them to file in.

Sena had never seen the room before but she had heard enough to know it belonged to the anbu. It looked like a changing room, where they shed their identities and became a shadow of the village. It was where Tsutomu had been assigned when he was alive.

‘This isn’t the academy or some low rank mission, this is my world and you don’t have to like me or like it here but you do have to respect it. You have respect the system and follow orders.’ Hitomi took a breath and folded his arms. ‘The truth is we are at war and the very people who live in this village, the people we protect, their lives depend on us. They depend on every single person in this room.’

They all stood in silence watching Hitomi intensely. Even by the time he had become Sena’s sensei, Hitomi had had an authoritative air about him. She had known he used to be a high ranking shinobi in his day but she never knew the details of what he had done. It was strange being able to witness him in such a way.

Sena hummed.

‘What?’ Kyou whispered.

‘You know he was still making that same speech when he taught us.’

Kyou smiled. ‘Hitomi was never one to bend to the wind.’

Sena returned the smile when she heard Hitomi speak again.
‘Right, now that everyone understands I’ll keep the rest of this brief. Ao here,’ Hitomi gestured to
the scarred man, ‘he will be your squad leader. Ao of course is not the name he was given when he
came into this world. To you and everyone else however he is Ao. He will also be giving you your
new names. These are the names you will use when you are active.’

Hitomi nodded to Ao.

Ao stepped forward with a sheet of paper in his hand. He read something then looked up toward
Kana.

‘You shall be known as Mei.’

Kana nodded. ‘Understood.’

Ao approached Makoto.

‘You are Yurei.’

Makoto frowned slightly then nodded.

Ao then stood in front of Kyou who met his gaze.

‘Kokuei.’

Kyou pressed his lips together and nodded.

‘This is when I officially became a shadow.’ The older Kyou said, standing behind Sena. ‘It’s also
when life as I knew it would be turned upside down.’

‘How long until it happens?’ Sena could feel that lump in her throat as she spoke.

‘For Kana, a little under a year.’ Kyou doesn’t take his eyes off her as he spoke, as if savouring her
memory. ‘Makoto, he’s got a couple more. I wonder how different it would be if…ah never mind.
No use grieving the past when you can’t change it. Let’s just—’

The scene change quickly around Sena. It was raining, pouring hard enough enough to impede her
vision. Squinting, Sena could make out that she was in a forest walking through the trees.

‘Uncle!’ She called. ‘Kyou?’

‘Sena!’ She heard him call to her. ‘I’m sorry I’m losing control just stay there!’

‘What’s happening? What’s this memory?’

‘I’ll explain in a minute just stay where you are. There’s no point seeing—’

A voice suddenly cried out.

‘I heard something!’ Sena called. ‘I’m going to see what it is!’

There was no reply from Kyou.

Turning back toward the path in front of her she began walking toward the sound of the cry. She
tried to speed up but it was hard to navigate the path with the heavy rain. Then she heard someone
cry out again. It wasn’t long before she saw it.
In front of her was a young Kyou holding Kana in his arms. She was covered in blood. Her blood. It was profusely seeping out of her wounds and onto the ground with the help of the rain. Kyou clutched her close attempting to stop the bleeding.

‘Kana.’ He pleaded. ‘Stay with me please.’

‘You have to leave…’ Kana breathed, ‘Before more c-come.’

‘I’m not leaving you. I-I’ll get a medic and you’ll be fine.’

‘Kyou. The intel.’

‘No, please don’t!’ Kyou caressed her cheek then slid his finger across her lips in an attempt to wipe away the blood. ‘Please don’t leave me. I don’t care about anything else.’

Sena watched a pleading Kyou with a tightness in her chest. She imagined being in his position and having to watch Neji die. She shuddered at the thought. A tear fell down her cheek but it was lost in the rain. It seemed everything was lost in the rain.

Then Makoto was there at Kyou’s side.

‘We need to leave, now.’ Makoto said, putting a hand on his shoulder.

‘I won’t leave her!’ Kyou yelled, desperately. ‘Please.’

‘Kyou,’ Makoto said, his voice breaking. ‘She’s already gone.’

Kyou turned back to Kana in desperation and began shaking her.

‘No, Kana, no!’ He cried. ‘Come back to me, please!’ He looked at her pale face, her eyes open but lifeless. ‘I can’t do this without you.’ He whispered. ‘Kana.’

Kyou pressed some fingers against her neck looking for a pulse but his hand was shaking. There would be no pulse to find even Sena could see that. It was horrible.

Sena turned away when she couldn’t look anymore. She couldn’t bare the pain Kyou must have in showing her this memory or even just remembering it. It was heart wrenching and she wouldn’t have wished such a moment on anyone.

With a shaky breath she walked away, feeling cold and numb despite the rain being nothing more than a memory.

‘Today we acknowledge a very terrible loss.’ The voice of Ao bleed through the memory like an echo.

‘I’m sorry, brother.’ Osamu’s voice.

‘She wouldn’t want to see you like this.’ Makoto’s voice.

Then it was like hundreds of voices bleed through at once, causing Sena to cover her ears. There were voices of sympathy, anger and fear. It was overwhelming and she wanted to throw up. She wanted it to stop. Sena collapsed under the pressure, the overwhelming feeling of the genjutsu seeping into her chakra.

Then everything stopped. Sena looked up and realised she was no longer in the memory. The voices had stopped. Her eyes blinked as she took in the new surroundings of the village. It was
He was leaning against the shop front, swinging a kunai around his finger. The was an air of unease about him.

Slowly, Sena approached him, very much aware of the crunching of stones beneath her sandals. Her heart was racing, still not calmed from the death she had just witnessed. The feelings she had felt witnessing it. It wasn’t fair, the memory didn’t belong to her. She had intruded.

Information was what she had craved entering this genjutsu. Finally she knew just what was taken from Kyou and Hitomi in the past. Kana had shaped them both greatly by the time Sena had entered their lives. Regret was all she felt at the knowledge. There was no clarity, nothing close to what she had wanted.

‘What happened?’ Sena asked.

‘Genjutsu is a tricky thing to control when you’re plucking out your own memories.’ Kyou winced. ‘The things I show aren’t always necessarily because I want them to be shown. Sometimes all it takes is a powerful emotion or intrusive thought and it’s there for everyone in the genjutsu to see.’

Sena nodded, triggering one of her own memories.

‘The shrine with Deidara,’ she blurted out, ‘when I saw my mother. You didn’t choose that memory on purpose did you.’

Kyou pressed his lips together then nodded. ‘I’d never want you to relive that.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘It was easier at the time. We had enough issues to deal with.’

‘We don’t have to continue if you don’t want to,’ Sena said, quickly.

Kyou raised his brows. ‘Do you want to stop?’ He asked, softly.

‘It doesn’t matter what I want.’ Sena said, shifting on her feet. ‘It was selfish of me to begin with. You shouldn’t have to relive everything just so I can understand.’

‘Sena—’

‘It’s enough!’ She quickly snapped, realising the tears were still running down her cheeks.

‘It’s alright.’ Kyou said, bringing her in for a hug. ‘I’m sorry to put you through this just to understand.’

‘I wanted to know.’ Sena sobbed. ‘I wanted to know everything.’

‘I know.’ Kyou released her. ‘I still need to show you more.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Of course. Not much can hurt me anymore.’ He chuckled. ‘I’ve already lived it remember. It’s stuck inside this photographic mind of mine forever. Besides, you forget that with all the bad stuff you see there’s also a lot of good stuff. Stuff worth remembering.’
‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah. That’s life after all.’

Sena hummed.

‘Come on, there’s a bit more darkness yet but I promise there’s light too, you just have to look for it.’

The rain was pouring down again. There were barely any people in the street as Kyou approached a door and began banging furiously.

At first there was no answer so he began banging again harder.

The door swung open to reveal slightly older Makoto. He had filled out a little and his eyes looked sad. He didn’t seem surprised to see Kyou.

‘Kyou.’ He breathed. ‘What’s the matter?’

‘I found him.’ Kyou said, desperately. ‘I found him and I’m going after him. All of them.’

Makoto sighed. ‘Kyou we talked about this nothing will change by—’

‘You don’t think I don’t know that!?’ Kyou yelled. ‘I know getting this bastard won’t bring her back but I can’t stand by while he lives and she doesn’t.’

Makoto put a hand on his shoulder.

‘I know, I know.’ He looked down. ‘I miss her too.’

‘I need your help.’ Kyou begged, this time more softly. ‘Please.’

‘I can’t Kyou, I have a wife to think of now.’ His grip tightened. ‘I can’t just go out into a battle without a plan anymore. This isn’t the anbu.’

‘Screw the anbu! Please, Makoto.’

‘No, Kyou.’

‘I can’t just forget about her and move on like you.’ Kyou spat.

‘That’s not fair.’

‘None of this is fair!’ Kyou clutched at his shirt. ‘Why won’t you help me?’

‘Think this through! It will only end one way. Have you even gotten the approval from the Hokage?’

Kyou remained silent.

‘That’s what I thought.’ Makoto sighed. ‘I’m sorry, I really am. I want to help you but I can’t go on a quest of vengeance for the sake of it.’

‘Well, I’m sorry too.’ He whispered, before pushing him away and taking off into the rain. ‘I will have my vengeance if it takes the rest of my life.’

Sena watched as the young Kyou disappeared into the rain.
‘You’re so…’

‘Different? Tragic? I’d lost the one thing in this world that I loved.’ Kyou replied, stepping beside her. ‘You see I didn’t have a doting mother or a loving father to help me through. All I had was Osamu and even he never truly understood. Without Kana I was alone so I was determined to avenge her or die trying.’

‘But wouldn’t that mean you went against orders? That you went rogue?’

‘Some roads you start going down and you can’t turn back. Back then I was consumed by vengeance and I wouldn’t stop until I got it. It didn’t matter what I had to do. I’m just lucky that the people I was hunting had been responsible for a lot of damage toward the village so the Hokage turned a blind eye. Made it like I was on a special S-Rank mission to rid them of this threat.’

‘Did you get it?’

‘Hm?’ Kyou turned to face Sena.

‘Did you get your vengeance?’

‘I think that’s a story that can wait until next time. I’m running low on chakra and I’ll need it for the next memory.’

‘What happens in the next memory?’

Kyou smiled. ‘It’ll show when I first met your mother.’

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoy this chapter. I look forward to your comments and kudos!

End Notes

Just going to chuck a disclaimer on here: All characters (other than my OC Sena plus others) belong to Masashi Kishimoto. Feel free to leave a comment or kudos. This is my first official fic. I am nervous as heck. Don't be hating too strong. THANKS FOR READING!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!