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**What Might Have Been**

by [SliverQuill](http://archiveofourown.org/users/SliverQuill)

**Summary**

In one world, Boruto, Sarada and Mitsuki were merely 3 curious genin staring into a forbidden scroll. In another world, Sasuke emerged victorious from the Valley of the End and the Shinobi World was changed, changed utterly. Then, the two worlds collided and the trio will have to decide what matters the most.
Chapter 1

It was totally Boruto's idea, Sarada insisted to herself. He thought it would be fun to sneak into his father's office and prowl through the array of forbidden scrolls - just because he can and just because he fancied irritating his father.

Mitsuki decided to tag along, because, well, he was frankly a little annoyed at being left behind by the other two in his team, now that they are beginning to exhibit rather strange signals to each other.

Naruto was off to the Gokage summit in Kirigakure and along him went Shikamaru and several other senior figures within Konoha. Hence, Boruto figured that now was the ideal time to execute their 'mission.'

It was late at night – but not too late. Sakura was still working in her hospital shift (good.) Many office workers have already left (also good.) And a couple of ANBU guarded the Hokage towers (maybe not so good.)

"I've come here to retrieve some of dad's stuff for mum," Boruto lied. "You see, dad barely washes his Hokage robes – instead he keeps a dozen of replicas. But the thing is, it's been at least 2 weeks since he last-"

"Just go." The ANBU guards shuddered, deciding that they would rather not hear the Hokage's son recount his unsanitary habits.

Sarada internally groaned. Of course Boruto would use this as an excuse; it was believable enough. Nevertheless, listening to her role model and hero being dissed in such a manner irked her a little. Just a little.

It happened in somewhat of a blur. They managed to finagle their way into Naruto's secret compartment. Mitsuki was babbling about how his father/mother talked about space-time scrolls, Sarada was awed by the vast collection of literature in front of her and Boruto decided to be his own reckless self. Holding up a scroll littered with indecipherable scripture and atavistic symbols, his eyes gleamed.

"Mitsuki! Ever seen something like this in your parent's place?" Boruto yelled (collectively, the three decided to refer to Orochimaru as Mitsuki's parent due to his unverified gender.)

"Boruto, shut up!" Sarada hissed.

Mistuki took one look and shook his head.

"Man, this is so weird! Maybe dad or uncle Sasuke would understand this!"

"I'm not sure you should be telling either of them about- Boruto what are you doing? Take that scroll out of your pocket now!" Sarada scolded him.

"Oh come on! You've already agreed to come with me Sarada, stop trying so hard to follow the rules!" Boruto groaned. Thinking it entertaining to witness Sarada's vexed expressions, Boruto started unwrapping the scroll.

"Boruto – stop!"
"This is really cool! Ah-choo! Ah-choo! Ah, crap! There's a lot of dust here!"

"Boruto – put down the scroll now!"

It started off with a strange chill that buried itself into their marrows. Then, the scroll began to emit an eerie, luminescent glow – one as cold as the moon, distant, ominous and otherworldly.

"Boruto, Sarada, I can't move!" Mitsuki exclaimed, the shock ripping off his usually calm and composed exterior.

"Me neither!" Sarada yelled. It was as if her physical self had frozen in time, leaving only her metaphysical conscience to float helplessly in the realm of the living.

Soon, they could no longer speak, their internal sentiments becoming completely detached from the outside. The ground beneath them rustled. The ceiling above them creaked inauspiciously. The fabric of their surroundings started swirling – Naruto's shelf was disfigured, warped.

Then, out of the blue, emerged shamanistic chants that did not belong in Konoha, or this world.

Sarada felt her vision fade: the things that lay before her eyes were being erased bit by bit by some nefarious cosmic entity. Soon, she – no all three of them it seems – passed out.

It was late in the afternoon. The ailing sun spilt red blood on the horizon and crows croaked in the distance. All around them was an air of sleepiness, with the shops being just about to close, with the children returning to their homes, and with the pavements emptying themselves of their daily hustle and bustle.

They were still in the Land of Fire. Sarada was sure of it. It was the same village where they subdued the panda-bear on a mission. Yet she could not help but feel that something was amiss.

As they ambled through the streets, Sarada wondered just what on earth had happened. Judging from their surroundings, the scroll had transported them elsewhere, but not somewhere too far away, evidently. But perhaps the more pressing question is why was that scroll forbidden at all. Teleportation, though a highly ranked skill and asset, is nothing dangerous.

"Sarada… Mitsuki.. I think we're back there..." Boruto muttered.

Both nodded in reply.

"Well," Sarada snorted. "What are we going to do?"

"I suppose we can just take a train back to Konoha – we are not that far away," contemplated Mitsuki.

"Sure thing," agreed Boruto. "But first, I want to go to the games arcade. This village has some pretty niche games that you wouldn't find in Konoha – "

"Boruto!" Sarada exclaimed. "This is serious, we need to get back!"

"Come one Sarada! We're off missions for at least a week and dad's away. Mum is busy with family affairs and-"

"Fine," Sarada resigned. "No more than an hour. Boys like you are so annoying."
"What do you mean you don't know what an arcade is?" Boruto was baffled. "It's where you play video games! Uh, you know, for example, the one where you fight evil gorillas to save the princess? Surely, you have to be from another planet to not know that…"

The teenage girl, whom Boruto was gazing inquisitively at, was still clueless as ever.

"But there was supposed to be one there!" Boruto argued.

"… I'm sorry… you must have been mistaken. My father's bookstore was always there – I – I – really can't help you. I'm sorry," the girl explained rather apprehensively.

"Oh well guys, let's go in anyway!" Boruto said.

The girl stopped them: "Did the Hokage send you?"

"No," Sarada answered. "And we won't be going in. Sorry to have disturbed you. Boruto – we're leaving!"

"Sarada! What is it with you?" Boruto complained.

"What is it with me? What's wrong with you?! We're far away from Konoha because of your goddamn stupidity, our friends and our parents would be worried sick and you're acting like nothing wrong has happened!" Sarada was getting a little angry.

"Seriously! What the hell is wrong with you?! Stop overreacting over everything. Why the hell did I ever consider liking a bossy bitch like yo-"

"Enough guys! Calm down," Mitsuki interjected. "We're scaring her."

Boruto looked a little embarrassed by his outburst, his arms were crossed and his face a little crestfallen. Sarada was still fuming; in her anger, she had accidentally activated her Sharingan.

The girl took one look at it and all the blood drained from her face.

"You know what Boruto, let's take a look anyway. No more than 10 minutes. Afterwards, we're heading back to Konoha," Sarada muttered. She started walking in. The girl was too terrified to stop her.

"Yeah whatever…" Boruto muttered as he followed suit.

Mitsuki trailed behind and offered the girl an apologetic smile. "My friends can be rather hot-headed sometimes. Sorry if we seemed threatening."

She was still trembling.

"My name's Mitsuki," he smiled again and held out his hand.

She shook it tentatively and replied rather quietly: "Sayuri – nice… nice… to meet you."

"Mitsuki, Sarada! Look at this! This is really weird – the history section and nothing about my dad!" Boruto yelled.

"Oh Boruto, maybe you just didn't look hard enough!" Sarada snorted. "There, the History of the Fourth Great Ninja War. He's bound to be in there!" She started flicking through the pages.
The introduction was a little vague – it didn't really explain clearly why the war had started. Nothing about the tailed beasts. Nothing about Naruto or the Kyuubi. Nothing about the Eye of the Moon Plan. Just a few vague sentences about Madara and the Shinobi Alliance.

This book, she decided, was terrible. If someone had used it to study for their graduation exams, they can kiss goodbye to their shinobi career.

"Sarada – look! This newspaper says your dad is Hokage!" Boruto called for her.

"What?!" A perplexed response was all she could muster. "Are you sure this is not a joke? Show me!"

There were a few satirical newspapers within the Shinobi World that Sarada read all the time, the Daily Ramen being her favourite. Boruto, however, had most likely never even heard of them because he had never been the biggest reader around the block.

She grabbed the paper from Boruto. It was the front page. There, a short edict from the Hokage read:

> Anyone who has witnessed any activity of the treacherous Hi no Ishi terrorist group is advised to make a report to the Hokage's office.

> Anyone who has any positive association with Hi no Ishi is urged to reflect his or her own consciousness and make the morally respectable decision to aid us in our struggle against them. Anyone who continues to support Hi no Ishi despite repeated warnings will be convicted as an enemy of the state and an enemy of the people of the state, receiving his or her due punishment.

> We will defeat them and our revolution will be victorious.

> Sasuke Uchiha, the Hokage

"The hell?!"

"Okay, we need to find out just what is going on," Sarada said. "Why the hell is Naruto's name not in the history books, why the hell is my dad the flipping Hokage and why the hell is Hi no Ishi the name of a terrorist group?"

Boruto shook his head in confusion. None of this added up.

"We should ask Sayuri," suggested Mitsuki.

"Alright, she's the girl at the counter right? I'll –"

"Let me do this," explained Mitsuki. "She seems… afraid of you."

"Okay, whatever. I'm coming with you though."

"Just, let me do the talking. I'm the only here who hasn't scared the crap out of her," Mitsuki chuckled.

"Agreed," Boruto conceded.

As they made their way towards the counter, Sarada couldn't help but glance at the title of all the books around her. 1001 Ways To Arrange Your Flowers, Icha Icha Paradise, To Love A Man... And then onto the less fluffy content: The Crooked Shinobi System, The Lies They've Told Us, What Really Happened in Konoha...
How peculiar, she wondered.

"Sayuri," Mitsuki smiled at her again. "My companions and I... we're a little confused about what's going on here. We were just wondering if you could lend us some help."

Sayuri snatched a glimpse at Sarada and Boruto suspiciously and hesitated.

"Look, I don't know if you think we're some sort of crazy secret police or something but we're not. I promise you. We're just... kinda... lost," Boruto burst out. "Please, help us with this. We'll help you in return, anything you ask --"

Sarada gave him a kick.

"What?! I'm sick of being viewed as some scary criminal when both you and me know we've never done anything wrong! This girl is acting as if we live under some tyrannical regime from The Search for Freedom!"

"I'm surprised you've read that. No, I'm surprised you read at all," Sarada chortled. Then she lowered her voice: "she's probably just terrified – we did scare her when we were arguing."

"Stop whispering! She deserves to know that there is absolutely nothing wrong with us!" Boruto rebutted.

"Boruto! Let Mitsuki talk!" They both stopped talking.

"Anyways, Sayuri, can you at least give us a recount of what happened in the past, say twenty years? It doesn't have to be anything personal. Just say whatever you're comfortable with saying," Mitsuki addressed her calmly.

She gazed at him, sighed, and started speaking: "I wasn't alive then – I was born 2 years after, but 17 years ago, there was the Fourth Shinobi World War. And... My father, who was only a young shinobi then – he was, I think, about twenty – said he fell into a dream. It was the best thing that ever happened, as he would often recount to my brother and me. He had everything he wanted, love, a family, happiness, and wealth. He quit his job as a shinobi and started a lucrative company in printing. He lived his life with his one true love and they were growing old together.

"And then all of a sudden, he woke up. Everything changed. The system that had existed ever since he was born was no more. I'm sure you all know that there used to be five Kages each governing over a different elemental national. But when he was awake there was only one: the Hokage. And, well, since then, all of us have been one big nation. It's not necessarily a bad thing. Really. We haven't had a single war for 17 years. I know I came across as paranoid, but my family and I are decent, law-abiding citizens--"

"For the last time, there is nothing to fear from us!" Boruto interjected.

"Have you ever heard of a ... Naruto Uzumaki?" Sarada inquired.

Sayuri looked taken aback and then prompted to shake her head vigorously.

"You're a pretty bad liar. I hope you realise that," Sarada raised her eyebrows.

Sayuri muttered something – it was too muffled for any of them to understand.

"It's alright, no pressure at all. Anyways, it was good talking to you, but we've got to go. Oh – and when it's been ten years and still no 'secret police' or whatever organisation that terrifies you so
much, maybe you can finally admit that we meant no harm," Sarada shook hear head as she left the
bookstore with Boruto following close behind.

Mitsuki was left with the girl. "My apologies Sayuri, for disturbing you. It was good meeting you."

She gave him one long, hard, impenetrable look: "likewise."

"They have arrived, Sakura. My spies have just informed me. Apparently, one of the young boys
looked just like him."

"It's about time," the tired woman sighed. "Please, bring me Kakashi and Shikamaru."
Chapter 2

At the end of the day, all three of them concurred that it was best if they returned to Konoha. There, perhaps, they can figure out what happened with everyone they knew.

Except there was no train.

In its place remained a pristine, rudimentary forest path. It was as if none of the development in the past 17 years actually happened.

This was going to be a long journey.

"Boruto…" Sarada addressed him with a tinge of concern as they tread through the dirt paths. "What if what she said was true? What if – what if there really is something wrong? What if my dad really is the one causing all of this?"

Boruto sighed. Seeing her so anxious made him feel rather uneasy. He was so accustomed to bossy, self-confident, forthright Sarada that the girl in front of him took him by surprise.

"Look, no matter what happens, we all stick together. If that girl was crazy, it's all-good for us. If what she said was really true," which Boruto admitted was the most likely scenario, "we'll find a way out of this, back to where we belong. I'm sorry I called you nasty names earlier today. I was just – it was my fault for being reckless and stupid."

"No, I should be the one apologizing. I was so rude and inconsiderate and –"

"It's okay Sarada, there's no use in blaming anyone now. And even if we did, the blame's all on me," he tried comforting her. "Heh. I'm so getting grounded when we get back. Guess I better start making some plans right now."

Sarada chuckled, feeling slightly less downcast.

"Thanks for ignoring me again," Mitsuki butted in. "You two are so close to each other sometimes."

A correct observation, given that, without much notice, both of them edged towards barely an inch away each other, with Mitsuki trailing far behind.

Boruto wrapped his arms around Mitsuki and Sarada and laughed.

"I guess we better stop by the tavern for some food," Sarada suggested. "I'm absolutely famished!"

Boruto's stomach growled: "I agree – Mitsuki?"

"Me too."

It was a small, earthy, unassuming tavern. There wasn't even any ramen. Granted, ramen wasn't the most common kind of food unless you were in Konoha.

Sarada ordered some rice and vegetables with soy sauce, Boruto went for some sushi and Mitsuki tried the unagi, even though he had little expectations for it given the plainness of the place.

The ordinary folk all around them were decidedly free from the kind of fear that grappled the girl at the bookstore. Some were engrossed in their game of cards, some were energetically sharing the
latest gossip, some were ranting about the drabness of women from Kumo, some laughed as they belched jokes and obscenities, others were simply exchanging the most recent episodes of their lives.

Everything seemed… so normal, thought Boruto. It was exactly the kind of tavern you would stop by if you went back to Konoha by foot.

"Boruto," Sarada was the one to start the conversation. "I was just wondering - the scroll you used, do you think we can find it?"

"Not sure to be honest," Boruto replied through a mouth stuffed with food. "I don't have it with me anymore, so it must have vanished when we came here."

"Or maybe," suggested Mitsuki, "it's still in Konoha."

"The forbidden scrolls were always located within the Hokage office right?" Sarada asked Boruto.

"No idea," he replied bluntly.

"Right. But hypothetically, say if we really were in some sort of alternate dimension and if a scroll like that existed, where would it be?" Sarada questioned the two.

"Uzushiogakure was a village that specialised in fuuinjutsu – they were destroyed in the Second Shinobi World War though. And judging from the books we read, history only started diverging since the Fourth War," Mitsuki speculated. "I guess we'll have to start looking at places with a particular congregation of scrolls. My parent has a lot of them – I'm not sure where he is here though, or what kind of person he would be. I'd still go for Konoha, given that the other villages have been well…"

"Yeah, that makes sense," Sarada concluded.

"I'll get the scroll," Boruto remarked abruptly. "What?" He responded to the bemused pair before him. "I started this mess, I'll get us out of it."

"Boruto! How are you going to do it? Sneak into the Hokage's office?" Sarada shook her head.

"Why, of course! What's so difficult about that?"

"Boruto Uzumaki you are one truly irredeemable moron!" Sarada snorted. "One, in this world – right, if that's what we have agreed – you are not the son of the Hokage. This means no more bribing the ANBU, currying favour with them or exploiting your position as the son of the Hokage. Two, the current Hokage well… I'm smart enough to realise that he doesn't sound like someone who would be keen to help us."

"Sarada's right," Mitsuki nodded. "We'll have to find another way."

"There is no other way except stealing it," Boruto refuted him. "Look, I know it's going to be difficult but realistically, there is no other way. What else are we going to do? Ask the Hokage to give it to us?"

"Okay Boruto, you have a point. But nothing rash, okay? We need to make a plan," Sarada asked for some pen and paper.

The waitress who came had dark brown hair, gathered tightly into a sleek bun. She wore a surprising amount of makeup for someone of her profession: her lips were bright red and her cheeks peppered with pink blush. Then again, who was Boruto, a 12-year-old boy, to judge?
"Pens and paper you say?" The woman asked softly. There was a strange, soothing quality about her voice. "I'll get them now – no problem at all!"

She smiled an oddly familiar smile. Boruto was sure he had seen her somewhere, perhaps in his own world.

"Guys, I'm going to the bathroom. I'll be back in a while, I have a lot of feces I need to egest –"

"Boruto – just shut up and go! Ugh!" Sarada groaned.

"Ma'am," Boruto whispered to the waitress on the way. "Can you please give this note to the two of them in twenty minutes?"

The waitress gazed at him incredulously.

"It's complicated," he admitted. "But I'm going to go do something very risky and I don't want to burden the other two. Please, promise me."

Before she could react, he rushed away, out of the tavern, on his way towards Konoha.

"We're nearly there!" Chocho exclaimed, euphoric about the prospects of being within close proximity of food.

"Remember, first things first, we're going to get them. Then you can worry about eating," Konohamaru warned.

"Aww! You suck sensei!" Chocho complained.

"What a drag," moaned Shikadai.

"Alright, we're there!" Inojin said as they arrived at the front door of the tavern.

"Wait, what do they look like again?" Chocho asked.

"For God's sake, why-" Konohamaru stopped short of complaining as they entered the room.

It had been twenty minutes and Boruto was still in the bathroom.

"I swear if five minutes later he's still not back, I will personally storm into the bathroom and drag his ass out of there!" Sarada fulminated the umpteenth time to a rather wary Mitsuki.

"Maybe I should do that."

"Maybe you should."

She cast her eyes around the room. Still no sign of Boruto. Turning her focus to the counter, she froze.

Chocho.

Konohamaru-sensei.

Inojin.
"Mitsuki, Mitsuki – it's them!" She grabbed Mitsuki by the arm and gestured towards the four.

Her eyes collided with Chocho's, yet whilst hers was filled with relief and excitement, all that greeted her was a mélange of confusion and fright, like the look one throws at a stranger who says hi in the streets.

"Chocho. It's me. Sarada Uchiha!" She yelled across the room.

A sudden hush descended upon the tavern. The raucous voices petered out, as the jovial expressions worn by the folk around them were torn out and replaced with shock. Pure shock. There was an uncomfortable air that rippled through room and penetrated its every nook and cranny.

"Excuse me, but do I know you?" Chocho frowned.

"I mean, we've known each other since the academy-" Sarada frantically scrambled for words. She had made a blunder – no, two blunders. She miscalculated and placed Sarada within her possible list of acquaintances in this world. She also revealed her last name, which was evidently what caused all astonishment or discomfort around her.

"What academy?" Was all Chocho replied.

"Look, we're sorry. There must have been some sort of confusion. Sarada drank some sake and she's not exactly thinking straight. She must have mistaken you guys with people she knew," Mitsuki tried to sound as rational as possible.

"No she's right," Konohamaru interrupted them as he walked towards the two. "You're coming with us."

"But our friend Boruto is still in the bathroom!" Sarada explained. "We're not going anywhere without him."

"But is he?" Konohamaru asked skeptically. "It may be that-

"He asked me to show you guys this note," the waitress – who had served them food - lent Sarada a piece of paper scribbled with Boruto's appalling handwriting. It read:

*Sorry, but I'm going to Konoha alone. This is my responsibility. I screwed up and dragged you guys into this mess.*

*I have a plan. I'm going to get as close as I can to the Hokage tower – I'll take some mundane job as an errand boy or a paperwork lackey. And I'll try and get as much information as I can on that scroll.*

*Sarada, Mitsuki, try looking for it elsewhere. Do send me a note if you guys have found anything new. We'll still be working together; we'll just be dividing the task so we're doing it more efficiently!*

*I'll be back. It's a promise. But please don't come after me.*

*Boruto Uzumaki*

"Why… Why didn't you give me this earlier?!" Sarada could feel a searing hotness surging through her cheeks and burning all the way down her throat. Her Sharingan activated itself again.

"I'm merely a servant. It is my job to fulfill the wishes of my customers," the waitress replied coolly.
"How could you?!" Sarada felt her eyes hurt. A moist mist masked her vision and before she realised anything, she was tearing up.

Konohamaru-sensei placed a hand on her back and started patting her. It was oddly reassuring for Sarada.

"There, there girl. Don't worry. We'll get you somewhere safe and then you can tell us all about it. But as of now, try and avoid any outbursts," Konohamaru's voice hushed. "He has eyes and ears everywhere."

Sarada nodded, barely able to re-orientate her feelings.

Mitsuki was shaken too, though he seemed way too baffled for any other emotions. His complexion was even paler than before – all trace of blood had evaporated. Sarada didn't think it was possible at all.

"Right, brace yourselves – it's going to be a long way," Konohamaru winked.

"Excuse me sir," Boruto called out to a travelling merchant and his companion. "Your cart says you're delivering stuff to Konoha. Mind if I tag along?"

It was late at night and the road was virtually empty. Boruto was exhausted from all the incessant sprinting, his cloths drenched in sweat and his normally spiky blond plastered on his forehead. It frustrated him that Konoha was still half a day away – by foot at least.

"I'll… I'll offer some protection! Please, just let me hop on. I'll do anything to help if you want," Boruto searched for words amidst the merciless stream of panting.

"Oh there'll be no need for protection kiddo. The roads are a lot safer these days, especially if you're near Konoha. None of the bandits you would get in the olden days," laughed the merchant. "Then again, feel free to join us. We've got plenty of space."

Boruto nodded gratefully. One step closer, he cheered internally. And some much needed rest too.

The merchant was a middle-aged man with an oily face and balding hair. His cloths gave way to his moderately affluent status – a self-made man, proud of his achievements, yet always yearning for more. He kept a pocket watch and a locket with a photo of a smiling woman and girl. His companion was in his early twenties, with rather scruffy cloths and hair. Evidently someone at the crossroads of life: edging out of adolescence yet struggling to grasp the weight of maturity.

As the horses resumed pulling the cart, Boruto ventured for some small talk: "I think I should probably introduce myself. I'm Boruto."

He left out his last name. Judging from his past experiences today, it was probably a good decision.

"Ichirou," the merchant nodded and extended his hand. "Pleased to meet you."

"Kengen," his companion added.

"We've been in the pottery business for ages. Kengen is my apprentice and my nephew. Really, all we do is delivery pottery throughout the continent. We're based in Konoha though, so we make an effort to go there at least twice a month," Ichirou started speaking. Boruto could tell that he was the garrulous kind of person – once you helped him start, there's no ending. "What are you heading to Konoha for?"
"I'm just visiting friends," Boruto kept his response short.

"Good to know. I have a lot of friends in Konoha too. They're all so friendly, the people from Konoha. I even know someone who works at the Hokage office. Kengen's older sister is an office worker. Ayame, she's called. She's such a lovely woman," Ichirou went on.

Ayame. Boruto's mind stopped absorbing Ichirou's words. Ayame: she's in ANBU is she not? Yes, Boruto remembered, she was definitely one of his dad's ANBUs back in his own world.

"… Anyways, have you heard the Hokage's edict today? Hi no Ishi – such a troublesome bunch. Don't they realise what nuisance they're being. We're living in the longest era of peace ever known to mankind!" Ichirou snorted matter-of-factly.

"Uncle, though to be honest, the circumstances have been… less than ideal," Kengen tried to mildly rebut his words. "We all know what's going on with the secret police and the regular purgings-"

"Nonsense! Absolutely nonsense Kengen. Stop filling your head with all that rebellious trash."

"I just think that there are other ways to achieve peace. Other ways that perhaps involve less terror."

"Terror? We've never been safer!"

"Oh you and your blind patriotism. The Hokage spies on everyone – under his rule, there can be no liberty-"

"Liberty? What's that good for?! Back when I was young, things weren't much better either. Do you know, when Kirigakure was still an independent hidden village, all the graduating genin were forced to massacre each other? Now tell me, how is that better than what we have now!"

"What happened in Kirigakure is most certainly not liberty uncle. Stop using false equivalences, it is most irritating. Look, what I'm saying is that what we have now isn't… there is room for improvement within the system," Kengen finished off.

"Now," Ichirou whipped out some sake. "Put a stop to all that sour ranting and drink a toast to the Hokage's health."

Kengen rolled his eyes.
They were back at the bookstore.

Konohamaru whispered something to Sayuri behind the counter and she eyed him with slight bemusement.

"The scroll," he requested.

She hesitated a little, before nodding: "here it is."

"Thank you, Sayuri," Konohamaru replied. "I trust that you've met Sarada and Mitsuki."

"Yes… They caught me by surprise when they entered here," she conceded before turning her attention to the two. "Sarada, I must apologise for my initial suspicions."

"No worries," Sarada waved her hands and grinned, simply glad to be rid of this unfounded accusation.

"Where's Boruto?" Sayuri asked.

"He left us," grimaced Mitsuki. "He's going to Konoha alone."

"We need to go and find-" Sarada joined in, agitation relapsing into her voice.

"No Sarada," Konohamaru shook his head. "Anyone near Konoha is good as gone – or at least if we retrieve him now and without a plan. We'll have to get to the base first."

"But we can't just leave him!" Sarada complained.

"We won't," Konohamaru insisted. "But –"

"I'll go to Konoha and find-"

"No. Look, I don't know how your dad is like in your world but he is not your friend here," Konohamaru lowered his head and shut his eyes for a brief respite. "Do not assume he'd go easy on you Sarada, anymore than he did on Sakura, Kakashi or … well friends who are not with us today anymore."

Words escaped Sarada.

"Alright, we should get going. Sayuri – mind leading us to the summoning room?" Konohamaru beckoned towards Sayuri for guidance.

She led them to an obscure corner of the bookstore and did a few hand seals. The shelves split open and series of stairs emerged, descending down a dark tunnel.

"Quick, follow me," Sayuri urged them.

They arrived at dawn. Boruto was woken up by the sound of the early fish market.

A homely old woman was bellowing the newest prices for her fresh, raw salmon as she frowns at the savvy antics of her competitors. They had, apparently, unilaterally lowered the costs without
consulting the other salespersons. Markets – they have arrangements like that.

He was home.

Because Konoha was the only home he ever knew.

As he bade goodbye too the merchant and his nephew, he made the decision to stroll through the streets.

It was a peculiar feeling, to be somewhere so familiar and so alien. Every corner, every turn was exactly as he imagined, yet just as Boruto began to come to grips with the blueprint of the area, he would run into an unknown shop erected by alien shopkeepers.

He traced his fingers over the graffiti adorning the concrete walls that enclosed a grocery. Barely visible red ink portrayed the shape of a spiralled leaf – the emblem of his village. It must have been there for ages, longer than twenty years at least.

No one around wore the Konoha headband, not even persons who vaguely resembled career shinobis. Desiring to appear less conspicuous, Bolt took his off.

He held it in his right palm and gave it one hard look – it was Sasuke's headband, the one given to him shortly before their confrontation with Momoshiki and Kinshiki. The long dent inscribed by Naruto during the first battle at the Valley of the End was there, like an irrecoverable scar that spoke of the pains of the past. Other parts were roughened, weathered by strenuous hardships, for the headband had previously accompanied Sasuke through an assortment of terrain during his journey for redemption: the snowy mountains of the Land of Iron, the sands of the Land of Wind, the eerie plains of worlds of yonder, the dense foliage of the Land of Fire, the misty marshes of the Land of Water…

Boruto himself often wondered why Sasuke gave him the headband at all; it was strange to be parted with such a committed companion, just like that. Then again, it was also a token of trust, a gift to a student that imparted invaluable lessons. It spoke of hardship, bonds, endurance, but above all, redemption. It was something that struck an intimate chord with a Boruto who had been tormented with the humiliation of being caught cheating, a Boruto dealing with profound feelings of loneliness, insecurity and anxiety.

Tearing his gaze away, he resumed his journey towards the Hokage tower.

"Reverse summoning jutsu!" Konohamaru chanted as he finished weaving an array of intricate hand signs.

The walls around them were engraved with mystical symbols and a strange chakra emitted all around them.

"The walls here are embedded with the remnants of scattered chakra from the tailed beasts," Konohamaru explained. "Combined with this scroll and the right hand signs, they are able to transport us to the base of Hi no Ishi."

Sarada gazed at her surroundings in awe.

"Right, off we go – to Mount Myoboku!" declared Konohamaru.

Boruto eyed the recruitment posters on the wall curiously. The Hokage's office needed a new errand
boy that is about his age and moderately competent in the arts of ninjutsu.

"This is my chance," he muttered to himself. "I'll-

"Out of my way kid!" bellowed a man brusquely. Judging from his strides and his jacket, he would be a jonin.

"Wait, sir," Boruto tried to stop him.

"What?" He was not amused.

"Do you know where I'd go for..." Boruto pointed at the poster to save himself the effort of explaining.

The man burst into laughter: "Good luck with that! The last one lasted for thirteen days – turned out to be a spy! We finished him off in no time! We pulled his entrails out one by one-"

"I am no spy," was all Boruto cold mustered.

"I'm just joking! Boy, you sure know how to draw people's suspicions," the man chuckled.

"I mean it- I... I just need a job-"

"You're one of those young kids who travel to Konoha right? The kind that's looking for better opportunities and prospects?" The man inquired. "In that case, just turn up at the lower office 10am tomorrow. My friend Ayame's heading the interviews."

Ayame. Ichirou's niece. Boruto will be sure to send a word of greetings for her uncle.

They were at Mount Myoboku, one of the last places of refuge in this world, one of the last places still untainted by the Hokage's shadow.

The emerald-green grasses were segmented by thin streams of crystal blue water, adorned by flowers tinted by all shades of the rainbow. All around them, frogs lay lazily on soft, comfortable fungi that functioned as the animal equivalent of armchairs. There was not a trace of fear, or so Sarada thought.

"Right kiddos, our leader Sakura is in… that cave… wait, no – that cave!" Konohamaru instructed.

"What a drag," complained Shikadai. "I'll take them there instead…"

Sarada chortled at Konohamaru-sensei (can he still be called that?) and his comical manner of speech – it was reassuring to find something so familiar.

The advance interiors of the cave caught Sarada by surprise, though she wonders why she is surprised by anything at all by now. There were rooms filled with cosy beds and couches. Some were even occupied by rebels (Sarada was, by now, sure of who they actually are) old and young. Children were playing in the game halls, chasing each other down the slides and pushing each other on the swings. The crackle of their laughter filled the surroundings with a sense of normality, something uncommon in these days.

They arrived at the main quarters. It was situated right at the top-centre, overlooking the affairs that occurred in the base.

Sarada saw that Sakura sat behind the chair of the main desk and when she turned around, their eyes met.
Sakura was a woman in her mid-thirties, though judging from her physical appearance, she only looked twenty. The sagging dark circles beneath her eyes, however, betrayed the cruel, merciless effects of time. She was an exhausted woman, a drained woman.

"Mama…" Sarada couldn't help blurt out. She went up and hugged the pink-haired woman in front of her. Hard.

Boruto decided to spend time scouring through the public library. It was best if he tried to piece together what happened in the past twenty years, even though he had been vaguely briefed by the girl at the bookstore.

Sarada loved to scold him for never reading and, to a small, small extent, she was right. He loved comics, especially ones that told of adventures in the Warring Clans Era, or ones that involved extraterrestrial threats (something more realistic than he originally imagined.) But it was true that he loathed anything with more than 10 lines of words per page. It was not as if he was incapable of reading them; he merely shunned them out of boredom and indifference.

Titles about his dad were still conspicuously absent, but there was a book about the tailed-beasts tucked away in an obscure corner.

_The Evils of the Gokage_, it read. The back cover was essentially a summary of how the five shinobi villages harnessed their monopoly over the tailed-beasts to wage war against each other, devastating millions of lives and satisfying their own greed. There was also a brief note on the horrors of the life of a jinchuriki.

Wonderful, more propaganda, he internally groaned.

Nonetheless, Boruto decided to check out the book, sensing that this version of history could come in handy if he were to audition for a job at the Hokage's office.

As he was about to leave the place, another title caught his attention: _The History of the Clans_.

Worth a shot, he contemplated with a shrug and proceeded to check that out too.

"Mama, I can't believe I'm saying this but I missed you so much," Sarada was beginning to sob.

Sakura – this Sakura – wore an expression of shock and utter confusion. It had fully replaced her previous complexion of fatigue and sadness. Gently, she pushed Sarada out of her embrace.

"Who are you, exactly?"

The sight of aunt Hanabi strolling through the streets stunned him beyond words. She was accompanied by another man from the Hyuuga clan; the caged-bird seal sign was absent from her forehead.

Boruto was unsure why it was the first thing he noticed. The aunt Hanabi back in his world didn't have a seal too, but this world was different. Had Naruto and Kakashi not been Hokage, would there still have been a challenge issued to the Hyuuga elders to eradicate this ancient ritual?

He decided to follow them.
"I…" Sarada was lost for words. I'm your daughter from an alternate dimension that you had with the man you are currently trying to overthrow sounded… well… unhelpful. "I'm Sarada. I'm your-

"You called me 'mama',' Sakura chuckled, her bright green eyes glistening with amusement.

"Well, you see, Sakura, Sarada and I are not from this world, we-" Mitsuki tried to help her explain everything.

"I know. Katsuyu and Gamabunata have already informed me… of the possibility of guests from a different reality. It was all written in the prophecies," she nodded thoughtfully. "You must be my daughter from there – correct?"

Sarada nodded. Her mother was as perceptive as ever.

"Will you lads please excuse us? We'd like some heart-to-heart girl-time," Sakura winked to the rest.

"Now," Sakura smiled – that same familiar smile Sarada would see every day back in her world (though this lacked the usual maternal flair) – as Konohamaru, Shikadai and Mitsuki filtered out of the room. She pulled Sarada close to her. "Tell me more about this, this other world."

"Are you sure it's a good idea to them there?" Mitsuki questioned Konohamaru skeptically. "She is her daughter from an alternate dimension, apparently."

"I've never seen Sakura so cheery," Konohamaru observed. "She has had a hard life. You may not know, but in this world, she never married. She dedicated the last seventeen years of her life to the cause of Hi no Ishi."

Sensing an opportunity to discover more about this alien reality, Mitsuki pressed on: "What happened?"

"What happened?" Konohamaru raised his eyebrows. "I'd like your question to be a little more specific than that."

"Why… I mean, how did we get here?" Mitsuki tried to be more specific and he was evidently failure due to the sheer abundance of facts he needed to fill in his as-of-yet virtually empty arsenal of knowledge of this world. "And," he added, "Why is Naruto Uzumaki's name erased from the history books?"

"I'll start with the basics. Shortly after the defeat of Kaguya, Sasuke killed Naruto in the Valley of the End. He declared the beginning of a new world order, massacred the Gokage, incarcerated the tailed beasts and made himself Hokage, or, to put things more accurately, the sole ruler of the continent plus the islands of the Land of Water. He did, however, release the Infinite Tsukuyomi. Long things short, Sakura and Kakashi refused to give in and founded Hi no Ishi in hopes of restoring the memory and beliefs of Naruto Uzumaki and they have been fighting against this… this… tyrannical regime ever since. And unfortunately, most ordinary people in the streets these days have all but forgotten who Naruto was. It is forbidden to talk or write about him," Konohamaru explained with somber eyes. "The Hokage gave these orders."

Mitsuki gulped uncomfortably, "so what you're saying is that… you're all fighting a lost cause?"

Konohamaru's expressions vacillated between indignant defiance and reluctant agreement. After pausing for a moment, he explained, "There is a chance, according to the prophecy told by the Toad Sage. He said that a ray of hope would dawn upon this land in the form of three young genin, who will have the chance to save or doom this world."
Mitsuki's discomfort only intensified. Save or doom this world – but this wasn't their world at all. No doubt saving it was the last thing on the minds of his two other companions, as is the case with him.

"I…" he was just about to explain his feelings when he managed to stop himself. Now is not the time for sensitive discussion.

Hanabi and the man were at the doorsteps of the Hyuuga compound. They entered and Boruto struggled to decide whether he should follow them in.

In this world, his father had been dead for seventeen years. In this world, he had never existed.

Sighing, Boruto took one last glimpse at the entrance and walked away.

Best if he did not arouse any suspicions.
Sarada sighed, unsure of where to begin.

"Take your time," said Sakura patiently.

"Mama – no – Sakura, in this other world, Naruto Uzumaki is the Seventh Hokage," she started. "That and lasting peace had been achieved between the Gokage of the five villages. A Shinobi Union was created and sustained. In the last twenty years, we have seen unparalleled levels of development: trains, railroads, factories, Boruto's favourite game arcades, you name it."

"So, you're saying that in your world, Naruto… survived?" She enquired earnestly.

"With a lost arm," Sarada nodded. "Or at least that's what I've picked up from you there. My dad lost an arm too, but he did not get a replacement, for some reason. Until recently, he was never home because he was travelling between different worlds to protect Konoha from external threats. He's back at the village now and you there, well, you were very happy with how things are."

"So, you're saying that I not only forgave Sasuke Uchiha, but married and had a child with that bastard?" Sakura sighed and shook her head. "It's strange isn't it, how many possibilities exist out there?"

"Indeed," Sarada agreed. "Look, I know you really hate my dad in this world –"

"Hate is a rather mild terminology I would use to describe my feelings," Sakura snorted. "That man is utterly devoid of any capability of love and compassion. Just take a look at what he's done to the world. He represented everything, everything I've been fighting against. But go on." She pulled back, not wanting to start a rant on Sarada, her would-be child if things did not turn out they way they did.

"What I'm trying to say is that he is a different man in the other world. Sure, at the beginning, he was an absent father, but you would never doubt his responsibility and commitment to his loved ones. He's also Boruto's sensei."

"Boruto?"

"Naruto's son – with Hinata Hyuuga."

"Ah," Sakura nodded. "Poor woman. She committed suicide not long after the end of the Fourth Shinobi World War. Couldn't bear the death of Naruto. She truly loved him."

"What?!"

"You heard it," Sakura continued. "The rest of her clan though, they're nothing but a bunch of greedy cowards. They betrayed the location of our first base to the Hokage and have been his most obsequious lackeys ever since."

Sarada's eyes bulged, "really?"

"Just take a look at our collected data about the secret police – at least a quarter of them are Hyuugas! Even Hanabi, can you believe that she's working for Sasuke after her sister was practically drive to her death?" Sakura shook her head in disgust.
"It is rather unfortunate," Sarada said.

"Too put it mildly," Sakura remarked sarcastically. "Anyways, you should get going. A good night's sleep will do the job after a day's confusion. I've had Shikamaru prepare your living quarters – it's right next to your teammates'."

"But Boruto isn't here," Sarada interjected. "He's headed off to Konoha-"

"What?!" Sakura did not expect that; she had known that one of the three companions had separated from the other two, but the part about him travelling to Konoha eluded Konohamaru's explanation. "Sarada, get me Konohamaru right now!"

Hinata Hyuuga's grave struck him by surprise. Boruto decided to foray into the cemetery, to come to better grips with this new reality by learning who lived and who died.

Hanabi's lack of a caged-bird sign was an ominous clue, but Boruto refused to believe it until he witnessed the cold, grey stone in front of him. His heart plummeted with a thud.

In some ways, this grave feeling fomenting within was rather inexplicable. The Hinata Hyuuga in this world was not his mother, not the gentle woman who would make him bento for lunch, who would patiently wait for his father every night, who would selflessly offer to fix his clothes without hesitation, who would comfort him when he felt the loneliness from his father's absence. But in other ways, they were still connected. Seeing her gone from this world instilled an odd sense of forlornness.

This is a crueeler world, Boruto thought. And he would find a way out of it no matter what.

"Shannaro!" Sakura screamed as she punched Konohamaru into the wall. "What on earth were you thinking?! Doing nothing, nothing about Boruto at all when you knew he was Naruto's son!"

"I…" Konohamaru searched for words as he tried to peel himself away from the cracks created. "You know it's hopeless – there's no way we're heading into Konoha unnoticed."

"Do you know the grave consequences if the Hokage gets his hands on Boruto?" Sakura's voice quieted eerily. "Do you know what kind of man he is?"

"How could I not? I'll never forget the day our friends Ino and Sai perished in his flames," Konohamaru muttered bitterly. "But you must be rational. If we go know, if we give any impression that we're retrieving anyone from Konoha, we will only endanger Boruto."

"What else do we do – wait until he is captured?"

"He… seems to have a plan, a plan to steal a certain scroll and return to his own dimension with Sarada and Mitsuki," Konohamaru explained as he handed her Boruto's note.

"One, his handwriting is even worse than Naruto's," Sakura squired, though the slight glimmer in her eyes betrayed her feelings of nostalgia. "Two, we can't let him do that," she added resolutely. "The fate of our whole world may lay in their hands. You know we can't let our only source of hope slip from our fingers."

"They sure won't be happy to learn about that," Konohamaru said.

"Of course they won't," Sakura nodded. "They live in a world that is much better than ours. But we
have to get them to stay, or at least stay until this… this barbaric regime is destroyed."

"I'm assuming you want me to keep your words from them," Konohamaru suggested sheepishly. "Of course I do."

Sarada stared at the blank, dull and pitiless ceiling, wondering just what she had gotten herself into, that one reckless night when she decided it would be fun to break into Nanadaime's office with Boruto. Within moments, she was swept away into this foreign world where her existence was never conceived, where many lived under a regime of fear that enforced a strained peace, where all her acquaintances and friends treated her as a curious stranger, where her mother and father were mortal enemies.

Chocho's gaze was engraved within the deepest depths of her memory; Sarada could not erase the look of bewilderment. Nor could she forget the hushed atmosphere in the tavern when she uttered her last-name, one that is so infamous in this world.

Just who am I in this world? She shook her head in confusion. No, she is Sarada Uchiha, daughter of Sasuke Uchiha and Sakura Haruno, two war heroes, two of Nanadaime's closest companions. She is also a loyal shinobi of Konoha, her Konoha, not the Konoha in this world but hers. And one day she will become its Hokage.

But she is trapped in this world, with only Boruto and Mitsuki sharing her woes – no, now that Boruto is far away in Konoha, it's only Mitsuki.

She felt her heartstrings tug in desperation. A feeling of inexplicable loneliness overtook her and she buried her face into her pillow and wept.

Chocho, Inojin and Shikadai were situated around a table, each holding a stack of cards and all were engrossed within their game of poker.

Hence why Mitsuki's interruption seemed rather awkward.

"Hi everyone, I'm Mitsuki-" he tried to start a conversation.

"We know your name, we've heard it at least ten times today," Shikadai deadpanned.

"Ignore him – do you want to join us?" Chocho offered. "When we finish this round, of course."

"Sure!" Mitsuki replied. "Wait, I'll get Sarada first. I don't want to leave her alone in her room."

"Be quick!" Chocho called after him as he started to leave. "Damn!" She shouted as Inojin managed to pull a full house.

Sarada was mildly annoyed at Mitsuki's interruption, but did not make any indication of irritation.

"Want to play poker?" He asked. "Inojin, Chocho and Shikadai said we could join them."

"I… I think I need some time alone." When Sarada got up from her pillow, her eyes were red from all the crying.

"Look, I don't want to sound too pushy, but I think being alone at a time like this will only worsen your feelings of alienation. For tonight at least, lets try and enjoy ourselves with our alternate-
dimension friends," Mitsuki said as he tried to give her a hand up from her bed. "Then tomorrow, after some sleep, we can decide just exactly how the hell we’re getting back."

Sarada nodded as she dried her tear: "You're right; I'll come."

Mitsuki simply smiled in return.

It transpired to be a long night, one that featured Sarada winning five times in a row, Chocho losing all her snack allowances, Shikadai uttering "what a drag" after being out-ranked about a hundred times, Mitsuki giving pretentious, pseudo-intellectual analytics about the possibility of obtaining straight flushes and Inojin scaredly effective poker-face.

Two days later

Sarada dodged an attack by Chocho on the training grounds of Mount Myoboku.

She had agreed to spar with Chocho out of boredom both yesterday and today. Lacking the access to the higher echelons of Hi no Ishi (and with neither Konohamaru nor Sakura being around), she found that she simply did not have anything better to do. She had no access to the library to do research, there was no way of travelling to the outside world and no one was wiling to reveal the latest details to her.

Mitsuki was playing Shogi with Shikadai on the fields and Inojin was practicing his drawings.

This could have been any day in her world, Sarada contemplated with a sigh.

"I got you!" Chocho warned, coming from behind with an expanded fist.

"Not so fast!" She replied as she concentrated all her chakra on her palm.

The earth splintered as she threw her fists down with a punch, creating momentum that sent Chocho flying in the other direction.

Heaving and panting, Chocho got up. The harm was drastically mitigated by her body expansion jutsu and not long after, she was up and running again.

"You're good!" The girl complimented Sarada. "I think you could be stronger than auntie Sakura in no time!"

Sarada blushed: "Maybe not. I've still got a long way to go when it comes to chakra control and medical ninjutsu."

She gracefully sidestepped a punch from Chocho's enlarged fists, maneuvering her way behind the girl with the help of her Sharingan.

"Plus," she added. "I still need to master my fire jutsus. They're rather substandard."

"Please," Chocho responded. "I know humble brag when I see it. Show me."

Sarada stopped and extended a hand: "Call it a truce?"

"Fine by me," Chocho shrugged. "I'll take you to the lake over there and you can show me just how bad you are."

When they got to the lake, Sarada took a deep breath. Weaving a series of hand signs, she
congregated chakra in her lungs and bellowed: "Fire style: fireball jutsu!"

A moderately sized cloud of fire - searing, intense fire- glistened over the surface of the lake, causing whiskers of steam to peel off after its departure.

Not bad, Sarada concluded. But not good enough either.

"You're amazing!" Chocho gasped.

"Not really," Sarada gesticulated rather embarrassedly while smiling.

"Humble brag," Chocho rolled her eyes.

"Heh," Sarada grinned.

"You any good at shurikenjutsu?" Chocho looked as if she was about to change topic.

"I'm alright – it's a specialty of my clan after all –"

"Can you help me with it? My aim is pretty terrible and, well, given you are such a humble bragger 'alright' probably means off-the-charts brilliant."

"I-"

"Come!" Chocho dragged Sarada off before she could utter another sentence.

Twenty out of twenty.

Sarada smiled triumphantly as all her shurikens landed on target. Her accuracy had definitely improved since last time.

"Whoah! You're much better than me!" Chocho praised as she looked at her results rather self-deprecatingly.

They weren't bad, Sarada thought. Sure, a couple of them went awry and one flew way off and nearly knocked off Shikadai's shogi pieces, but other than that, everything else was on target.

"You're great at this too!" Sarada replied with a grin.

"Oh please," Chocho said as she sat down on the ground. "We both know the reality of my skills."

"Don't put yourself down like this," Sarada complained as she joined Chocho.

"No worries," Chocho waved her right hand. "I specialize in my clan's jutsus anyway. Dad said I've made great progress. He said mum would be proud if she was still around."

"Chocho…" Sarada was unsure of what to say. The news of Karui's death came so abruptly that she didn't know how to react; yet by now, Sarada noticed rather uneasily, the shock factor was beginning to erode when it came to news of people's deaths.

There was Naruto, aunt Ino, Sai, Hinata and now Karui.

"Don't worry, I've pretty much gotten over it," Chocho was a little taken aback by Sarada's stunned and confused complexion "You eventually learn how to cope – rebellion is serious business."

"I…"
"It's fine Sarada!" Chocho started patting her. "Or are you just a fresh fragile little soul?"

She then gave Sarada a hug.

"Now, why don't we go find the boys and take our minds off such serious stuff?" She changed topic and dragged Sarada off again.

"She's a kind person, you know," Konohamaru remarked while sipping his green tea. "Maybe she took it after you."

"Or maybe he just didn't turn out this way in her world," Sakura shrugged as she speculated, gazing at the laughing figures of Sarada and Chocho at a distance.
Boruto was at the back of the cue. It wasn't exactly his fault that he overslept in his cheap, sub-
standard youth hostel: he was exhausted from a terrible night's sleep from the previous night,
travelling all across Konoha, consuming huge amounts of government propaganda until midnight–
okay maybe it was his fault.

Still, he arrived at 10 am spot-on. Except others had arrived much earlier than that.

The cue was filled with anxious, eager faces, dying to get a job – even a small, insignificant job – at
the most important office on the continent. Many brought along with them their copies of *The Evils
of the Gokage* or *The Lies They've Told Us* and were skimming through the pages for last-minute
revision.

Running government-sanctioned facts through his head, Boruto shifted his feet nervously. He had to
get the job if he were to stand a chance of getting near that forbidden scroll. It was a matter going
home or staying in this godforsaken world.

Nothing else mattered.

"Hey, what's a squirt like you doing here?" came a rude call from a boy with bright red hair.

"Same reason why a squirt like you spends his mornings queuing for meager job auditions," Boruto
responded coolly, his voice tinged with gentle sarcasm.

"My parents wanted me near the Hokage's office to curry favours with the regime," the boy declared
proudly.

"I'm sure a small errand boy will do them much good in obtaining the favours of our great leader,"
Boruto deadpanned. He was getting good with the propaganda regurgitation. "They'd be so proud
of yo-"

He dodged a punch. "Really – there's no need for all this violence man! I was just kidding."

"Annoy me one more time and I'll rip your head off," the boy threatened murderously.

"You know, people usually threaten more… unconventional body parts," Boruto observed with
amusement.

"Your balls – happy now?" The murderous glare intensified.

Boruto gulped: "Warning accepted."

"Good."

"Actually, I was thinking, since we're both at the back of the cue and it's going to take at least an
hour for them to get to us for the interviews, do you want to join me for a game of… chopsticks?"
Boruto offered half-jokingly.

"What?" The boy was baffled. "Did you know forget how I just threatened to rip your balls off?"

"No, but as a matter-of-fact, I'm willing to look past that."

"God, what the hell is wrong with you?" The boy groaned before holding out his two index fingers.
Mitsuki shook his head as he lost another game. Shikadai was good at this, scarily good.

"I'm done!" He threw his arms in the air in mock-surrender.

"What a drag," Shikadai drawled.

"You're good," Mitsuki simply said. "And I'm bored from all the Shogi."

"Such a drag, very well," shrugged Shikadai.

That was when Chocho and Sarada approached them.

"I think we should have a collective heart to heart!" Chocho declared. "We should aim to learn more about each other! Come one guys, let's sit around this table!"

"I can't object to that," Mitsuki remarked politely.

"And, I win again!" The boy declared triumphantly as the ranks in front of them thinned again. "You really suck at this."

"I was being magnanimous, I let you win out of concern for your frail ego," Boruto refused to give him grounds for satisfaction.

"Right, it's my turn for the interview!"

"I hope you fail!" Boruto called gleefully after him.

"So who are your parents?" Chocho gazed at Mitsuki with her eyes wide open. Everyone else had finished recounting his or her personal backgrounds.

In this world, Chocho is still the child of Choji and Karui, although her mother perished when she was six. Shikadai is still the son of Shikamaru and Temari, yet they saw him rather infrequently, as they were both prominent members of Hi no Ishi and dedicated the vast majority of their time to the cause of the resistance. Inojin was orphaned three years ago and has since latched himself onto the support of his friends Chocho and Shikadai, as well as that of his unit leader Konohamaru Sarutobi.

Sarada's background brought a lot of personal uproar amongst the three, and this resulted in Mitsuki giving them a long, detailed account of how things turned out differently in their world. The sheer immensity of the difference meant every sentence drew a disproportionate amount of shock, from the fact that Naruto Uzumaki was Hokage, to the lack of a secret police, from the existence of video game arcades (this took up a long time of the explanation), to the fact that Icha Icha Paradise had reached it's sixtyth installment.

Inojin was especially moved when he heard that his parents were still alive there, running a flower shop and witnessing him grow by the day. He chuckled as Mitsuki retold a story of his father scolding his avant-garde and impressionistic drawings ("He hasn't seen my worst yet!" He laughed).

Chocho wanted to hear more about her mother. What her mother thought of her, how her mother was doing, what her mother liked to say and do.

Shikadai heard one snippet about the activities and interactions of his parents and concluded that things were not so different at all between them, only that there, they were both able to spend more time as a family with him. It was one of the few moments Mitsuki saw his lazy, lackadaisical
demeanour slip and reveal a vulnerable child yearning for some simple family time.

When it came to his turn to answer, however, Mitsuki had to position himself and prepare for an onslaught of awkward questions: "Orochimaru."

"The hell?!" Chocho was the first one to yell. "Well – who's the mother then?!"

"Um… Chocho," Sarada tried to explain with discomfort. "Orochimaru is both the mother… and the father. It's complicated."

"You mean he could gender-bend?" She asked.

"Not really," Sarada shrugged. "Okay, honestly, I don't know. I really don't know any of your parent's anatomical details Mitsuki."

"Neither do I," he concurred.

"What?!" Chocho was still baffled.

"Well," Shikadai joined in. "In this world, he's, well, a prisoner in Konoha. Or at least that's what I could gather from dad's conversations with mum."

"Still kind of true in my world," remarked Mitsuki. "He's not allowed to leave any of his experimental bases. But he could get permission to see me."

"I see," Shikadai continued. "Well, according to dad's speculations, he simply knew too much to be exposed to the public. He's sort of like the Hokage's prisoner but a prisoner who does useful things. Not sure what that means exactly, but I have my guesses."

"Right," Mitsuki replied. He didn't like where this was going.

"Dad reckons he won't last for long though," Shikadai finished off his explanation. "At least according to our spies there, the Hokage is planning on getting rid of him not-so-soon."

The room was eerily empty save for one woman at a desk at the very centre – that and her quiet, somber assistant.

Boruto treaded on the floor nervously, minimizing the noise upon impact. His time had come.

"Please to meet you, Ayame," Boruto said as he smiled curtly and glanced at her nametag for confirmation. "I'm Boruto."

"And? Your last name?" She inquired.

"I never had one," he lied. He sure did not want rumours flying around that another Uzumaki was still around, even though he did remember the existence of a Karin Uzumaki in his world, who, in this world, could very well be under Sasuke's administration.

"An orphan then?" Ayame smiled sympathetically. "How curious. Sorry, may I ask, why exactly do you want this job?"

Boruto felt his insides collapsing. He knew this lie was only the start of many lies and that things will get more and more difficult, more and more convoluted from now on. Hh collected his disorientated mind together and sharpened his planned platitudes. I have to nail this.
"I… I was raised by an old couple in a small town near the outskirts of Kumogakure," Boruto began carefully – it made sense to go for Kumogakure; blonds were common there. "Ever since I was very young, they have instilled in me the importance of-

"You just wanted to get a job at Konoha don't you?" Ayame smirked cheekily. "Oh come on. Provincial kid goes to the capital in search for better prospects. I've heard it a million times. Don't feel the need to make up some half-baked, sensationalistic excuse. "

"You're partially correct I'm afraid!" Boruto chuckled, deciding to go along with her. "I'm pretty fast for someone my age. You know, that's why I think I'd make a decent errand boy. It won't take that long for me to familiarize myself with the streets here. I've been doing a lot of prior exploration here and there. I have a knack for direction."

He beamed enthusiastically at her. She responded with an amused nod.

"It's great that you're someone who is not all stuffy and stuck-up," Boruto added. "I'm thrilled to find someone who speaks human."

"Oh?" She was a little taken aback by his frankness. "I can't lie – I feel the same. A lot of these other interviewees, you should have seen the sycophantic way they tried to treat me and my poor assistant!"

"You know what most people did when I asked them why they really wanted this job?" Ayame's eyes twitched. "They continued with planned sound bites about their desire to serve the revolution – blah blah bah. Then they started implying how rich their parents were and how they'd take us to dinner to repay us. Ridiculous."

"Well, you want someone fun and non-sycophantic like me at the office then!" Boruto puffed confidently. "I'm the one and only Boruto!"

"Ayame," the assistant whispered, barely audible, barely looking up. "I feel I should remind you that you are obligated to conduct this interview in a professional manner, assessing his credentials first and foremost."

He resumed writing. Ayame gulped.

"Yeah Boruto, I'm afraid you'll have to pass the knowledge quiz first. Here," she said as she handed him a double-sided worksheet. "It's got questions regarding the whereabouts of important places here, the structure of the government and all that. It shouldn't take long – it's all one-worded or one-sentence answers. Your time starts now."

Boruto stared at the paper and his heart fell with a stud.

The location of the library – that should be an easy one, he mused internally as he picked up his pen and started writing.

"You know an awful lot for someone who's never lived in Konoha," she remarked as she observed how he blitzed through questions regarding important locations and local customs.

"I told you – I'm a fast learner," he replied as he continued to write. He was halfway done; he was onto the hard part, the governmental functions and the political… propaganda (for lack of a better word.) He made up some bullshit about the evils of the ideology of the Gokage prior to the revolution, finding it amusing to concoct short, snappy platitudes on how they exploited their jinchuriki and devalued human life and all that. He blanked out on the key organs of government though, not wishing to write down anything that did not belong to this world.
"That's a useful asset around here," Ayame agreed. "You're done right? I'll take it."

She snatched the paper from his hands.

"Hey!" Boruto protested.

"You've got to be quicker if you're working for the Hokage's office. We don't tolerate slackers," she explained matter-of-factly.

"But-

"Don't worry," she added reassuringly. "Others have done far worse."

"Right," Boruto put a smile on his face again. "Anything else you want from me?"

She took one uneasy glance at her assistant, who persisted with his stream of writing, unflinching, unstopping, never looking up.

"I'd like to know more about you," Ayame finally said. "Your hobbies, your past, your dreams. Anything you feel comfortable with saying."

"As I said before, I'm Boruto, I grew up near Kumogakure, I'm a bit of a joker at times but I can be professional and hardworking if I try. I actually met your uncle on my way here!" Boruto suddenly remembered.

"Uncle Ichirou?" Ayame asked amiably.

"Yes! He told me to send his greetings," Boruto nodded enthusiastically. "He's here for business."

"Yes, we met up yesterday. He did tell me there was this very nice boy he took along," Ayame recalled. "But that means you've only been here for a day – am I correct?" She added, her voice betraying a hint of suspicion.


"Ramen is disgusting, isn't it?" The assistant looked up and Boruto felt a pair eyes press uncomfortably into his, as penetrating as a kunai. They eviscerated him from the inside and Boruto felt his internals bleeding, bleeding, bleeding of secrets and of the unsaid.

His breath began to rise sharply, his heartbeat grew erratic and his pupils dilated out of some irrational fear.

No, he told himself. I've got to keep my cool.

He pulled himself together and smiled: "Absolutely terrible." Though it was a tenuous fixture, akin to how a house was erected with its foundations still shaky. He knew he could fall apart any moment.

"Well, Boruto," he got up from his chair with a letter in his hands, his face fixed in an expressionless gloom. "Congratulations, you're hired."

His voice was cold, curt and it petrified Boruto in an incomprehensible manner. His eyes were black as coal; they reminded Boruto of a night without stars. They were strangely familiar, but they were also chilly and alien.
"You start tomorrow – don't be late. Report directly to my office and then… to me." His voice was soft and sharpened like a needle.

Boruto blinked and re-focused his vision on the man in front of him.

"I like to personally inspect all potential workers," the man explained, as his features evolved into one Boruto would instantly recognize. His eyes inspected Boruto curiously, like the way a predator examines its prey.

"Good luck," he whispered.

The genjutsu was lifted. It all makes sense now.

That was when Boruto realised he just had his first meeting with Sasuke Uchiha.
Boruto looked at himself in the mirror, combing his hair and putting on his black jacket.

This is my first day, he mentally conversed with himself. I've got to keep everything low and not attract any suspicions.

He shook his head. An ominous voice whispered in his head that Sasuke already knew, or at least suspected there was something odd about his origins. In fact, he was sure that his dubious background was one reason why he was picked. Hopefully, though, it wasn't the only reason.

I'll prove them wrong then, he declared internally. I'll be so normal, so boring that they'll have nothing on me! But would it work?

There was no point in ruminating on such meaningless things. He had a task to complete.

He strode out of the door with a strong sense or purpose and … stole one glance at his Konoha headband situated on his bedside table.

Sakura summoned her to the main office again. Sarada wondered what was the reason this time.

"How are you?" The woman asked with friendly warmth.

"I've been good," Sarada nodded. "How are things going for you?" She asked in return.

Sakura gave a huge sigh: "Two of our spies in Kirigakure have been caught. They took their own lies before they could endanger anyone. I…” She couldn't finish her sentence.

Sarada decided to give her an embrace: "It's okay, I know you do your best. From what I've heard, you always have."

"Oh? What do your new friends say about me?" The woman questioned with mock curiosity. "That I'm a middle-aged woman married to a lost cause? That I once possessed enough stupidity to fall in love with a monster?"

"No!" Sarada shook her head vigorously. "Nothing of that sort! You mustn't be so hard on yourself."

It was Sakura's turn to disagree: "You're too kind, Sarada. And you must also be wondering why on earth I summoned you."

"I-"

"I need your help with something," Sakura said bluntly. "This letter – it needs the sharingan to help decipher it."

"I see."

Welcome, Boruto!" Ayame greeted him as he entered the lower office. "Here's your tag – don't lose it, you'll need it to travel between the Hokage tower and other adjacent offices."

It looked like some tracking device, or so Boruto suspected as he took his nametag from her.
"Hey I met this kid!" The man who he bumped into earlier when he first arrived at Konoha remarked while approaching Ayame.

"Takashi, meet Boruto," she tried introducing them formally. "Boruto, this is Takashi. He's a jonin and he occasionally pops by for mission reports."

"Pleased to meet you," Boruto smiled curtly. He needed to make good impressions.

"I'm surprised you got it kid!" Takashi laughed. "But good job! You must have managed to satisfy the Hokage – not an easy task."

"Yeah it was a little scary," Boruto admitted.

"A little?! Kid, you can be honest with me…" Takashi trickled off sheepishly.

"Well, it was terrifying-"

"That's more like it! But don't worry," Takashi tried for a comforting voice. "You'll be fine so long as you're not some secret rebel spy. The last one did not end well."

"I remember you telling me about this," Boruto remarked.

"I did! Don't worry; we didn't actually pluck out his entrails. The Hokage merely pulled out his soul," Takashi's voice deliberately quieted.

"Oh…"

"Just kidding!"

"Takashi," Ayame interrupted them. "Boruto needs to pay a personal visit to the Hokage's office."

"Right! Good luck and don't die," Takashi winked. "Just so you know, I'm here for help!"

"Takashi," Ayame shook her head as Boruto was leaving the lower office, "someday you're … provocative rhetoric is going to get you into trouble."

"Come on Ayame! Folks like you need to learn to take jokes!"

The Hokage's personal office was at the top of the tower; it was the same office his dad held in another world.

Boruto traced the familiar stairs and the familiar walls. As expected, none of the portraits of the former Hokages remained. Chuunin assistants rushed up and down the stairs frantically, unwilling to waste a single minute for respite.

Taking a deep breath, Boruto gave the door a gentle knock.

"Come in," answered a soft voice from within, a voice Boruto knew only too well. Except this one had its edges sharpened.

"Good morning, Hokage-sama," Boruto greeted Sasuke with a bow.

"Good to see that you're on time," the man cooed. "I must confess, I did not have high expectations."

This Sasuke had similarities with his mentor. They both had jet-black hair, dark eyes and skin like
ivory. They were both, objectively speaking, men young girls would squeal about in delight – in terms of physical features.

The difference starts here: this Sasuke had a gloomy air about him. It was as if his entire existence had distorted, twisted the atmosphere of the room to some menacing will. There was a bleakness and coldness about his eyes, like an infinitesimal abyss. He was donned in cold, wintry white Hokage robes. The Sasuke Boruto knew had been a hard man with hard features, but this one had his expressions honed by murkier vicissitudes and murkier deeds. If there was any trace of regret, Boruto couldn't sense it.

"Hokage-sama, I shatter expectations," Boruto pretended to laugh, masking his nervous interior.

"Funny, you're excessive confidence reminds me of someone," Sasuke stared intently at Boruto.

"Someone awesome, right?" Boruto grinned wildly, not wanting to betray any hint of suspicion.

"Someone stupid," was Sasuke's blunt reply.

"Gee, thanks," Boruto tried to give a crestfallen look.

Sasuke's amused chuckle surprised him.

"Very funny sir, very funny," Boruto went for a groan.

"Hn. Normally, such insolent behaviour would earn you disciplinary measures," Sasuke's expressions hardened again, his eyes peering into Boruto's like an autopsy. "But I suspect you haven't been around long enough to realise the … expected customs."

"I'm always willing to learn Hokage-sama," Boruto defended himself carefully.

"Interesting."

"I am interesting," Boruto agreed sheepishly.

"You must find yourself and your jokes so, so funny," Sasuke shook his head and handed Boruto an envelope. "Your first task will be to deliver this to the Hyuuga compound, or more specifically, to Hanabi Hyuuga. You have 30 minutes. Do not look into the envelope – I will find out if you do."

Boruto gulped at the last threat: "Got it. I'll be done 30 minutes spot-on!"

"Thank you Sarada," said Sakura gratefully.

It was a message to the Hokage from Kumogakure, something intercepted by Hi no Ishi rebels. It said roughly this: There is no knowledge or records of a child called Boruto. Neither within Kumogakure, nor in any of its surrounding villages.

Sarada's heart fell: "Something happened to Boruto."

"What's the matter?" Sakura was concerned.

"The message. It said something about there being no records of 'a child called Boruto.' Sarada uttered anxiously. "He – they must have caught him!"

"What?! Stay here Sarada, I'll get Kakashi and Shikamaru," Sakura ordered as she left the room.
"And this," Boruto bowed as he handed the letter to Hanabi Hyuuga, "is a letter from the Hokage."

He had to suppress the internal urge to call her aunt. It worked well enough.

"I see," the woman nodded as she opened the parchment.

"My pleasure," Boruto said deferentially.

He was sweating madly, having frantically rushed his way towards the Hyuuga compound. No stops were taken.

"You may go now," Hanabi answered him curtly.

Taking a brief moment to re-orientate himself and a deep breath to soothe the aching in his legs, Boruto sped back to the Hokage tower.

"So you're saying Boruto has caught the attention of the Hokage?" hypothesised Shikamaru. "And his suspicions? This does not bode well."

"What could he have done?" Sarada was worried. "What if he's captured?!"

"We don't have enough information about this," Sakura sighed. "Our last spy at the Hokage office was uprooted a while ago."

"Sarada," Kakashi turned his attention to her. "Can you please tell us why do you think he left for Konoha?"

"I mean, I've shown you guys the note he sent already," Sarada bit her lip as she continued. "He's after a forbidden scroll, which we have concluded should be in the Hokage's office. My guess is…"

She tried to pull herself together and be rational. "He would try to get as near there as possible. I don't know."

"There are three possibilities this could turn out," Shikamaru speculated. "One: Boruto illegally walks into the Hokage office and tries to steal it and gets captured."

"-He did say that was a good idea," Sarada muttered under her breath.

"-Or Boruto has found a way to enter the Hokage office legally, either by government authorization or by miraculously finding a job there and this could play out in two scenarios. Two: he was caught trying to get near the scroll. Three: he hasn't approached the scroll yet but is raising suspicions," Shikamaru finished. "Which one do you think it is, Sarada? You know him best out of here."

"Boruto's stupid, but not that stupid," Sarada admitted. "It's probably the latter two."

"Not bad," remarked Sasuke upon Boruto's return. "31 minutes – that's one minute late." The last word was punctured with a heavy thud, which mirrored Boruto's interiors.

"I'm sorry," he muttered with his head down.

"Don't be late next time," Sasuke simply said.

"I won't."

"You know," Sasuke remarked, his voice laced with morbid curiosity. "Thirty minutes to the
Hyuuga compound is no easy feat for a non-shinobi."

Boruto gulped. He chose to stay silent on this matter.

"Or are you familiar with chakra?" His eyes narrowed.

Boruto still did not speak.

"Go downstairs," Sasuke ordered. "My lower office workers may need you. Come back here late in the afternoon, just before you leave."

"Your first job was to deliver something for the Hokage?" Takashi sympathised in mock-horror. "Damn! I wanted yours to be making coffee for me!"

"I'll do that," Boruto nodded, as he walked over to the coffee machine.

Takashi followed him, remarking, "Don't get too scared okay? We don't bite. Well, the Hokage might. And Ayame might. And some other glum-looking faces might. But I don't."

"Here's your coffee," Boruto replied as he handed over the newly made espresso. "I get it, you think you're cool."

"I am," Takashi rolled his eyes indignantly.

"Okay…?"

"Tell you what kid," Takashi said as he sipped his espresso. "I'll take you out to dinner tonight. Ayame might join, depending on whether she agrees when I ask her later…"

His eyes momentarily drifted to Ayame, who was working in the other corner, her gaze fixed to her desk.

"I'm not crashing your date!" Boruto protested. That and he did not want any undue scrutiny about his background, especially given that dinners provide a platform for further private conversations.

"Shhhhh… It's not a date! Yet."

Boruto took one glance at Takashi and then another fleeting one at Ayame in the other corner. He needed to make friends and earn favours: "I'll help."

They were assigned to a brief scouting mission, Mitsuki, Sarada and Shikadai were told by Konohamaru.

They were to travel to Konoha to garner information on the whereabouts of Boruto Uzumaki.

They were to leave in next morning and arrive by nightfall on the same day.

"You already know how to get back to us," Konohamaru nodded sternly. "You know where Sayuri's bookstore is."

"Yes we do," all three of them nodded.

"And Shikadai," Konohamaru addressed him specifically. "You know, and you can tell the others, what to do when you're captured. The security and secrecy of this place must never be
A kunai flew at his face the moment Boruto stepped into Sasuke's office. He deflected effortlessly it with his own shuriken, giving into his gag reflexes.

Crap.

"So you are a shinobi," Sasuke remarked with his brows furrowed.

"What-

"There's no need in pretending, Boruto. Civilians don't go around carrying shurikens, much less know how to deflect kunais," Sasuke deadpanned.

"I was taught this as a child! To protect me, you know?" Boruto desperately searched for a plausible explanation.

"Really? Then care to tell me why you're using techniques specific to the Uchiha clan?" The man inquired, barely hiding his snarky undertones.

Crap, Boruto thought. He did use a technique that uncle Sasuke taught him in his own world. How could he be so stupid?

"Hey! Uchihas aren't the only people who know how to throw shuriken-"

"What you just did, kid, was use a technique that my mother taught me when I was young," Sasuke stared into Boruto inquisitively. "She and the rest of my family perished." For a moment, Boruto sensed a glimmer of emotion in his voice. "And... I'm sure you know why."

"I don't know – it could have been passed on to a non-member. You know how things are!" Boruto waved his arms frantically.

"All the way to Kumogakure?" Sasuke raised his brows in scepticism.

"Maybe?"

"Very well, Boruto," Sasuke sighed, not sounding convinced at all. "You may go."

"Alright!" Boruto beamed, his face slipping into a jovial mask once more.

"Remember," Sasuke warned. "I'll be watching."

"Man, kid, you're a saviour! Do you know how many times I've tried to get Ayame to go on a date with me?" Takashi was ecstatic as they arrived at the BBQ restaurant.

Boruto had helped him deliver a bunch of short, sweet messages to Ayame. Then he had not-so-conspicuously brought them together – he had files to deliver to them anyway from their boss in the lower office – and not-so-ceremoniously left the scene after implying Takashi had strange feelings for her.

"You just needed to be a little more explicit!" Boruto laughed.

"Okay, I owe you a favour. A big favour."
"My pleasure."

"What are you boys talking about?" Ayame asked cheerfully as she joined them.

"We were… talking about what a wonderful woman you are," Takashi winked.

Ayame rolled her eyes: "Come on, let's order food! I'm starving!"

The more the dinner progressed, the more awkward things got for Boruto. Sure, the barbequed beef was delicious and he was stuffed within minutes, but the longer the dinner, the more intimate Ayame and Takashi got and – thus – the more Boruto experienced the painlessness of third wheeling.

It started off with them holding hands beneath the table. Then they started throwing saccharine complements at each other like –

"- your eyes are beautiful!"

Yeah, that. Not to mention they began to play footsies under the table. It was weird.

"Sorry, Boruto! I meant to kick Takashi!"

Great, Boruto internally groaned.

Then, god forbid, they were sharing the same piece of meat: Ayame's mouth was at one end and Takashi's was at the other. Their mouths got closer and closer as they chewed more and more.

Boruto decided he'd had enough.

"Alright, it was nice meeting you two!" He stood up and shook both their hands. "But I've got to go – I still need to buy some pyjamas and toothpaste and all that."

Because he was smart enough to forget the day before.

"All the money's on me!" Takashi bellowed cheerfully. He was in seventh heaven, having just snatched a kiss from Ayame.

"Thanks, I'll find a way of paying you back!" Boruto called after as he left.

"Don't worry, you've already done that!"

"Are you sure you've made the right decision?" Shikamaru asked, his voice betraying a hint of concern. His son was going on a dangerous mission near Konoha after all, though Shikadai has yet to earn himself a place in the bingo book so his automatic presence would not imperil him.

"This is the only way," Sakura said. "Try to understand, out of all the kids, Shikadai is the most perceptive and intelligent, the one most suited to a scouting and infiltration mission."

Shikamaru nodded grimly.

"Still," Sakura's brows furrowed as she spoke. "Just in case, I should probably prepare a squad. Just in case the two and Boruto do try to leave this world. You know what to do, Shikamaru."

"Understood."
Boruto closed the door after an exhausting day, placing his recently purchased pyjamas and toothpaste on the floor.

His headband was still on his bedside table. He jumped onto his bed and held it in his hands. I wonder when will be the next time I'd be able to wear it, he pondered to himself. He wasn't really any closer to actually getting the forbidden scroll that would transport him, Sarada and Mitsuki back to their own world, but he had made some sort of progress.

But the Hokage is suspicious, an insidious voice whispered in his head. I'll be watching. These words burned themselves into his mind.

Boruto shook his head vigorously, hoping to cast off these distractions.

"Looks like I'll need a hot shower to refresh myself!" He remarked as he took off his clothes, stepped into the bathroom and turned on the showerhead.

This world is strange, he thought to himself as he felt the warm water coursing through his skin. Yet, he wondered as he brought Ayame and Takashi to his mind, it is also strangely normal.

Boruto wondered what they could be doing now and mentally shuddered.

People still lived, still had fun, still ate delicious barbecue, still loved, still went along with their daily lives. There was peace, albeit on built on dubious terms. There was safety and security, albeit not for those who questioned the Hokage. Sure, it was also a totalitarian dictatorship with a secret police – okay, maybe not so normal. But ordinary folks like the ones at the tavern, like Ichirou, like the sellers at the fish market and, heck, even ones like Takashi and Ayame – barring a few occasional paranoid outburst from the latter - lived as if nothing was wrong. In fact, from the perspective of these people, the only things that are wrong are the rebels in Hi no Ishi or the dissidents who tried to seek things, ideals that were larger than their own lives.

But something is wrong at the heart of it, Boruto thought with a slight inkling of suspicion budding within. Beneath this tranquil surface lies a rotten culture of fear, willful ignorance and slavish obsequiousness amongst those who try to curry favour with the regime. Yet if you close your eye to it, if you pretend that everything's well and everyone's happy, it almost makes things seem easier.

He sighed as he briefly put all of his troubled thoughts aside, closed his eyes and let the comforting hot water wash through his face.

Sarada and Mitsuki were alone and facing the night sky of Mount Myoboku.

"Mitsuki," she ventured for conversation. "Do you think Boruto will be fine?"

Noticing her consternation, which was bordering on a breakdown, Mitsuki said in a comforting voice, "Boruto is a smart and resilient guy. Remember, he took down a deity like Momoshiki. He'll survive this."

"You and I both know he only stood a chance because he had Nanadaime and my dad with him," Sarada rebutted, not feeling any more assured. "What if he does something dumb?"
Her insides squirmed and contorted. An uneasy precognition was swirling in her stomach.

"Sarada," Mitsuki looked at her, mustering all the calm he still had. "We have to believe things will be fine. Even if something wrong did happen, we'll save him together because that's what we do."

She nodded: "And we never leave each other behind."

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Hot steam curled off his body as Boruto wrapped himself with a towel and stepped out of the bathroom. He was feeling especially comfortable after the infinitely soothing experience of being basked in hot water.

"Care to tell me why you are in possession of my old headband?" An icy voice reverberated from the other corner of the room.

Boruto jumped in surprise – and slipped and fell on the mildly wet floor.

Sasuke was not amused. His arms were crossed and his gaze did not flinch from Boruto.

"Hi Hokage-sama," he chuckled nervously as he got up. "Uh, how did you find this place and, more importantly, why are you in my room?"

"I can sense your chakra here – it's an ability of the Rinnegan. Why I am here is not something I need to disclose to you," Sasuke answered blandly as he held up his old headband and surveyed it with emotions Boruto could not decipher.

"Also," Bolt was starting to sound indignant. "How on earth are you so sure that is your old headband?"

There was a brief moment of silence.

"I could have recognised that anywhere, anytime," Sasuke finally answered. "How could I have forgotten it?"

Boruto wasn't sure whether his voice softened or not.

"What if I got it from a second-hand market in Kum-"

"The scratch here," Sasuke interrupted him, pointing to the long mark over the symbol of Konoha with his deft fingers, "It was from … the Valley of the End."

Boruto could almost detect a vague hint of nostalgia. "Oh," was all he could muster in response.

"Not defending yourself anymore?" Sasuke's eyes narrowed again and re-focused themselves on Boruto.

Boruto gulped.

"You are a terrible liar," Sasuke snorted. "Though I've met worse."

"You don't think I'm some sort of spy right," Boruto asked anxiously.

"Like someone with your lying skills would be selected for an infiltration mission," Sasuke shook his head. "No. Besides, you're not on the data book detailing the profiles of rebel children. But I do have ideas and suspicions."
Boruto was feeling very uncomfortable. He felt he was being interrogated like a prisoner. He also felt cold; he was still wrapped in his towel and the room was wrapped in a chilly air.

"Sorry, Hokage-sama," he blurted out. "I really want to change into my pyjamas."

Much to his surprise (and slight horror), Sasuke laughed: "Hn. Go ahead. You're a ridiculous loser, I hope you know that."

"Okay, mind if I pop into the bathroom?" Boruto frowned, being mildly irritated.

He slipped into the bathroom with his clothes and shut the door.

Loser, Sasuke, this Sasuke had called him that. It was the one word the Sasuke in his world used to tease his dad.

Boruto shook off the thought and put on his clothes and walked out.

"Now," Sasuke glared at Boruto, his expressions grave and serious again, "Just who are you?"

"Boruto."

"And?" Sasuke pressed on. "Ayame may not have asked earlier, but I'd like to know your full name. And don't lie to me again – I'll know."

"I don't have anything to say," Boruto said vociferously and defensively.

"I'm warning you one last time: tell me who you are or I'll force it out of you with a genjutsu," Sasuke threatened as every syllable came with a heavy thud in Boruto's heart.

"I…" Boruto contemplated the options he had. If he really let Sasuke look into his memories with the Sharingan, he'd really spill everything, absolutely everything. There'd be nothing left to hide. He'd be endangering his friends too, friends who he swore to protect. He couldn't do that. No. Anything else was preferable, even telling the man himself.

"Go on," Sasuke encouraged.

"This may sound crazy," Boruto warned.

"Nothing is crazy if you're a shinobi."

"Okay, if that's what you think. I'm… I'm Boruto Uzumaki. And I'm not from this world," he explained.

Sasuke only nodded in silence, as if his hypothesis had been confirmed.

"I'm from another world and, there, I peered into a forbidden scroll in the Hokage's office. Something weird happened and I was transported here," Boruto continued. "And I'm trying to find my way back. My family would be worried sick. I – I was being completely reckless."

"I thought so," Sasuke whispered.

"What do you mean?" It was Boruto's turn to ask questions.

"The resemblance is uncanny," Sasuke answered, with a hint of pain in his voice. "You and Naruto."
"You're also not surprised about me coming from an alternate dimension?"

"No. I sensed a disturbance, a strange warping of chakra, four days ago. I sensed three foreign chakras, one of which was yours," the man explained, his face not betraying any sign of emotion.

Crap, he knows about the other two, Boruto mentally swore and kicked himself.

"Okay, so, what more do you want to know?" Boruto hoped Sasuke would say nothing.

"What do you want?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean."

"I… I want to find my way back. Okay – it was me. I screwed up. I decided it would be fun to sneak into da- the Hokage's office and I took my friends with me. We opened a forbidden scrolls and BAM we're here. It's my fault they're stuck here too," Boruto didn't care if he was spilling all his emotions. He had already opened the floodgates. "I was arrogant, I was reckless, I was being stupid. I know that. But not I know it's my responsibility to make things right – that's how things are done in my world. I- I- I need to find a way back for all three of us."

"And?" Sasuke wanted something more.

"I need that scroll," Boruto finished.

"Were you planning on stealing it?" Sasuke raised his eyebrows. "You do realise that I would never let anyone near where I put it?"

"Okay, but from my perspective, that was the most realistic option," Boruto admitted whilst internally lambasting himself for revealing so much. He knew he'd come to regret it.

"I see," Sasuke frowned. "Come to my office tomorrow. I will give you that scroll. I think I know just exactly which one you're talking about."

"What?!" Boruto was flabbergasted.

It wasn't supposed to be this easy. More than that, this was this world's most notorious tyrant offering to help a young boy, the son of his once-nemesis and rival.

"You seem surprised," Sasuke noted snidely.

"I… I just didn't expect you to help," Boruto said.

"There's no reason not to," Sasuke explained. "Keeping you in this world will only damage the rightful balance of things. You belong in your own world."

"But –"

"Why am I helping you? I believe I just explained myself."

"You're –"

"I don't harm people for the sake of harming them, I hope you realise that."

"Then why-"
"Everyone else that I've killed – there's a good reason for each one of them," Sasuke elaborated without a hint of remorse.

It was unsettling. It froze Boruto's insides.

"But-

"I've said enough. I'll leave," Sasuke punctured his words bluntly. "Remember: come to my office. I'll be waiting for you."

"Okay – uh thanks!" Boruto was more confused than ever as Sasuke made his way towards the door.

"Boruto, can I ask you one more question?" The man asked as he was about to close the door.

"… Yes?"

"Is Naruto the Hokage in your world?" The man's voice was trembling slightly; it was also scarcely audible.

"Yes."

The door shut gently. Sasuke did not bother asking anything else about the other world.

Boruto sighed, switched off the lights and jumped onto his bed, snuggling in his blanket.

Sarada tossed and turned in her bed, her thoughts transfixed on the prospect of Boruto being captured.

Silly Boruto, going off on his own like that – boys like him are just so stupid! Sarada internally cursed.

Her chances of sleep did not seem to be getting any better.

That's it, she thought. I'm getting out of my room.

She got off her bed and headed towards the common room.

It felt like a long, sleepless night.

Boruto should be happy – indeed, he was closer to going home than ever.

Yet something felt wrong about just getting the scroll and leaving. What about all the wrongs in this world? What about all the problems that need fixing?

No, he thought to himself. Whatever happens here has nothing to do with me. My job is to get the hell out and take my friends with me, go back to my world, my village and my family. Then, afterwards, apologise like crazy to my poor mother.

Sometimes, he reasoned with himself, you can't and you shouldn't fix everything.

Heck, he tried to persuade himself. This world isn't even real. It's merely an alternate dimension where the past diverged, a divergence that didn't happen in his world, the real world.
No, Boruto won't let anything get in his way. He will get the scroll and bring himself and his friends back to their own world.

With that thought, Boruto felt a greater sense of tranquility on the inside.

His eyelids came crashing down and, soon, sleep came.

Sakura was in the common room too, alone and with a book.

"Mama – sorry – Sakura?" Sarada approached her.

"Just call me mama," the woman smiled while closing her novel. "It makes me feel like I've actually had a child."

"I can't sleep," Sarada confessed. "Thoughts about Boruto kept swirling through my head. I'm very worried about him."

Sakura nodded thoughtfully.

"I… he's reckless and stupid but he's my best friend," she felt a rush of heat flowing through her cheeks. "I don't think I can bear it if something wrong happened to him."

"Sarada…" Sakura pulled the girl towards her in a warm embrace.

"It's just. The thought of him being harmed makes me hurt," Sarada's voice became muffled as she started tearing up.

"Sarada… don't worry. I know exactly how you feel," Sakura replied, continuing and tightening the hug.

"Ouch, mama. Too tight," Sarada complained.

Sakura chuckled.

"You know, the you in my world would always do this: hugging me too hard, I mean," Sarada laughed slightly through her tears.

"I'm glad to know things aren't so different here when it comes to that," Sakura said as she smiled.

"Boruto is just like his dad sometimes," Sarada started talking about Boruto again. "Except his eyes are bluer and he's louder and very cocky."

"I wish I could meet him – this boy who you don't seem to be able to get off you mind," Sakura remarked, her voice cheekily implying something else.

"I don't really like him that way mama!" Sarada pouted. "We're just very good friends."

"Sure," Sakura mused. "That's what we all say. How does he act towards you?" She added with a hint of curiosity.

"Well, he's usually nice. Sometimes, though, he clearly tries to annoy me," Sarada scowled. "He would say things he didn't mean just to get an irritated reaction from me. Boys are weird."

"Shows he likes you," Sakura winked in response. "Listen Sarada, I want to tell you something. Choose someone who will love you back."
"Mama?" Sarada sounded confused at her sudden change in tone. There was a sense of repressed anger bubbling on the surface.

"Don't make the mistake I did," Sakura muttered bitterly. "Don't fall for a man who only cares about power. Don't fall for a man who only cares about what he wants, what he needs, what he likes. Men like that would depose you the instant you become a liability. No matter what you do, no matter how hard you try, you will never be enough for them."

"Yes mama, I'll keep that in mind," Sarada was unsure of what to respond.

"It's my fault you know, part of this," Sakura sighed. "If only I wasn't so blind, if only I had helped Naruto on that fateful day…. things might not have turned out this way."

"Don't be too hard on yourself," Sarada tried comforting the woman before her, the woman whose tough exterior is disintegrating by the moment. "You're what keeps the resistance alive – this," she gestured her hand around the place. "All of this. All of the efforts of Hi no Ishi. You managed to shine a spot of hope in this world."

"No," the woman whispered, collecting her calm. "You're the spot of hope Sarada. You and your friends."

"What to you mean?"

"There's a prophecy we received from the Toad Sage the day Naruto perished," Sakura explained. "It said that one day, three young genin will arrive in this world and they will make a choice that will either save it or doom it to perpetual darkness."

"So…" Sarada was perplexed. She most certainly did not expect anything of that sort. But as she thought more about it, everything made sense: the way they had been expected, the way Konohamaru, Chocho, Inojin and Shikadai located them, the way Hi no Ishi already had beds prepared for them as if they were going to stay here for a long time.

"Yes, Sarada," Sakura uttered her words heavily. "We need you guys."

"But how?" Sarada looked at the woman before her. "How are we supposed to save this world? How are we supposed to do anything?"

"We don't know," Sakura shook her head. "But please…"

"I…" Sarada hesitated in her response. "I'll be honest with you, I miss my home, I miss my world. I've wanted to leave since the day I came-"

"I don't blame you for that."

"But," Sarada toughened her resolve. "The experiences I've had here, the bonds I've formed and, most importantly, the problems that needed solving – I'll do my best to help. If I leave behind a world of suffering, what good will I be as Hokage?"

Sakura threw her arms around the girl and said: "I'm glad you understand. When you do become Hokage, your village will be lucky to have you."

"Thank you," Sarada blushed, feeling rather flattered.

"Now," the woman's voice switched to seriousness. "It's late. You should be in bed. You'll need to get up early for tomorrow's mission."
"Yes mama," Sarada nodded as she began leaving the common room.

"I'll be there to send you off," Sakura beamed.

"Thanks, mama," Sarada uttered these words gratefully.

She was a whole world away from home, yet here, in the middle of the night, with a virtual stranger that would have been her mum had things turned out differently, she felt a trace of warmth and familiarity.
"Help! Karin, use your scary chains jutsu!" Suigetsu ordered in panic.

They were undergoing a full on assault. ANBU operatives fired kunais, shurikens and ninjutsu on Orochimaru's lair. They held – for the moment – but they knew they would eventually be overwhelmed. Things were just getting started.

"My chakra is running low!" Karin yelled across the commotion.

"Damn!" Suigetsu screamed.

"Both of you stop whining!" Orochimaru's raspy voice was scarcely decipherable in the midst of the mayhem.

Their time had come.

Sasuke had finally had enough with them. They simply knew too much; they were an unwanted liability from his past. He decided they were disposable.

"I'll head out with my Executioner's Blade!" Suigetsu declared as the musculature of his arms adjusted to the weight of the sword.

"No – don't go!" Karin called after him.

"We have no choice!"

"We have no chance!" She rebutted. "He's coming," she whispered, feeling the encroachment of an ominous cloud of chakra. "I can sense it."

Dawn was barely breaking when Sarada, Mitsuki and Shikadai were gathered in Sakura's office.

It was time for them to leave for Konoha.

They were given a stock of weapons and summoning scrolls for more storage.

"Good luck everyone," Sakura said in an encouraging tone.

"We will succeed," Shikadai stated determinedly in a manner rather uncharacteristic of him. He wanted to do something. He wanted to make his parents proud.

Sarada and Mitsuki nodded in agreement.

"Alright guys, I'm about to teleport you all back to Sayuri's bookstore!" Konohamaru forewarned. "Brace yourselves!"

He weaved a complicated array of hand signs, the scroll glowed and Sarada felt the room warp itself around her. Her surroundings were spinning, whirring themselves in a blur. Then all of a sudden she was propelled through a twilight dimension, where she briefly lost all sense of touch, taste, sound and smell.

Boruto chewed a piece of bread as he cheerily made his way towards the Hokage's office.
He blitzed past an old lady selling her newly grown cabbages, he strode past a hysterical cat that vaguely resembled Tora (it was rummaging its way through a merchant's collection of faraway trinkets), he said hi to an old man at a candy store and he helped a few kids cross the road.

Today was the day he'd be able to get the scroll and send him and his friends back to their own world, out of this hellhole.

They were back at the bookstore.

"Pleased to see you all," Sayuri said as she greeted them and led them out of the secret compartment.

"It's nice to meet you again," Mitsuki replied politely.

"Indeed," she smiled as she replied.

"We've got to go soon," Sarada interrupted authoritatively. "We have a friend to save."

"We'll get back to you later," she added out of courtesy.

"Good luck!" Sayuri cheered them on as they walked out into the open.

There was no one in Sasuke's office. Boruto was confused. Had the man simply been messing with him? Was yesterday night even real? Doubts sprung up within him.

"Ouch!" Boruto yelled as an unrecognisable jonin brushed past him and placed a stack of papers on the desk.

"Hokage-sama is out this morning," the man retorted gruffly.

"Oh," Boruto said blandly. That made a whole lot of sense.

He headed back to the lower offices.

A purple giant towered over the rubbles of a former experimental lair, where nothing remained remotely resembled a habitable structure. It loomed over carcasses of an assortment of creatures, Orochimaru's test subjects. The man himself had been pierced and pinned by the arrow of the Susanoo, had his physical body incinerated hundreds of times by merciless black flames, had his sealing techniques repeatedly neutralised and, finally, had his soul consumed by the demons of hell.

Sasuke had come prepared for this – it is not easy to completely extinguish Orochimaru, a man who had cheated death many times. While it was certainly true that those inhabiting the lair did expect a purge, they did not expect it to come now. They managed to hold off the assault rather competently until Sasuke's arrival, but they stood ultimately stood no chance. They knew they stood no chance.

No one in this world did.

"Sasuke..." Suigetsu's hoarse voice moaned beneath the rubble. "Why? Why did you have to do this? We were your allies."

"I have no allies," was the simple, unfeeling reply.

"Heh... Guess we knew too much about you," Suigetsu mustered all his chakra to liquefy himself and escape the piling debris.
"It had to be done."

"Really? Bastard, we were there for you when no one else was! We helped you devise and collect all the information about all the shinobi. We-"

A blade of lightning impaled him. He was paralysed, solidified.

"You were all a thorn to my regime, a threat to stability," came the cold response. "I mean no ill will, but my emotions here are irrelevant."

"You-" Suigetsu coughed blood for the first time in his life as the strength of the lightening intensified and became enmeshed with black flames.

"Goodbye," Sasuke uttered as the man before him disintegrated into a puddle of blood, which was soon evaporated by the heat of the dark inferno swirling through.

The job was done - one more connection severed, one more threat extinguished.

Sasuke shut his eyes for a moment and then realised something was amiss.

Karin was missing.

"And Ayame came over to my house and slept over," Takashi winked mischievously at Boruto. "I'll spare you the details because you're still young. But we had loads of fun. She's pretty exhausted now though; she's got a lot of work to do."

"Right," Boruto nodded as he shifted his gaze to Ayame. Her eyes were underlined with thick dark circles, her hair was barely combed and she looked as if she could collapse any moment. "Tell you what, I'll make some coffee and you can deliver it to her."

"Oh Boruto, why did I not meet you earlier?" Takashi sighed, overjoyed. "Then I could've been together with Ayame way longer."

Boruto smirked as he operated the coffee machine. He went for a medium-sized mocha.

"There," he said as he handed the mug over to Takashi.

The man skidded happily off to deliver it to Ayame.

A chunin called Boruto over for a small errand and he sighed. More paperwork delivery.

They were on the same road again.

Sarada looked at her two companions and decided to start a conversation: "So… where are you guys thinking of going for lunch?"

"I don't mind," Mitsuki said, sounding indifferent.

"I'm not Chocho, I don't care either," Shikadai was relatively disinterested.

Great. What a wholesome conversation, Sarada mentally punched herself.

"Shikadai," she started talking again. "What –uh- are some of your hobbies."
"I like playing shogi and sleeping," Shikadai answered plainly. "Look, if you want to begin some deep talk, don't do it here. You don't want any witnesses picking up on stuff like that. Things are different out here."

Sarada rolled her eyes: "Fair point."

How she wished Boruto, ever so talkative, were here with them.

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"Takashi, you got any clue when Hokage-sama is coming back?" Boruto inquired earnestly.

"Soon I think, according to a friend in ANBU, he had something important to do this morning," Takashi shrugged.

"What important thing?" Boruto pressed on.

"Can't tell you – it is a classified state secret. Sorry kid. I love you but I can't."

"Right."

"Don't take it the wrong way."

"I won't."

Takashi lowered his voice, mimicking a feeling of paranoia: "If I do, my soul will get pulled out and fed to the creatures of hell."

"Uh…"

"Just kidding!"

"Absolutely hilarious."

Another chunin had called an errand.

"Guess you got to get going – good luck!" Takashi remarked cheerily.

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Sakura shook her head as she heard about the massacre of food demonstrators in Sunagakure from an informant. There had been a drought, which diminished the village's already meagre abilities to grow crops. Yet the appointed manager refused to release the emergency food stocks to the public. Those who were angry with the matter took it to the streets to express their disapproval.

This is the world we live in, she sighed.

"Kakashi," she turned around to greet her former sensei.

"Sakura," he nodded tiredly.

"Are you sure the three will be safe?" She asked for reassurance – she had maintained her calm exterior when she bade them goodbye but her insides were churning with uncertainty.

"Provided they don't make a scene," Kakashi said. "You've also sent an accompanying task force trailing them."

"But… that won't be enough if Sasuke-" she couldn't finish the sentence.
"No it won't," Kakashi admitted, knowing just what she wanted to say. "I can go-

"No. I'll go," Sakura declared resolutely.

"We'll both go," Kakashi concluded.

Boruto was imparted a task to bring a mountainous pile of paperwork into the Hokage office. However, this time, it was occupied.

"Boruto," Sasuke greeted him as he entered.

"Here's all the stuff," Boruto responded.


Boruto thought he could smell a trace of blood.

"So, Hokage-sama I-" He began.

"I believe you're after this," Sasuke did not wait for Boruto to finish the sentence, holding out the forbidden scroll in his hand. "Correct?"

"Yes!" Boruto's eyes gleamed. "I can't believe it!" He threw an empty punch into the air.

He did it. He was going home.

"Stay," Sasuke ordered softly, leaving his chair to shut the door. "For just a short moment."

"Um… okay," Boruto was mildly surprised. "Is there something you want to know?"

"Your two companions," Sasuke's eyes narrowed. "Who are they?"

"Er…" Boruto scratched his head, fumbling over words. "Do you really want to know?"

"Mild curiosity," was the short reply.

"Doesn't look like it," Boruto countered.

"Are you hiding something?" The man's suspicions heightened.

"They're Sarada and Mitsuki. They're on my genin team. End of story."

"I see…" Sasuke's voice trailed off.

"Okay, if you really want to know what happened, in my world you're my mentor and Sarada is your daughter with-"

"Enough," Sasuke interrupted him. "That's all I needed to know."

"You don't care about your daughter from another dimension?"

"Why should I? You don't care about this dimension either," Sasuke eyed him, expecting an agreement.

"You're right I suppose," Boruto sighed. "But just so you know, the you from my world was a really awesome guy. He gave me my headband after I crashed out of the chunin exams because of
cheating. Speaking of which, I can't find it any-

"Here it is," Sasuke interjected, handing over his old headband. Boruto hadn't even realised Sasuke took it last night. "I took it for some… inspection. That is all. Boruto, if there were something I wanted to know, I would have asked. You are dismissed from the job."

"Eh?"

"Go back to your world."

They arrived at the same tavern again.

"Pork cutlet bowl please," Shikadai ordered.

"Port cutlet bowl too," Sarada echoed. She wanted something filling for the rest of the journey.

"Unagi," Mitsuki uttered.

They ate in silence.

Sarada was mildly frustrated by their repeated attempts to shoot down a conversation; she didn't understand why they had to be so uptight.

"Guys," she said. "Are yo-"

She was interrupted by the appearance of a haggard woman with red hair, who burst into the tavern.

"I need water," she moaned in a croaky voice.

Karin. Sarada was sure of it. That woman was Karin.

They even had the same red-rimmed glasses.

"Mitsuki," she whispered. "That's Karin over there."

Mitsuki nodded in agreement: "What on earth do you think has happened?"

"An assault on Orochimaru's lair," Shikadai answered. "That's what must have happened."

"Should we approach her?" Sarada asked the two.

"No!" Shikadai vociferously objected. "We'd be drawing suspicions on ourselves."

Karin sat down on a table next to theirs, gulping down glass of water after glass of water.

Sarada couldn't take her eyes off the woman.

Karin stared back.

Sarada was taken aback and tore her eyes back to her food.

"What are you looking at girl?" The woman gave a rather feisty response.

"Sorry," Sarada answered apologetically.

"Hey what's your problem!" Karin asked once more.
"Nothing – I'm sorry if I bothered you," Sarada muttered.

Shikadai internally kicked himself. Of course they had to do something suspicious.

Mitsuki decided to step in and mediate.

"Sorry. My friend here likes to stare at people randomly," he said while smiling apologetically. "Please forgive her."

"Whatever," Karin waved her hand and drank even more water. Then she caught eye of Shikadai and asked, "You're... from Hi no Ishi?"

Shikadai pretended to not notice her.

"Hey, kid! I'm addressing you!" She walked up to him aggressively.

"Shhhh..." Shikadai hushed her. "What a drag."

He glanced around the place and no one seemed to notice them.

"What's the matter?" He asked with a deliberately ambiguous slant.

"I..." Karin's voice quieted. "Can you give this to Sakura?"

She handed over a small, compacted scroll.

"It has all the information we have gathered about the regime," she whispered.

"Thanks, I'll take it," Shikadai nodded and extended his hand.

"Give them hell," Karin uttered these words with a spitefulness that surprised them all.

She walked back to her table and laughed. Tears poured out, mixed and meshed with a guffaw that spoke neither solely of despair, nor sadness, nor hysteria.

"I'll go... I'll go..." She responded airily to the increasing stares and strolled towards the door.

A kunai caught her at the back of her neck. It was a lady seated in a five-person table.

The secret police. They truly are everywhere, Sarada shuddered internally.

Except Karin wasn't dead yet. Biting herself while pulling out the kunai, she turned round to face the lady with her arms open.

"Go ahead. Try and kill me," she yelled neurotically.

Two-dozen customers stood up and brandished their weapons – half of the restaurant.

"Crap," Shikadai cursed under his breath. "We have to get the hell out of this place. It's filled with the Hokage's eyes and ears."

"When they fire, we run," Mitsuki suggested.

"But Karin – are we just going to leave her there?" Sarada asked with concern.

"We've got no choice," Shikamaru countered. "Either me, you, Mitsuki and Karin all die or Karin dies. She looks extremely weakened. She won't last for long."
Sarada hesitated and then followed her companions out of the back door. Each step she took was laden with guilt.

They had no choice.

As they went further away from the tavern, Sarada thought she could hear the wailing sounds of a woman embittered by life and disillusioned by betrayal.

This will change, she declared internally.

She bit her lip and carried on.

"They're headed for Konoha, Hokage-sama," informed a member of the ANBU. "Two of them are heretofore undocumented and unrecorded on our data booklet."

"I see… They'll be in for quite a surprise," the man chuckled with amusement.
Boruto stared idly at the ceiling. While it was certainly true that Sasuke dismissed him, he still had a
day to spend around the office.

Takashi and Ayame were engaged in a heated discussion, so Boruto decided not to approach them.
Errands weren't coming so Boruto had nothing to do.

He felt a suppressed feeling of excitement – he did not dare appear too cheery amongst the stale
office atmosphere – and thought about the surprise in Sarada and Mitsuki's eyes when they realised
he had succeed and they were going home.

It was scarcely past lunch and, thus, Boruto had an entire afternoon's time on his hands.

He could certainly afford to wait.

Sarada panted as she, Shikadai and Mitsuki grinded to a halt.

They had been running for more than an hour.

While it was true that they had made significant advances to Konoha, they were still not there yet,
being situated amongst the stretches of dense foliage surrounding the village. A cool cloud of
moisture wrapped itself about the vicinity, dissipating some of the heat that latched onto Sarada's skin
after the sprint.

They decided to sit down, take a break and have some water.

"Phew that was close!" Sarada remarked.

"Indeed – we could have gotten caught," Mitsuki said while shuddering.

"Let's rest for ten minutes and no more," Shikadai told both of them. "We don't have much time to
spare."

Sakura was accompanied by Kakashi. Both underwent a transformation jutsu to alter their
appearances and mask their chakra.

She was now a plain woman with dark brown hair adored with an earthy brown garment (the kind
that was ubiquitous amongst provincial townspeople) and he was a man with dark black hair.

They pretended to be husband and wife as they strolled out of Sayuri's bookstore, travelled down the
road, bypassed towns and trailed Sarada, Shikadai and Mitsuki. The trio's chakras indicated they've
already made substantial progress within the forest near Konoha.

"How far should we keep our distance?" Sakura inquired Kakashi, her former sensei.

"Just a little closer," he suggested.

It was in the outskirts of Konoha when Sarada felt something was wrong.

"I have a bad feeling about this," she whispered to her companions.
It was more premonition than any substantiated sense, but Sarada felt encircled.

"I don't see anyone dangerous nearby," Mitsuki answered.

Indeed, their surroundings betrayed no sign of harm. The trio were in the midst of a relatively affluent neighbourhood, locating their way through streets filled with small shops and businesses. Young teenagers were sprawled around the fountain in the main square, gossiping and giggling. Families strolled through the place nonchalantly as if nothing was wrong with the world. Nearby, Sarada could hear the sound of a little girl's laughter as her parents brought her candy.

As if nothing was wrong with the world. The thought hit Sarada.

All these people around her had everything they needed; they lived in an enclosed enclave of happiness, sealed off from the rest of the world. To them, there was nothing wrong with this regime. To them, the rebels from Hi no Ishi were truly dangerous, radical terrorists threatening to upend order and stability.

Such a strange world, they were in.

"Let's hope you're right," Sarada told Mitsuki. "We're nearly there anyways; we've got a little more than an hour."

Her two companions nodded.

"Have you ever been here?" Sarada asked Shikadai.

Shikadai replied: "Occasionally."

"Sarada, I was just thinking, we need to- Shit-"

Mitsuki stopped as a group of police officers drew near them. They halted another group of teenagers and demanded to be shown identification papers.

"It's okay, we've got this," Shikadai whispered as he handed Sarada and Mitsuki a bunch of documents. "It's customary for those who want to enter Konoha this way to be inspected. Unless you're a commonly certified visitor or a permanent resident – then you just show the police your other cards. There's also the option of bribery."

"Right," Sarada said as she absorbed all of that in.

"Papers young lady!" One of the policemen shouted gruffly at her.

She handed hers over.

"Okay… Sarada… you may go," he remarked. "Next – you!"

Mitsuki showed him his documents as Shikadai prepared his.

"I think we'll take the young man there," a smooth voice approached them, gesturing towards Shikadai. "He's on the suspect list."

ANBU. Sarada's heart thuddled.

"Impossible – we're just visiting our friends in Konoha!" She remarked without thinking.

The ANBU was, judging by her voice, female. She was a cat's mask so it was impossible for Sarada
to identify her. She turned her face towards Sarada.

"And who are you to speak?" A stern voice came from behind the mask.

"I'm his friend," she replied indignantly. It was too late to appear conciliatory – that would only arouse suspicions.

"We'll take all of them," a man ordered as he descended upon the trio with half a dozen of ANBU.

"No!" Sarada protested.

"You got a problem with the security and stability of our land?" The man questioned her.

"No – this is absurd. You are accusing my friend of outlandish cone-"

"Shut up girl. Know your place," the man interrupted.

"I do," Sarada fired back. "And I have done nothing wrong."

"Sarada…" Mitsuki whispered lowly. "Maybe its not such a good idea to go against them."

"Shadow strangling jutsu!" Shikadai yelled as he immobilized two ANBU and constricted them with shadows. "Sarada – there's no point. We've got to get rid of them here and now."

She nodded and yelled "Shannaro!" whilst pulverizing the floor. It set off a powerful blast that sent some flying off their backs.

Mitsuki extended his arms and wrapped them around the cat-masked ANBU's neck until all the air escaped her insides. She fell down with a thud. The feline portrait dispelled into grinded dust as the mask shattered.

Sarada activated her Sharingan and dodged a kunai flying her way, throwing another shuriken to deflect an explosive kunai. It landed near a flower shop and sent off a devastating explosion.

An ANBU saw her dojutsu and recoiled.

"Impossible…" a terrified voice whispered behind the raccoon mask. "Only one person-"

He collapsed into a genjutsu before he could finish his sentence.

The other two were still around her, finishing off their remaining assailants.

Soon, they were done.

Sarada heaved a sigh of relief. The three are competent fighters even amongst the most elite teenage shinobis. Extra training in the past few days certainly helped.

Suddenly, a whirlwind cloaked in luminous green chakra immobilized Shikadai. He crumbled to the floor before any of the other two could react.

The figure of a woman with long, thick dark black hair and eyes like pale pearls manifested in front of Sarada and Mitsuki, and asked the two while narrowing her eyes, "Any reason why you three are wrecking havoc at this hour of the day?"

It was Hanabi Hyuuga – one the Hokage's lackeys, as Sakura previously mentioned with scorn. In the last of expected places.
"Leave him alone!" Sarada demanded as she recovered.

Mitsuki was paralysed by shock at his spot.

Sarada charged towards the women with her Sharingan activated and yelled at Mitsuki: "Take Shikadai with you and find help. I'll hold her off."

Mitsuki shook his head to wear off the stunning scenario in front of him.

"Quick!" Sarada ordered.

He picked up the crumpled body of Shikadai and ran with all his might.

"Oh he won't get far," sneered Hanabi so uncharacteristically that it surprised Sarada. She had to remind herself that they were in a different world. "My clansmen will catch him soon enough."

"You underestimate my friends," Sarada refuted. "Now, fight me."

"My pleasure," the woman in front of her smirked.

Boruto hoped he was mistaken when he overheard two office chunins discussing reports about three young intruders in the suburbs of Konoha.

He leaned over near them surreptitiously.

"… Hanabi caught one – she put up a tough fight apparently. The streets were utterly demolished. They're still trying to track the other two."

Sarada? Boruto pondered. Could it be her?

He hoped he was wrong.

"Her name?" The other asked. "I might need it in my report to the Hokage."

"Sarada."

Boruto's heart froze.

Sakura and Kakashi sped up as they realised something was wrong. Shikadai's chakra was muted and Mitsuki's and his were travelling in the other direction, towards them, whilst a cluster of malign chakra closed in upon them.

The Hyuuga, Sakura cursed under her breath.

"You sensed them too?" Kakashi inquired.

Sakura nodded in response as the front of her hair incessantly flew into her face – her rate of travel accelerated exponentially owing to her desire to minimize the time it took for her to reach the boys.

They had a lot to lose.

Perhaps they've already lost.

Boruto tried to grasp what was happening.
So, Sarada and two other shinobi (one of them being presumably Mitsuki) tried to foray into Konoha for a mission. They got into a fight with the ANBU, the two others fled and Hanabi Hyuuga eventually subdued Sarada after a grueling fight. Sarada is currently detained near the Department of Torture and Interrogation and will soon be subjected to stringent examination by the authorities.

I've got to do something, he told himself. But I can't be suspicious. No. But I can't just walk in there and demand her release. Or sneak in there, for the matter.

From what he had learnt, it was the most secure institution in all of Konoha – perhaps in the entire continent – save for the Hokage's office.

For a moment, Boruto really hated himself for his ineptitude.

It's all your fault, a voice nagged persistently inside his head. If you hadn't been stupid enough to bring her along that night-

No, he refuted himself. No – I can do this.

"The Hokage wants you in his office," a peremptory order from a chunin cut off his stream of internal debate.

"For?" Boruto attempted to press for more information.

"How the hell am I supposed to know? Just go," the man in front of him dismissed rudely.

"Mitsuki, Shikadai!" Sakura called out to the two figures ahead of her.

Well, two barely distinct figures, considering how Shikadai appeared entirely unconscious and sprawled over Mitsuki's back.

"Sakura, Kakashi," Mitsuki replied hoarsely, sapped of energy from the frantic fleeing. "They've got Sarada."

"Why did you summon me here?" Boruto asked bluntly. All niceties had been dropped.

Sasuke looked rather amused, much to Boruto's exasperation.

"I'm asking you: is there a reason why you called me into your office after dismissing me this morning?" Boruto demanded again.

"A little less anger, please," the man replied coolly, unaffected by Boruto's temper. "I'm sure you know why."

"Why?"

"Your friend… has been captured," he raised his eyebrows while explaining. "She tried trespassing into Konoha with rebel spies."

"She has a name – she's Sarada Uchiha," Boruto looked at Sasuke straight into the eye. "In another world, she would have been your daughter."

The man winced, though just barely, and continued: "I am aware of that."

"Then-"
"I must admit, I did not order her capture," Sasuke brushed off Boruto's words. "I was informed of a trio of young, unidentified – though, according to my intelligence service, affiliated with Hi no Ishi – shinobis approaching Konoha. The actions of the ANBU or the Hyuuga were in no part due to my instructions."

"Oh really?" Boruto said sardonically, his features contorting. "I believe every word you say."

"Save your pathetic attempt at sarcasm for someone who cares. The ANBU and the Hyuuga auxiliary police force often operate independently around the area to guarantee security. However, that is not to say I am not in charge of them," Sasuke replied, unflinching. "I simply don't direct every single move they make."

"Alright. I still don't understand why you-"

"I'm just getting there," Sasuke interjected Boruto again. "I want you to personally release her and take her with you back to your own world."

"Why?"

"Like you, she doesn't belong here…"

"And you want me to basically piss off with her."

"I'd advise you to use more appropriate language in my office."

"Whatever."

"I must say you're even ruder than your father."

Boruto didn't know what to say to that.

"Anyway, you should get going. Here's my letter of authorization – just show it to the guards and they'll let you in," the man stated while pulling out a piece of parchment. It was inscribed with his clean, clinical handwriting.

"Why?" Boruto just had to ask.

"I believe I've already elaborated why I'm helping you. I don't care about you or her so long as both of you leave this world."

"Do you-"

"No. I don't care about her at all. She's from an alternate dimension where what happened never was and, more importantly, she is disrupting the balance of this world, my world. The very essence of stability is threatened if both of you remain. And if you do – I will kill you," Sasuke finished off unceremoniously.

"I see," Boruto's voice quieted. "It's a pity then. She's a fine, passionate, talented girl. She's my best friend. You would have been proud of her."

"Would I? Perhaps. But it is useless to speculate on such things. I can see why you'd call her talented – according to Hanabi Hyuuga, she wasn't easy to beat," Sasuke said while shrugging.

"Very well I'll leave," Boruto uttered these words. Nothing in this world mattered anyway; in a few hours, he'd be back home.
"One more thing," Sasuke said sharply, leaning close to Boruto and pulling the boy towards him. "She was with the rebels of Hi no Ishi. Now I don't care and I don't know about your political views but they're not likely to be happy with you leaving. They'd probably try and stop you."

"How would you know?" Boruto frowned.

"I have my sources."

Boruto gulped uneasily as he strode towards the door. A nauseating feeling rose about his stomach as he realised he might as well have been colluding with this repressive regime – there was certainly an element of tacit agreement in what just happened. He stood face to face with the most brutal man in this world and conversed with him like nothing was wrong. To be fair, Boruto did convey a sense of outrage but it was wholly personal, being completely unrelated to and unaffected by the system itself. He was only indignant because his best friend was captured, not because the secret police routinely arrested and spied on citizens without due process.

No, although Boruto did feel rather disturbed, he did not really care.

You shut your eyes and everything becomes easier to bear.

It was not his world after all.

He would be returning to his.
Chapter 10

When Shikadai's eyelids fluttered open, he discovered he was in the midst of a room in a spa village near the Land of Grass. He had been lying on the tatami floor, unconscious. The faint earthy smell of bamboo wafted through the air, ever so slightly. It was strangely calming.

"You're finally awake," came Sakura's gentle voice as she handed him a cup of hot green tea. "I've been waiting for a long time – Mitsuki has gone to buy more supplies. He'll be back soon."

Shikadai was slightly dazed: "What happened?"

"You were knocked out by the Hyuuga and Sarada…" The woman bit her lip as she uttered the name; her eyes shut and she took a deep breath. "Sarada tried to buy time for you and Mitsuki to escape. She was captured by the Hyuuga police subunit."

Shikadai's heart fell.

"I… I'm…" He couldn't spit it out. He couldn't say 'I'm sorry.' Words deserted him.

He had failed.

"It's okay," Sakura answered as if she were reading his mind. "Casualties happen on missions like this – I don't blame you at all. You also encountered one of the most dangerous police units in Konoha. You all fought bravely and did the best you could."

"What – what do we do now?" He couldn't help ask. "We've failed to gather any form of intelligence on the situation and whereabouts of Boruto. Our teammate was captured. We are getting nowhere in terms of, well, resisting!"

"All is not lost yet," Sakura explained calmly. "We have already assembled a full taskforce to retrieve Sarada – we know where she is."

"How?" Shikadai's brows furrowed as he questioned quizzically.

"We've got a tracker on her."

Boruto's stomach fluttered as he headed over towards the Department of Torture and Interrogation. He had passed by Takashi and Ayame chatting happily and chose to ignore them. He had passed by a taciturn chuunin who tried to saddle him with another errand; he simply brandished Sasuke's letter and the man shirked back in discomfort.

He had no time to waste in this world anymore.

He made his way across Konoha's labyrinthine array of buildings, circumventing the conventional long path with short cuts only a well-versed Konoha insider would know. No one else tried to halt him or question him.

He frowned as he caught a glimpse of two jonin's beating up a vaguely intellectual middle-aged man in one of the narrow alleys, possibly one of those political dissidents. The man's face was bloodied and bruised purple. He begged the jonin to stop.

Boruto did not stop and continued, accelerating his pace by channelling more chakra into his legs.
The worse this world is, the more the need for him to get his friends back to where they belong.

Sarada's eyes flew open.

She realised she was in a cell, with only the dank and stifling air as her companion. She could not see the other inmates. They were all isolated from each other well. Deciding to use her Sharingan for confirmation on that matter, she winced in pain as some intricate complication abruptly shut down the chakra pathways to her eyes.

Hanabi Hyuuga's chakra-blocking.

No.

This was not the shutting down of chakra pathways – it was something active, something proactively resisting the activation of her dojutsu.

A seal.

She was covered in seals. Seals engraved on her arms, her legs, her torso, her forehead and near her eyes too.

She needed to figure out how to undo them.

Boruto approached the guards outside the Department of Torture and Interrogation, pulling out the Hokage's letter of permission in response to their sceptical expressions. They immediately nodded deferentially.

Boruto nodded back and entered the complex.

Its interiors were grey and clinical. A large desk was situated at the centre of the first room. A bald man with dark sunglasses sat there writing, writing and writing. Death notes, notes about prison conditions, notes about prisoners' weaknesses, notes about the torture and interrogation schedules.

"Excuse me?" Boruto approached him.

The man looked up, his emotions obscured by the black glasses.

"Yes?" he uttered quietly.

"I... I'm here to retrieve my friend. Here's a letter of authorization from the Hokage," Boruto said as he handed the man the parchment.

When Mitsuki returned, he saw Sakura and Shikadai engrossed in a conversation about the affairs of Sunagakure.

Apparently, Temari, Shikadai's mother, is based in Sunagakure and is currently helping the demonstrators against food shortages, clandestinely deflecting the worst forms of violence directed at them and doing her best to offer them whatever aid – food, water or otherwise – she could muster. Her brother, who runs a Hi no Ishi base in the sands of the Land of Wind, often helps her.

Shikadai was noticeably worried about her life and well-being; Mitsuki had to remind himself of the differences between this world and his world
"Hi guys," he interrupted somewhat awkwardly, "I brought some food stocks and toiletries."

"I've also got some dango," he added.

"Come join us," beckoned Sakura. "We were just talking about the situation in Sunagakure."

"I see," Mitsuki smiled at the two.

"But more importantly, Mitsuki, I want you to know that we already have a taskforce that's gone to retrieve Sarada. It's got some of our best," Sakura said, aiming to project a reassuring tone.

"That's good to know," Mitsuki nodded. "I… I want to go too. I can help save Sarada."

"That won't be needed," Sakura rebuffed. "Right now, what you need to do is simply rest and prepare yourself for what is too come." She sighed before resuming, "These days, I almost feel the children in this world share a burden comparable to the adults – this time, just leave things to us. We'll make everything right."

"Sarada!" A voice called in the dark.

Boruto.

It had to be him.

"Is that you, Boruto?" Sarada whispered.

"Yes and I've come to get you out of here!"

She could hear the sound of keys rattling as he drew near her cell.

"How-"

"There's no time to explain things. We've got to be quick," he cut her short.

"But I can't use my chakra – I'm covered in seals!" She protested.

"Doesn't matter. We'll get help later," he explained. "I've got the keys."

As clinking sounds of locks and keys echoed through the room, Sarada braced herself for an escape.

This won't be easy, she told herself. They were, after all, in one of the most secure buildings on the Continent.

"And… we're done!" Boruto declared triumphantly. "Come on Sarada, take my hand."

He helped her get up and (very kindly) offered her to lean on him after sensing her fatigue.

"... Thanks, Boruto," she remarked gratefully.

"No problem! We're all in this together, right?"

She nodded and, realising the hindered visibility of it all in the dark, said, "Of course."

Kakashi and his team were nearing the Department of Torture and Interrogation.
It was not as if this would be Kakashi's first time there. Indeed, back when he was still an elite jonin from Konoha, back when he was the sensei of Team 7 and before the Revolution, he would visit his friends Ibiki and Anko there.

It was still the same location, but the building has changed. It was fortified, enlarged, stripped of what little humanity is possessed by cold, grey metal walls, labyrinthine dungeons and emotionless men in suits and sunglasses. Granted, interrogation and torture complexes were not meant to be welcoming place, but this one had indubitably undergone a transformation for the worse. It was the embodiment of this regime's twisted ideals. The ideals of Kakashi's former student.

The man looked at the distance ahead and suppressed all the thoughts brewing within him.

It felt too easy, from Sarada's perspective.

They were supposedly breaking out of the Continent's most protected buildings, but they encountered no resistance. There was no way the fortifications and internal security were this sloppy.

Something felt wrong.

They bypassed empty hallways, tiptoed across cells of other prisoners, and evaded a room filled with guards (evidently on a break) by taking a detour through the extremely constricted ventilation system.

Whenever she tried inquiring Boruto about the state of the place, he would whisper urgently the need to for them to be quiet.

Boruto would never admit it, but he would have felt a certain queasiness if he ever had to reveal Sasuke's permission note in front of Sarada. She would not have looked upon him favourably if she found out the real reason why their 'escape' was such an easy affair. Being the person she is, she might also have accused him of colluding with the Hokage.

But of course I'm not, Boruto reminded himself internally. I'm just trying to be pragmatic and get what I want so I can fix this mess and take us all back to where we belong.

They were approaching the exit. It was getting late and the sun had already set. Yet there was still a dim, dying ray of light – possibly moonlight - emanating from outside.

"We made it!" Sarada cheered, throwing her arms into the air in relief.

"Yes, we did!" Boruto beamed at her. "Now, do you know anywhere we can go for a rest? Anywhere that's secure from this regime?"

"As a matter of fact, I do," Sarada said. "Sayuri's bookstore."

"What? You mean the girl we scared a few days ago?" He asked with a befuddled expression.

"Exactly. The girl we scared a few days ago. I'll explain things when we're there," Sarada answered. "I... I'm sceptical as to whether any information we share on the way there won't be picked up by spies working for this regime."

"Alright Sarada, you lead the way!"

Sarada and Boruto were intercepted by Kakashi's team just outside of Konoha's suburbs, where the foliage began to thin.
"Kakashi!" Sarada gasped as she recognised the man under a mask. "Kakashi, what are you doing here?!

"Sarada! Is that you?" The man was consumed by shock. "How- how did you-

"Boruto helped me," Sarada gestured towards the boy. "He technically rescued me from the Department of Torture and Interrogation."

"But- It's one of the most secure complexes on this continent," Kakashi remarked, suspicion rising within him. He chose to bury it temporarily and noted, "You're covered in chakra suppressing seals. We'll take you to a base and you're staying there until we undo it."

"That would be great," Sarada said gratefully. "I am finding my inability to utilise chakra rather irritating."

The man chuckled, "Wouldn't we all?"

He then added, "Boruto, you look… just the same as your father did when he was your age. The resemblance is uncanny."

Boruto didn't really know what to say except scratch his head and grin.

"Anyways, we better get going!" Kakashi resumed with a warm smile beneath his mask – the gentle glow came from his eyes. "We don't have much time to waste before they try to recapture you guys."

They were at an inn in the Land of Grass. It was situated in a tourist village filled with cosy hot springs and people of all sorts.

It was apparently a Hi no Ishi base, ran by an elderly couple sympathetic to the cause. But it was also a pretty renowned tourist site, one of those inns that perennially showed up on magazine recommendation lists. They were hiding in plain site.

"Boruto! Is that you?" Mitsuki exclaimed in astonishment.

"Yup! The one and only!" Boruto grinned, walking up to Mitsuki and hugging him. "Mitsuki… we're going home."

"What?" Mitsuki asked, not entirely sure what Boruto meant.

Boruto took out the forbidden scroll with a wink.

Mitsuki's eyes bulged: "Where did you get that?"

"Long story," Boruto shrugged. For some reason, he didn't feel comfortable recounting the episode where Sasuke Uchiha basically barged into his room and handed him the scroll after an excruciating conversation.

"You're not going to tell me?" Mitsuki sensed something was amiss.

"I'll tell both you and Sarada once she's done with all the seal removal," Boruto quickly made something up. "There's no point in repeating myself."

"Really Boruto?" Mitsuki remarked sceptically. "Please don't try and hide something from me."

You're a terrible liar, Sasuke's voice rang inside Boruto's mind.
"Alright, I took it from the Hokage's office okay?" Boruto began to explain. "I devised this super elaborate plan where I auditioned for a job as an errand boy and, well, when the moment was opportune, I got the scroll!"

Not exactly lying. No. He was just obscuring some of the detail.

"Sounds pretty interesting," Mitsuki nodded.

"Interesting? Come on Mitsuki! I deserve better!" Boruto said while beaming.

"Well, the job's done!" Mitsuki agreed. "All we have to do is wait for Sara- no. Boruto, there's something I have to tell you. They don't want us gone."

"Yeah, I know."

"You do? How?"

Crap. Boruto had misspoken.

"I sort of guessed that," he simply stated. "Not sure why. Just a premonition that they want us to stay."

"Okay," Mitsuki shrugged and continued. "The thing is, we're their last hope."

"What?" Boruto was confused.

"The Grand Toad Sage had this prophecy that said three genin – presumably from an alternate dimension – would have the chance to doom or save this world," Mitsuki described what he remembered from his conversation with Konohamaru, this Konohamaru

It made sense now, Sasuke's desire for him to be gone. A missing piece of information completed one of the strangest mysteries Boruto encountered in this world.

Boruto wasn't so sure about how to feel. His resolve to leave this world was faltering – though only slightly.

No, no, no. He wasn't going to come this far and change his plans.

No, he needed to do something.

But then again, what was there for him to do? The prophecy only mentioned he would either doom or save this world. It never said how. What chance did a small genin like him (and Sarada and Mitsuki) stand against a regime that had dominated this world for almost two decades?

"… I see. What are-"

He stopped when he saw Sakura, Kakashi and Shikadai enter the room with Sarada, who was now free of seals and glad of it.

"Hi everyone, I'm Boruto. Boruto Uzumaki."

That was all he could muster.
"Sakura Haruno," a woman who would have been Sarada's mother greeted him with a cheery smile. Except this one had more dark circles under her eyelids. She tried to appear carefree, but there was a permanent air of exhaustion about her that Boruto noticed.

"Kakashi Hatake," said the jonin with silver, perhaps greying, hair.

"Shikadai Nara," said Shikadai as he extended his hand. It was the same old Shikadai from Boruto's world, except he looked more tired, more worried.

"Pleased to meet you," Sakura said. "Sarada has told me so much about you."

"Heh," Boruto grinned. "Like how cool I am, right?"

"Oh please," Sarada snorted while rolling her eyes at him. "Nonsense."

"Boruto, I want to hear more from you: who you are, where you came from, what you just did," Sakura continued with curiosity. "I heard you two had it pretty easy breaking out of the Department of Torture and Interrogation."

"Well, the escape had its difficult bits," Boruto said while scratching his head. "It took us a great deal of effort to avoid all the guards. Being a temporary errand boy at the Hokage's office helped though – I was able to steal information about the design of the place and figure out how to navigate my way through everything."

Okay that was partially true; he did take a long, hard glance at a map of the Department of Torture and Interrogation in someone's office. But Boruto held back from all things concerning him meeting Sasuke Uchiha. He couldn't spit it out.

"Well done!" Sakura said with a congratulatory tone. "That's no small feat."

Boruto couldn't tell whether she was satisfied with his response or not. She was certainly good at looking satiated and Boruto couldn't detect a whiff of suspicion, but if Kakashi previously reacted with reservation, there's no reason to assume Sakura wouldn't be any different internally.

"I… I'm just glad I'm reunited with my friends," said Boruto, deciding to nudge the conversation in another direction.

Sakura nodded genially; still no hint of doubt.

"Well, we're about to have dinner here. It's pretty late but you don't want to leave your stomach empty," she said.

"And," she continued. "You can tell me your side of the story."

They all seemed pretty impressed when Boruto gave a detailed narration about passing the job audition (he had deliberately left out the part with Sasuke being disguised as the assistant.) They were even more impressed when they heard about how he earned favours with other jonin to make his life easier and eavesdropped successfully on important conversations about Sarada.

"Well, what can I say, you would have been a perfect spy!" Kakashi sighed. "And boy, we needed
one in the Hokage's office."

Not, Boruto chuckled internally.

"Too late now," Boruto said, slightly apologetic. "They're probably searching for me. I'm probably already on some sort of wanted list."

"True," Kakashi agreed as he shook his head. "A pity."

"I've heard – from previous spies that managed to mingle their way into the Hokage's office – that he personally scrutinizes all interviewees," Sakura interjected. "Did he this time?"

"Uh…" Boruto hesitated. "Not that I'm aware of."

You lie, a voice buzzed inside his head. You lie, you lie, you lie.

"Alright," Sakura nodded, appearing convinced. Boruto suspected she really wasn't.

"How's the environment within the office?" Sarada asked, curious.

"Well… uh… it's actually pretty dull. A lot of people just sit in their desks and I get errands from time to time. It's weirdly normal," Boruto commented. "Not much different from dad's office back in my world. Okay, save the fact that you sometimes deliver reports about labour camps and people being purged."

Ouch, that sounded unnecessarily callous.

"Sorry," he added. "I didn't mean to sound insensitive."

"Oh Boruto," Sarada rolled her eyes and inquired, "So, did anyone threaten to kill you? You know, because you're well… quite stupid at times."

"Hey!" Boruto protested. "Actually, yes. Angry superiors and all that. Doesn't matter anymore because I'll never have to go back to that shithole anymore!"

Sarada laughed.

Sakura and Kakashi shot a brief glance at each other.

"Sarada," Boruto whispered in her ear as they left the dinner table. "Meet me outside. Near the hot springs. Midnight. Tell Mitsuki to come too."

"Got it," Sarada nodded back. "What-"

"You'll find out later."

Hanabi Hyuuga was pacing up and down outside the Hokage's office, impatient for her turn.

She had heard that Sarada was released.

She was not happy with it.

"Come in," Sasuke ordered.

Not waiting for him to finish, Hanabi stormed into the room.
"What is the meaning of this? Why did you free Sarada?" She demanded angrily. Normally, being in the presence of the Hokage would have intimidated her – or anyone, for the matter. But this time, for now at least, her indignant emotions overwhelmed all other senses.

"My reasoning behind this decision is none of your concern, Hanabi," Sasuke replied coolly, unfazed.

"Do you know how much effort it took for me to capture her?" Hanabi tried very hard to stop her voice from rising. "More than that, she was with a boy that is clearly documented as a rebel spy. This should concern you."

"I know what I'm doing, but thank you for your insight," Sasuke said, with a hint of wryness.

"They're going to steal important intel – what if they-"

"Calm down Hanabi, I've got this covered," Sasuke interrupted her. "But if you insist on knowing why…"

"Yes..?" Hanabi pressed eagerly.

"She's my daughter from another dimension."

"What?" Hanabi's jaws dropped. "What is – have you gone mad?"

"I'm surprised you haven't figured it out, witnessing her Sharingan. No one else in our world has my eyes," Sasuke explained; his eyes turned blood red and bore themselves into Hanabi. She drew back. "How should I put this…our world has seen three intruders that do not belong here. My sources tell me they could be a threat."

"Wait – I don't get this. With all due respect, Hokage-sama, this is bizarre. Then-"

"Not all of them want to be here. You've seen Boruto haven't you? The blond errand boy with blue eyes?" Sasuke continued.

"Why yes, you sent him to my house."

"He's also from there."

"I see," Hanabi nodded. "He looks… familiar."

"There's no need to be so vague," Sasuke chided rather sternly. "He's Naruto's son. I knew that from the moment I saw him. He belongs elsewhere and if he wants to go back, it's all fine by me."

"That was what I meant," Hanabi said. "Does his presence make you, in any way, uncomfortable?"

"It certainly… brings back memories, but that doesn't matter. You're getting awfully curious," Sasuke's eyes narrowed as he spoke.

"Well, one can always ask-"

"You've asked too much. Now, seeing as you're already here, let's discuss some clan affairs, shall we? Your father is an ailing man… he won't last forever," Sasuke remarked. "And I must say, I hope you will maintain his co-operative attitude. It's been a pleasure working with the Hyuuga clan."

There was a gloomy quality about the man in front of her that penetrated his surroundings. Now that Hanabi's previously pent up rage was dissipating, she felt fear creeping through her. One word bad
from him could end her. One good word could raise her further through the ranks of the regime. She had misspoken. She needed to pick her words more carefully in the future.

"Likewise, Hokage-sama."

Boruto was outside at midnight, near empty pools of steaming water.

There were no tourists there at this hour.

"Boruto!" Sarada whispered as she approached him. "What did you want to tell me?"

"Just wait a moment, I'll tell you when Mitsuki comes," he winked back at her.

She rolled her eyes: "It's late and I'm not waiting forever."

"He's here!" Boruto pointed to an emergent figure of Mitsuki.

"Well, what information do you have for us?" Mitsuki smiled his usual smile.

Boruto giddily whipped out the secret scroll: "Guys! We're going home!"

"Boruto?!" Sarada gasped incredulously. "Where – how – why haven't you told me this before?"

"You haven't told her before?" Mitsuki blurted out in confusion.

"You told Mitsuki? And not me?" Sarada said, her voice betraying a sign of displeasure.

"I couldn't find the right moment," Boruto admitted as he hung his head. "Sorry. But that doesn't matter anymore because we're going home!"

He grinned.

Mitsuki nodded in return.

Sarada hesitated and asked, "Now?"

"Yup!" Boruto declared buoyantly.

"I… I can't Boruto."

Sarada's words struck like thunder.

"What do you mean?!" Boruto's cheery, amiable features gave way to horror and shock.

No. They've come too far to stop.

"We can't Boruto. We can't just leave them behind. Not if we give a damn about what's right."

"Sarada, this world has nothing to do with us. We don't belong here. Besides, there's nothing we can do anyway."

"All of this," Sarada said as she gestured her hands. "All of this is just wrong. You know its wrong. We're the only ones who stand a chance of fixing it!"

"And how?! Sarada, how do you propose we solve all these problems? This world is terrible, I know and that's why we should have no part in it. It's not our problem! None of this is. I messed up and got
us here. I'm going to take us home."

"Are you even listening to yourself?! 'Not our problem.' Are you still the Boruto I know?!!" Sarada's temper was slowly heightening.

"Sarada –" He tried approaching her.

"The Boruto I know would never walk away from injustice, would never look at evil straight in the eye and shrug!" She pushed him away.

"For the last time, there's nothing we can do!"

"The prophecy."

"I know about the prophecy. It means nothing – just a bunch of obscure words that could have meant anything! Are you really going to-"

"-How can you say that?!"

"I have evidence on my side," Boruto shrugged.

"Jerk!"

"Look, you're being irrational-"

"Stop! The resistance, they're devising something-"

"Sarada. Hate to break it but they've been failing. They've been failing for almost twenty years. There's no reason to believe they'd have any success this time round! Staying here would be like binding yourself to a sinking ship."

"Have you no shame?! We're shinobi and we never walk away from something that's difficult, especially if it's the right thing to do."

"Yeah and we endure – but we do that back in our world-"

"It doesn't matter what world we're in Boruto! These people, they need us. Sakura… she needs me by her side," Sarada bit her lip as she said these words. "She's been through too much…"

"She's not even your mother! She's… her and all the others, they're not real!" Boruto explained frantically.

"What do you even mean by this?! Boruto, these are very real people you're denigrating. Full of emotion, full of life and every bit as real as you and me."

"That's not what I meant! I-"

"Enough Boruto-"

"If you stay then so what? You don't even know what to do!"

In all his wild gesticulations, a letter fell from Boruto's pockets.

Sasuke's parchment.

"Hang on let me- Sarada – thanks for- what-"
Sarada had rushed to pick it up and rebuffed Boruto's request for it to be handed over.

"Well, what have we got?" She asked冷ly. "Are you trying to hide something from me?"

Boruto panicked and defended himself: "He found out okay? He found out the day I got there! I… you have to listen to me Sarada, I had no choice!"

Sarada trembled as her eyes perused through the words on the parchment.

Inside the inn, Sakura gazed at the small scroll in the middle of her palm. Shikadai gave it to her shortly after dinner, claiming that Karin entrusted it to him and urged him to share it with Hi no Ishi. According to him, Sasuke had attacked Orochimaru's lair, obliterating everyone in it, everyone except for Karin.

She opened the scroll and dropped it on the floor, gaping, stunned. It read:

*On the Location of the Nine Tailed-Beasts.*

"… So that's why… This explains a lot…" Sarada muttered.

Silence.

"I-"

"That's why everything was so easy. He wanted us to leave all along."

"Sarada, I… It was the only way for me to get the scroll-"

"So you lied about the scroll too?"

"That's not really what I meant – okay, I did. I didn't really know how to explain things to you."

"You don't know! He knew where I lived, he knew who I was. He came into my room and forced everything out of me. If we don't leave this world he'll kill us."

"Did he give you the scroll too?"

Sarada's glared at him.

"… Yes."

"You're playing straight into his hands."

"I don't give a damn," Boruto declared resolutely, trying to mask his feeling of shame.

"Don't you get it Boruto? He wants you to leave, he wants us to leave!"

"So what? I want to leave too! Not my world, not my problem."

"You – how could you?!" Sarada said as she felt herself boiling with rage. "You're behaving like a guilty collaborator! Like an accomplice of this regime!"

"I make my own decisions! I-"

"You're siding with the regime on-"
"I side with no one!" Boruto yelled back, interjecting Sarada.

"I can't believe this! I can't believe you!" Sarada screamed, tears welling up in her eyes. "Your apathy disgusts me."

Boruto took a deep breath in an attempt to calm himself – it was to little avail.

Mitsuki still stood there, glancing tersely between the two of them. He was about to speak when Sarada started talking again.

"You know what, you sicken me. I'm leaving," she huffed as she started walking away.

Boruto grabbed her by her arm and she smacked him in return.

"Hands off me," she glowered at him with murderous intent. "Mitsuki? You coming with me?"

Mitsuki didn't know how to respond. She took Mitsuki's hand before he could do anything and began dragging him away from Boruto.

"Guys, please! We need to leave," Boruto pleaded as he followed them.

Screw this, a voice inside him asserted. I'm going to take them back whether they like it or not.

"Sarada, Mitsuki, I'm sorry," he muttered.

He opened the forbidden scroll and its glow engulfed their surroundings. The world around them warped itself as Sarada and Mitsuki fixated their gaze on his, a gaze of shock, a gaze of utter disbelief.

Ominous incantations prowled their way into Boruto's ear, puncturing his entire body.

Time froze.

Boruto was back in the Hokage's office. It was late at night; the place was filled with dead, desolate silence. Even his father had left at this hour.

Sarada and Mitsuki's bodies lay near him. They were evidently still unconscious.

Boruto sighed with relief. They were home. None of the commotion, none of the strife in that alien world mattered anymore.

His parents, Himawari, their parents, their friends and everyone else would have missed them.

They can now put everything behind them.

Then, out of the blue, the other figures wavered and vanished with a puff.

Shadow clones, Boruto mentally cursed. Damn.
Chapter 12

The scroll was gone.

That was the second thing Boruto noticed.

For a moment, he couldn't feel anything. His senses were suspended in disbelief. Only moments ago was he engulfed in ecstasy, fuelled by his belief that he would soon be home, with his friends and away from that godforsaken world. Only moments ago, he believed that he had finally done something right this week after his incredibly stupid decision to sneak into his father's office.

He blew it. He had done something even stupider.

He abandoned his friends in the other world and there was no way for him to return to them. More than that, there was no way for them to come home.

The full weight of reality crashed down on him and he collapsed onto the floor, weeping, wailing, and howling with frustration and self-loathing.


Boruto grunted cynically; they would never think the same of him again. He was disgraced, an apathetic bystander, a person with no principles, a reckless and irresponsible adventurer who landed his best friends in a mess they could never escape.

And they were gone. Gone from his life.

He sobbed, uncontrollably.

The portraits of Konoha's past Hokages seemed to surround him and eye him with scornful, unflinching gazes, chiding him.

They can lambast him all they like. His friends, his family in this world can call him a dishonoured coward. He didn't care because it was true, too true.

Those who break the rules are scum. Sneaking into the Hokage office late at night and lying to the ANBU guards about it? Check.

Those who abandon their friends are worse than scum. Leaving his friends behind in that dark, oppressive dimension (albeit accidentally)? Check.

Those who have no concern for the feelings of their friends are even worse than that. Telling Sarada that she is being a fool for caring about that other world and acting like an opportunistic jackass about it? Check.

He had violated every single teaching his father and his sensei have tried to install in him.
No – there was still more. Those who walk by evil and treat it with a shrug are the worst of them all?
Check.

Boruto had never hated himself more.

Mitsuki witnessed the situation in front of him with a state of utter bewilderment. He couldn't believe what just unfolded before his eyes.

Sarada had forcefully, with her super strength, hauled him away from Boruto with her.

You did nothing, Mitsuki mentally berated himself. You did nothing while the other two argued. It should have been you. You should have interfered and solved everything. But no, all you could do was stand there and watch. What good are you?

He had failed. He had failed to be the Moon to Boruto's Sun. Boruto was gone. No – Boruto would never just leave them like this. He had wanted to take them with him. Mitsuki was sure of it. Boruto had tried grabbing Sarada's arm before she slapped him, disorientated his attention, set a temporary genjutsu and substituted her and Mitsuki with a clone.

Mitsuki had been too stunned to react.

And the Sarada in front of him was distraught.

"How – how could he?!" She screamed in front of him. "How could he just- just decide to leave? Does nothing here matter to him?!!"

She plunged into him and sobbed.

Mitsuki took a deep breath. She needed his assurance – he had always been the one to provide that in Team Konohamaru. Both Sarada and Boruto depended on his calm their fiery passions. He was like a solid rock, a large one. He was the Moon that balanced the Sun.

He said nothing and watched her cry into the night.

Boruto trudged along the streets lethargically. His eyes were blood red from the tears and from exhaustion. It was around three in the morning. Not a soul budged in the dark.

He decided that he needed to get back to his house, find his parents and come up with something to do about this, even though Boruto didn't know what he could do.

There were no lights in his house; Boruto guessed that his parents were fast asleep.

He sneaked in through the window, careful not to wake his parents up. He didn't want to shock them in the middle of the night.

His room was still the same as he had left it. He was only gone for less than a week, but it felt like eons.

His Gameboy was still on his desk, which was still littered with a stash of comics. His favourite posters were still on the wall, staring down at him. His bed, however, a previously haphazard amalgamation of blankets and pillows, had been made neatly by his mother.

His mother. Boruto felt guilt surging through his veins like poison. She must have been worried to death about him.
As if on cue, came Hinata's voice by his door, baffled, pleasantly surprised: "Boruto, is that you? Boruto?"

She looked haggard (by her standards). Dark circles blackened her eyes, the result of many sleepless nights.

"Mum?" Boruto's hoarse voice cried out.

"Boruto?!" She gasped.

"Mum!" He leapt into her arms. "Mum…"

"Oh Boruto! I've been worried to death about you!" She began sobbing. "I… I thought you were gone forever! I haven't slept for nights."

"I'm so, so, so sorry mum!" Boruto's tears started again. "I messed up so badly… I…. I sneaked into dad's office and-"

"Boruto?" Naruto's weary voice sounded by the door.

"Dad!" Boruto exclaimed. "Dad – I'm so sorry. I-"

"I know what happened," Naruto said as he sighed. "You broke into my office. My ANBU have already informed me."

"No, it's not that – I-"

"Boruto, wipe your eyes. Let's go to the living room with your mother so we can discuss all about this. Don't worry," Naruto comforted Boruto while gently nudging his wife and son out of the room. "It looks like none of us would be sleeping tonight anyway."

Boruto nodded, still in the clutches of Hinata, not wanting to leave them for the first time since he was a young academy student.

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Sarada wept and wept and wept.

It was not just disappointment she felt over Boruto's actions, it was a sense of betrayal. It was a betrayal of the Boruto she knew.

Mitsuki stood beside her as they walked back into the inn. He hadn't said a word, offering her only a look of tranquillity and composure.

"Mitsuki… don't you feel anything?" She asked, trying to gauge a reaction from him.

"Boruto… Boruto will come back for us," Mitsuki said as he did his best to appear convincing.

"Mitsuki, it's okay to voice your worries. We… I mean, I guess we can't do much about Boruto," Sarada muttered, staring at the ground ahead of her. "We'll, we'll have to try and trust him, though I'm not sure how I feel about him anymore. He's… not like himself."

"Sarada… I'll be honest about my thoughts," Mitsuki admitted, swallowing something before continuing, "Boruto… all he wanted for us to go home. And now you can disagree with his view – I'm personally uncomfortable with his zeal about it all. But he means well for us. He cares deeply for us in his heart and he's doing what he thinks is best."
"Both of you are not wrong. But both of you are not right either…" Mitsuki paused. "What's happened happened. We can only put our trust in him to come back – unless…"

"The scroll!" Sarada spoke what was in his mind, judging from his look of acquiescence.

"It's disappeared, but it's got to be somewhere in this world," Mitsuki nodded.

"But… we can't go just yet," Sarada said.

"But we need to try and locate it so we can get back when we want to," Mitsuki noted.

"We don't know where to start," Sarada sighed.

They were almost at the inn.

"We'll have to wait and see-"

"No," Sarada said. "I'll talk to Sakura about this… We'll be completely frank and honest with her. She's one of the few people here we can trust."

"Dad…" Boruto heaved a deep sigh. "This will be hard for me to describe…"

"It's okay, do your best Boruto," Naruto gazed at him empathically. It made him feel slightly better.

"I took a scroll from your office – one from the forbidden section. I was curious and I was being stupid," Boruto started. "And then something really weird happened. We – me, Sarada and Mitsuki - were transported to this alternate world, where everything was different. Everything. You and mum were both dead, uncle Sasuke was Hokage, aunt Sakura was head of this rebel group called Hi no Ishi, all the countries in the Continent were incorporated into one all-encompassing regime, there was a secret police and most of my friends turned out to be, apparently, children of rebels."

Boruto paused for a moment to recollect himself.

"We arrived at this village that would be a few hours train ride away, except there were no railways in that world. The technology was, in some areas, pretty backwards. So we took a while in walking back. I… I took a gamble and decided to go to Konoha myself – Mitsuki had conjectured that the Hokage's office was probably where the scroll was located in that world. I met a merchant and his cousin on the way – they offered to take me there and I spent the night sleeping in their carriage. When I got to Konoha, I discovered there was a job open for the Hokage's office: they needed an extra errand boy. So I took another gamble and auditioned for it."

Naruto nodded, absorbing everything Boruto said attentively.

"It went… I thought it went well, but then the assistant of the interviewer turned out to be Sasuke in disguise. He offered me the job. He was suspicious about me, but I had no idea. He started testing me immediately after I started work. He threw a kunai at me, I deflected it and he knew I was a shinobi. He found where I was staying, saw this head-band," Boruto stopped as he scrambled for the headband in his pockets. "He then put the pieces together and figured out I was your son from another world. So I told him, I told him that I got here by a forbidden scroll. For some reason and to my surprise, he just offered it to me."

"He gave it to me next day, but then, afterwards, I found out that my friends were at the suburbs and"
fought with the secret police there or something. Sarada was captured, Sasuke recalled me to his office and ordered me to release her and take her back to this world. Coming to think of it, he was very determined to get me to leave…

"But anyways, when we finally got out of there and arrived at this inn that was a secret Hi no Ishi base. Except Sarada didn't want to come back and… I totally messed up! She wanted to help that world; I just wanted to leave it. I was so desperate that I opened the scroll and I thought I got her and Mitsuki, but they substituted themselves with shadow clones…" Boruto couldn't finish the sentence and choked on his tears. "I can't believe it! Why, why am I always screwing things up?!"

None of his parents looked angry, even though Boruto suspected that they were internally pretty vexed about his rashness and stupidity.

Breaking his silence, Naruto finally spoke up: "I see Boruto. So what your saying was that you ended up in a world… where Sasuke won our final fight?"

"Yes. I think so," Boruto concurred.

"I see," Naruto nodded gravely. "How was that world?"

"Shit," Boruto said.

Naruto looked a little sad.

"Poor Sasuke…" Those words slipped from his mouth. His eyes had acquired a suddenly inexplicable forlornness.

"Poor Sasuke? He was crazy," Boruto reminded his father. "Not our Sasuke, but that Sasuke. More importantly, what the hell are we supposed to do?"

"That scroll you took," Naruto explained patiently. "Was one that Sasuke acquired on one of his travels. He warned me it was dangerous, and thus I stored it in the forbidden section. He warned me to never open it, so I never did."

"From my experience, the scroll vanishes every time it is opened," Boruto added.

Naruto nodded: "I see."

"We need to find it in this world. I have to go back and get my friends. I was a total jerk – I – Dad I… you would have been so ashamed of me… Mum, I disappointed you too, I'm nothing like Dad when he was young. I was a coward and an asshole." Boruto lowered his head.

"Boruto, you've made your share of stupid mistakes, but so have I in the past. We all have," Naruto commented thoughtfully. "I know you're not a coward, I know you're someone who ultimately knows what's right. Reckless? Yes. But so was I. Heh. What matters is that you recognise your mistakes and do something to fix it."

"Your father is right Boruto," Hinata said as she smiled encouragingly at him. "No matter what happens, you're still my baby boy and a brave one who managed to help rescue his father and this world. What matters is that we find the scroll, get you back there so you can do what's right and bring your friends back."

Boruto looked at both his parents, both of whom were smiling at him.

"How can both of you be so… understanding?"
"We love you Boruto and, more than that, we believe in you," Hinata said kindly.

Boruto yawned and then realised just how tired he was. He nudged closer to his mother on the sofa and his father moved in from the other side.

Slowly, sleep dawned on him. He felt safe in his parents' arms.

Sasuke Uchiha was in his office when the forbidden scroll re-appeared on his desk. It was midnight, but he barely sleeps anyway.

He chuckled as he noticed it and carried on writing.

Things were finally back to normal.

No.

He could still sense her. Her and the other boy.

Sasuke Uchiha was travelling through the Earth Country when he noticed a disturbance.

There it was, the forbidden scroll right before his eyes, situated near the window of a closed shop. It was the scroll he acquired when he wandered through the ruins of Uzushiogakure. The one he warned Naruto about.

He used his Rinnegan to transport himself in there, pocketed the scroll and promptly transported himself out.

He needed to get back to Konoha. Soon.

Something was wrong.

"… and Boruto was gone. He's back at his own world," Sarada finished describing what just happened to Sakura. "I… I want to find the scroll. I know that you want me to say until this regime is defeated and I will, I'll try my best, I'll try whatever I can. But I need to get my hands on that scroll too. At the end of the day, I belong to the other world."

"I understand, Sarada," Sakura whispered gently and pulled the girl close to her. "Boruto, he's misguided, yes, but he cares about you. He cares a lot about you and Mitsuki. He was willing to go very far for both of you."

"I know," Sarada sighed. "I…"

"Don't worry Sarada," Sakura said in a comforting voice. "In fact, we might have a sliver of hope in the scroll Shikadai gave me. I'll explain it to you later tomorrow when we're back at Mount Myoboku. Right now, you need sleep."

"Yes… mama," Sarada tried smiling.

"I've always loved it when you call me mama," Sakura said, her expressions bittersweet. "I'll miss you when you're gone."
They were gathered in Naruto's office in the afternoon, the day after the next. Boruto, Naruto and Sakura too. Boruto had, according to his mother, been as dead as a rock until then, wallowing in a dreamless slumber. When he finally woke up, he was mildly horrified.

When they had informed a distraught Sakura that her daughter was still alive, if only trapped in another dimension, she couldn't be more relieved. She insisted on a meeting immediately to discuss what was going on.

Sasuke, apparently, was still away on his travels, but Naruto had sent a message to him to summon him back to the village.

In the meantime, Boruto briefed Sakura on his encounters.

"A world where I'm the leader of the resistance and where I'm hell-bent on overthrowing Sasuke?" Sakura observed while frowning. "This almost brings back memories of times when Team 7 was separated. I'm starting to imagine what might have been had you, Naruto, lost then and there."

"Crazy, huh? That the world could have been so different," Naruto nodded in agreement.

"No Shinobi Union, no you, no Boruto, no Sarada..." Sakura's voice trailed off.

"A crap place," Boruto finished off. "'Cuz I'm amazing and I won't be there." He then joked.

Naruto chuckled while Sakura rolled her eyes. Like father, like son.

"So," Sakura said as she took a serious turn. "What do we plan to do?"

"No idea," Boruto sighed, glancing at the two with a helpless gaze. "They have a rebel group but it hasn't been very successful in the past. It almost seems like they haven't made any progress at all, truth to be told."

"Boruto," Naruto scolded. "Don't say that – where there is hope, there is a way!"

"Dad, I'm serious. These folks are seeing their bases dwindling by the day, their spies are weeded out constantly and they didn't even have eyes and ears in the Hokage's office. On top of that, they have absolutely no way of overcoming the regime in terms of raw power, manpower and financial resources and their popular support is, at best, tepid," Boruto explained while shaking his head. "I do regret leaving, by accident, my friends there and I do think I was being a cynical jerk, but you have to know that I did have a point."

"I'll go," Naruto answered gravely, much to Boruto and Sakura's surprise. "It was my fault in that world for not beating Sasuke in our final battle. It only makes sense that I do something to remedy things... Still... maybe I'll be able to talk him out of it. I don't believe Sasuke is really gone forever..."

"No way dad," Boruto rebutted his father. "He seemed pretty set on his ways."

"I disagree," Naruto replied. "He could have killed you right there when he found out who you are, Boruto. But instead, he offered to help you leave the place. My guess is that he... he doesn't want to face you or the past. He doesn't want to know what could have happened."
"But the prophecy," Boruto argued. "He just wanted me to leave so I don't disturb the balance of that world."

"Like I said, he could have just killed you to get rid of that problem," Naruto said, certain that he was correct, ever so confident of his best friend's inner goodness.

"Okay, but so what? He's still crazy," Boruto pouted in front of his father. "How on earth are we going to get him to listen to us? He's also said he'll kill me if he found out I went back. And how are we going back?"

"Right," Naruto admitted. "That would be a problem."

In the meantime, Sarada was gathered in Sakura's office, filled with various members of Hi no Ishi. Shikamaru was there strategizing and his wife, Temari, appeared too, having taken a journey from Sunagakure. Both of them looked older, Sarada noted, much more haggard than their selves in her world, weathered by hardships and drained by years of fighting a losing war. Wrinkles were already emerging on Temari's forehead. Shikadai, Sarada realised with a warmth rising inside her, was absolutely delighted to see both of his parents – given their normally occupied schedule, this meeting was a rarity. He snorted as his mother made an offside comment about his messy hair and tried to fix his clothes. His father simply uttered the familiar words "troublesome woman."

Kakashi was there too, reclining against the wall with an old copy of Icha Icha Paradise, waiting for Sakura's arrival. It was worn, at least ten years old. Now that she thought about it, this was the first time she saw him prowl through his licentious and controversial books.

Konohamaru had a serious air about him, something that was usually absent when he was their sensei; he had always been a jovial and light-hearted person, too cheerful for his own good, to the extent of becoming rather comical.

Many other former members of the Konoha 11 were there too. Tenten sharpened her kunai as Rock Lee jumped up and down excitedly, pumped for whatever revelation was to come. Shino-sensei was withdrawn, silent and brooding in response to Kiba's enthusiastic babble about dogs. Chouji shared a bag of chips affectionately with his daughter, Chocho, as he recounted his most recent adventures in foiling an operation to uncover the Hi no Ishi base in Iwagakure.

This conglomeration of familiar peoples, of vital figures in Hi no Ishi can only mean one thing, Sarada reasoned: this had to be something important.

A revelation? A way to overthrow the regime? Sarada couldn't tell. Mitsuki looked just as confused beside her.

"We may have found a way," Sakura declared as she strode in with a scroll, the one Karin gave to Shikadai before her death. "Hope at last. Hope of defeating him."

Kakashi nodded.

"By that you mean?" Shikamaru pressed on.

"Shikadai," Sakura smiled at the boy. "Why don't you start first?"

"Me?" The boy took one glance at the scroll she was holding and understood what she meant.
"Okay. It was during our retrieval missing to Konoha. We encountered someone from Orochimaru's base, Karin, in a tavern. According to her, the base had been sacked earlier that day. She knew she
was going to die and she didn't seem to mind it. But before that, she gave me a scroll and asked me to give it to Hi no Ishi."

"And," Sakura continued. "What's in it could hold the key to defeating the regime: the location of the nine tailed beasts."

A hush descended upon the room.

Stunned faces.

Hopeful faces.

Perplexed faces.

Delighted faces.

Sarada saw them all.

"… That… is great news," Shikamaru was the one to break the silence.

"It is," Sakura said. "If we could locate all of them, wrench them away from the Hokage's control and harness their powers, we might just be able to oppose him, which is why I called you all here in the first place."

"Where are they?" Kiba burst out impulsively. "We'll find them immediately."

"Hang on, I'm just getting there," Sakura said. "Sasuke has sealed them in scattered locations all across the Continent. According to the scroll, each location requires an intricate knowledge of how the mechanisms of each seal works in order to retrieve each tailed beast. Fortunately, this scroll has everything covered."

"Everything?" Konohamaru sounded incredulous.

"Everything – from location to sealing procedures," Sakura affirmed. "This could be the principle reason why Sasuke chose to eliminate Orochimaru and his lackeys."

"Makes sense," Kakashi agreed.

"But how confident are you about the veracity of the scroll's information?" Shikamaru questioned cautiously. "We would all like it to be true, but what are the chances of it being not?"

"I think…" Sakura paused before continuing. "It is worth the risk. This is the best chance we've got. Plus, for Karin herself to risk her life and carry this piece of information to us in an act of vengeance, she herself had to believe it would do great harm to the regime."

Sakura took a deep breath: "Shikamaru and Temari, both of you will be tasked with retrieving the Ichibi."

"Yes," the couple nodded.

"Kiba," Sakura ordered. "I will allocated a task force to help you with extracting the Nibi."

The man flashed a canine smile: "I'm on it."

"Kakashi, you'll be focusing on the Sanbi," the woman continued. "Our agents in from the Land of Water will deal with the Yonbi. Chouji – take down the Gobi with your daughter. Konohamaru, you
and Mitsuki will capture the Rokubi. Shino, the Nanabi. Rock Lee and Tenten, the Hachibi. And Sarada and I will go after the Kyuubi. Come to me separately after this and I will give you the further details."

"What do we do then?" asked Tenten. "What do we do after we get the tailed beasts?"

"They hate Sasuke's guts for imprisoning them," Sakura said. "We'll use them to our advantage."

"How?" Temari questioned. "By creating new jinchurikis?"

Sakura sighed, conceding, "That is a possibility."

Father and son were back in the house. They were still pondering about the other world, debating the merits of Naruto's claims about Sasuke and utilising knowledge from the past to back up their arguments.

"Dad," Boruto said again. "I don't – I don't think you understand. Sasuke's a different person there. He won't listen to any of your advice; he'll probably try to kill you. You don't know him there."

"As a matter of fact, I think I do," Naruto frowned. "You see, he's just like our Sasuke before – someone warped in cynicism, someone who was utterly disillusioned with the world and believed in resorting to extreme solutions. Fundamentally, he means well, even if his methods and reasoning are utterly wrong."

"But-"

"He's also lonely," Naruto added. "We were both lonely when we were young. But the Sasuke in the other world, he's the loneliest of us all – don't you see it? He's all there at the top, all-powerful, but he has severed all his bonds. And Sakura hates him. He has no one."

"He doesn't seem to care," Boruto shrugged.

"But he does," Naruto argued. "I believe he does."

"He-"

"Do you know what he told me? Way back before our final battle?" Naruto cut off his son. "He saw how the five villages united in the face of a common enemy. He said he wanted to eliminate all the bonds he formed in the world. He said he wanted to be Hokage, to establish a system where everyone feared him and concentrated their hatred on him. That way, there will be no more wars because everyone had a common enemy."

I don't harm people for the sake of harming them.

Boruto remembered these words from his conversation with Sasuke. No. It couldn't be. Was every malicious act done with a purpose, a purpose to exacerbate people's fear and hatred towards him? If that were the case then Sasuke had, in some ways, succeeded. People were united either out of fear of (like old man Ichirou, Takashi, Ayame and the sycophantic social-climbers in Konoha) or hatred against him (like members of Hi no Ishi.)


Disrupter, Boruto remembered Sasuke calling him that. Was it because he, in some mystical way, altered the balance of power and chakra in the world and posed a threat to the regime that way? Or
was it because he reminded Sasuke of a world that could have been?

"No," Boruto reaffirmed himself again. "No."

"You know, the more you say no, the less certain you sound," observed Naruto.

"But the man is also perfectly capable of cruelty," Boruto said. "He's capable of unspeakable ruthlessness."

"I know that, I know exactly what you mean."

"Then how do we-"

He was interrupted by the doorbell.

It was Sasuke.

"We're retrieving the Kyuubi together?" Sarada approached Sakura bemusedly in private.

"Correct, Sarada," Sakura said. "It's... located in an obscure cave in the Land of Fire, near a series of abandoned monasteries."

"But why me?" Sarada asked. "What help can I be?"

"The Sharingan," the woman answered. "It can be used to subdue the Kyuubi if need be."

"I see..." Sarada said, feeling a little queasy on the inside. She had gotten too close with the woman in front of her; she was sure the woman had other reasons for choosing her. She didn't know how she felt about conflating this Sakura with her mother. They were so similar and so different. Her mother was bold, brave and intelligent, but she didn't possess the same kind of steeliness one acquired by leading a resistance group for almost twenty years. Could she be letting this relationship cloud her judgment? No. No way. All she wanted was to help this world out of darkness and go back to hers and become Hokage. Yes, that was all she desired.

"We leave in the dead of night," Sakura said. "In the meantime, you can... hang out with your friends here? Get some food? Get some rest? We have important things ahead of us."

"Yes, Sakura," Sarada smiled. She consciously avoided the word 'mama.'

If Sakura noticed, she didn't show it.

"Bastard, you're finally here," Naruto joked. "What took you so long?"

Sasuke rolled his eyes at Naruto and answered: "I was at the Land of Earth."

"Alright, fair enough."

"I found this..." He took out the forbidden scroll; Boruto and Naruto's eyes bulged in surprised, in pleasant surprise.

"Where on earth did you get this?" Boruto gasped. "How on earth did you know we were looking for it?"

"To answer the first question, the Land of Earth — no pun intended," Sasuke said wryly. "To answer
the second question, I didn't. But I knew it was meant to be in Naruto's office – it was too risky to be anywhere else. Speaking of which, Boruto, were you the muppet who opened this scroll?"

He glared at the boy, who shirked back. Even in this world, Sasuke still had the scariest glares.

"…Yes… and in fact… I…" Boruto trailed off. Gathering himself together, he resumed, "Shishou, I snuck into dad's office at night with Sarada and Mitsuki and-

"Oh God," Sasuke facepalmed. "I knew it. Naruto – why the hell is your office so poorly guarded?"

"Don't blame me," Naruto defended himself. "I had tons of ANBU there and I was away to a Gokage summit!"

"Let me guess, Boruto," Sasuke conjectured. "You were all transported to another dimension?"

"Yes," Boruto answered, his head hanging low.

"And you accidentally came back?" Sasuke asked again, with a slightly accusatory tone.

"Yes," Boruto said, appearing decidedly ashamed.

"Of course. Naruto, Boruto – the scroll I just gave you, according to what I deciphered from the ruins in Uzu, it has the ability to transport one into another dimension, one where the most important events of a century diverged," Sasuke explained.

"I know," Boruto said. "In that other dimension, you killed dad at the Valley of the End."

Sasuke looked taken aback by Boruto's comments.

"Crazy, huh?" Naruto remarked.

"I see," Sasuke said. He looked rather uncomfortable. "I… somewhat expected that," he continued glumly. "And that was the main reason why, Naruto, that I wanted you to keep it safe from all human contact."

"We're going back there – Dad and I," Boruto told his master. "We're going back there to make things right and bring back Sarada and Mitsuki. Don't you worry."

"You're really asking me to not worry?" The man deadpanned.

"Hey Sasuke!" Naruto complained. "We'll be fine! Actually, you should come too. You should go there and give your other self a good kicking."

"I wish I could," Sasuke said. "But I can't. You see, there are two main features to this scroll. One, it vanishes and reappears elsewhere in one dimension every time it is used. Two, it can't transport those whose chakra are present in both dimension. So in other words, no me, no Sakura and no anyone whose also alive around there. Believe me, I tried. It didn't work."

"Oh," Boruto said disappointedly.

"So…from what I've gathered," Sasuke analysed. "Both of you will be confronting me there?"

The two nodded.

"I see," he sighed. "I can't exactly predict how I'll act – strange huh? Back then, I was so reckless, so single-minded… so inconsiderate. I believed only I could be right. But, do remember to tell the man
that there are other ways to achieve peace and that Naruto's vision isn't unrealistically utopic. Do tell him that the world deserves better. Oh and if that doesn't work, kick his ass."

Naruto laughed: "Don't worry – we will! I'll kick your ass so badly like I did back then-

"To be fair, it was a draw," Sasuke interjected. "But good luck anyway, loser. No, losers."

Boruto thought he caught a smirk. Sasuke poked him on the forehead and said: "Make sure your dad doesn't do anything stupider than you did."

"So," Naruto stated. "Boruto, let's open the scroll?"

"Alright! Here we go!" Boruto declared triumphantly.

He was going back; he was going to right what's wrong. He was going to save Sarada and Mitsuki.

The room was enwrought with a luminescent radiation. Boruto felt his senses freeze – given that this was his third time round, this sensation felt less ludicrous and unsettling. Voices, chanting voices broke out as his vision gave way to darkness. He saw that he was being transported into a limbo dimension, where void was all there is.

Boruto's neck couldn't move, yet his eyes could. He rotated them left to right to absorb his surroundings.

His father was not there with him.

Boruto thought his vision must have gone awry, so he retraced his eyes, surveying all that surrounded him. Still no dad.

His alertness was blurring, the edges of his vision becoming more and more blunted. His mind was inundated with fuzziness. His head hurt.

His consciousness was fading, fading, fading, fading,

fading, fading, fading,

fading fading

fading
Chapter 14

Sarada followed Sakura through the woods of the Land of Fire. It was the dead of night and not a soul budged in the vicinity. For extra precautions, they were both subjected to heavy disguises. Sarada became a young girl with blond hair and green eyes, while Sakura transformed into an elderly women with greying hair, which made it all the more peculiar that they were travelling at high speed.

With the moon and stars masked by the dense, dark foliage, the two had to rely on their personal torchlights to illuminate the way. The rustlings of leaves were the only sound that was present. The two kept quiet for fear of drawing undue attention – although that, for now, seemed unlikely.

They were closing in on the Kyuubi, at least according to Sakura. The dim trees flashed by them as they leapt from branch to branch.

Sarada's mind returned to Boruto. The boy must be back in his Konoha now. Knowing him, he must be feeling devastated about the whole affair. Mitsuki was on point: he had meant well, even if they disagreed on what was right. Boruto would probably be trying his hardest to find his way back, though Sarada felt dubious about his chances of success. All of a sudden, a sense of remorse coursed through her – their last parting was tense and acrimonious. They left each other yelling, screaming, slandering.

"Sarada, you look troubled. Is there something wrong?" Sakura asked, noticing Sarada's perturbed expression.

"Nothing, Sakura," Sarada replied. "Just thinking about Boruto."

They arrived at the foot of a vast, rocky cliff embedded with derelict temples and carved with weathered Buddha statues and fading, blurring sacred sutras. The supposed location of the Kyuubi.

It was dusk. There was a melancholy air about the place, like the wistful exclamation of something once great and mighty as it peters out into oblivion. Indeed, monasteries vibrant and full of activity once flourished around here. Ascetics, monks in the Fire Country – long before the establishment of the Five Great Shinobi Villages and the foundation of the Shinobi system prior to the revolution – would meditate in caves here, abstaining from all the earthly desires love, desire and greed, harnessing and honing their chakra in hopes of attaining some form of spiritual enlightenment. But those times were long gone. All that remained were the temples that had long fallen into disrepair, never to be resurrected again. Nonetheless, a convenient location to contain a tailed-beast, owing to its obscurity.

"This place is… beautiful," Sarada whispered to her companion. "Beautiful and sad."

Sakura nodded: "Just goes to show how all things come and go."

"Yes," Sarada replied, attempting to shake off this feeling of awe. She activated her Sharingan, sweeping her vista through the region in attempt to detect potential threats. "There's nothing…." she frowned. "Or rather, I can't see anything. There's a feeling of something being blocked."

"That's when the knowledge from the scroll comes in handy," Sakura said assuredly. "Watch out for any guards."

Darkness.
His five senses escaped him as he levitated amidst a strange void. Numb and helpless, he continued to drift, drift, drift…

Who am I? He began to ponder. What is my place in this world? Why am I here?

Nothingness. Oblivion.

But he was there; he was conscious.

No, he declared to himself. I have a name. I am Boruto Uzumaki, son of Naruto Uzumaki and Hinata Hyuuga, genin of Konoha and member of Team Konohamaru. And-

His eyes flew open.

He was in someone else's room. The sun was up. The sky was a bright blue. It was fairly early in the morning.

Where am I? He contemplated, surveying his surroundings quizzically.

There were old posters of action movies he had never seen or heard of before, coupled with a few old photos of a young boy, a familiar young boy. A boy laughing with his parents.

"Boruto, are you awake?" rang Takashi's voice from the outside.

He was in Takashi's house.

But why?

And where was his father?

Naruto was nowhere to be found. Where was he? Was he left behind? Did he make it? Or was he stuck in that other world for unfathomable reasons?

Boruto leapt out of his bed and left the room.

Takashi was cooking breakfast. Judging from the smell, it was a mixture of toast, bacon and eggs.

"Takashi, why am I here?" Boruto asked, utterly confounded by the circumstances he found himself in and the absence of his father.

"I found you on the street, passed out. I had to do something so I carried you to my house. I had a spare room where I used to stay when I was young – back when, well, there's no point in me saying much about that. Anyways, I put you in that room and basically waited for you to wake up," Takashi explained rather cheerfully. He seemed like the optimistic kind of guy, Boruto concluded.

"Well, thank you Takashi," Boruto said gratefully. "Speaking of which, what's going on exactly?"

The man shrugged and said, "I'd last to ask you that, to be honest. You did vanish without a trace a few days ago."

"That is … uh, none of your concern," Boruto pouted.

"Just curious," Takashi said, surprised that his question was rebuffed.

"But thanks anyway Takashi," Boruto said. "I don't know how screwed I would be if I continued to stay passed out on the streets."

"No problem," Takashi replied. "That being said, you won't come back to the Hokage's office, right? I saw your resignation papers. They were personally signed by the Hokage."

"No," Boruto confirmed, deliberately trying to be elusive. "I… I won't stay here for long either."

"Okay" was all Takashi said before handing over a plate of breakfast to Boruto. "Come on, let's eat!"

Boruto nodded.

"So," Boruto ventured for conversation. "Anything in the news?"

"Well, there appears to be a surge in rebel activity earlier today – some of my more… elite colleagues have been summoned to missions," Takashi said.

Sarada. Mitsuki. Boruto mentally crossed his fingers and hoped they would be okay.

"Are you… alright?" Takashi asked, after seeing the colour drain from Boruto's face. "Is there something I can do to help?"

"Not much. I'm fine, thanks for asking," Boruto answered. "It's just… You're not suspicious are you?"

"Of you? About what?" Takashi questioned bemusedly. "That you were a rebel spy? Given that the Hokage personally authorized your resignation and given that you were decidedly absent from the torture chambers, unlikely."

"Nice analysis," Boruto complimented jokingly. "Yeah I suck at hiding stuff."

"Believe me, I can tell when someone is pretty antagonistic towards the regime," Takashi continued. "I've seen too many."

"Also, when you found me, was I alone?" Boruto asked with his father in mind.

"Yes," Takashi confirmed his worst fears.

"Oh."

His father was not with him; Boruto was alone again. The fear of it all descended upon him. His heart fell. There will be no help from the Nanadaime in this struggle.

"What's the matter? You don't look very happy." the man queried after witnessing Boruto's rather downcast expressions, which emerged immediately upon his answer.

"Okay, Takashi… I'll tell you something, but you can't tell anyone," Boruto said warily. "I went back to find my father. We came to Konoha again and were walking on its streets and I passed out."

A half-truth.

"I see," Takashi said sympathetically. "I'm sorry I can't be of any help with that. Does… does your father engage in any form of 'suspicious' activity? Sorry if this question sounded indelicate."

"Not that I know of," Boruto replied, realising that Takashi clearly had Hi no Ishi or other forms of dissident activity in mind.

"My father did – my father and my mother both did," the man said abruptly. "I didn't know anything about it either, until the secret police came into my house one day. I was 15 then, just celebrating a
chunin promotion with my friends. I came home late and they weren't there anymore. There was only a letter that said they had been incarcerated for crimes against the state…”

Takashi couldn't continue anymore as he choked on words.

"Are you okay?" It was Boruto's turn to ask.

"My apologies," Takashi smiled as he took a few moments to recollect his demeanour. He was obviously shaken by his own (accidental) revelation, which opened a chapter of his life that he'd rather not revisit. "I spoke too much about this – Ayame would go nuts if she found out. It's no big deal anyway. I'm fine. It took me a while to get over this, but hey, I ended up becoming a jonin with a fairly solid job. Life goes on."

Well, Boruto thought, this conversation took a darker turn.

Boruto stared at the man in front of him, complicated emotions swirling inside. He seemed like the kind of person who just wanted to get along with life, but Boruto suspected that deep inside, Takashi would always be haunted by the fate of his parents.

"Do you miss them?" Boruto could help question.

Takashi was silent for a minute or two. An awkwardness descended upon the table as Boruto began playing with his bacon, delicately slicing off strings of unwanted grease, waiting for the man opposite him to speak.

"…Yes, Boruto, I do," Takashi said.

"I'm… I'm really sorry for getting all personal," Boruto immediately began apologising.

"It's alright! You seem like a decent person," Takashi replied. "Although we really shouldn't be talking about stuff like this. And, really, we should stop apologising to each other for asking questions– it's getting a little tedious."

"Agreed," Boruto said.

"Now," Takashi continued speaking as he got up from his chair. "I'm about to go off to work. What would you like to do? Stay here? Go elsewhere? It's really up to you, you know. I have a spare room, my old room before I moved into my parents'. It's your call."

To leave or not to leave? Boruto mused internally. He'd be pretty secure at Takashi's house, he reckoned. Yet the image of Sarada and Mitsuki struggling overtook his mind.

"It was nice to meet you again, Takashi. But I've got to go. Thank you for your hospitality, though, and uh… good luck with Ayame in the future!" Boruto told the man cheerily and then ran up to him in a hug. Takashi closed his eyes and returned it.

Boruto was going to the one place where one was guaranteed to encounter Hi no Ishi: Sayuri's bookstore.

This was the cave they were looking for, Sarada realised. It corroborated perfectly with Sakura's descriptions – four pillars away from the temple facing the rising sun, which had shone onto a mystical edifice's now rusty decorations. They no longer reflected a golden glow.

Come closer and one can see faded inscriptions, a language no longer spoken or written, erased from
living memory. Now they just had to warp their chakras to operate the correct seals that translated these engravings into an opening. Sakura already had the instructions.

Whatever these indecipherable inscriptions were though, Sarada contemplated, they were impeccable at masking things: when she activated her Sharingan, she could sense nothing behind the walls. Neither could Sakura with her years of experience.

"Watch out!" Sakura yelled as a kunai flew towards Sarada. The girl dodged just in time, backflipping nimbly.

The ANBU.

A man in a nefarious tiger mask threw a punch at Sarada, who sidestepped it and grabbed his arm, throwing him off-balance temporarily. Several shuriken flew at her from the distance, which she deflected easily – shurikenjutsu had always been her forte. Yet the force of the attacks caused both of their disguises to peel off.

A female ANBU began weaving a few hand signs. Sarada immediately recognized the makings of a fire jutsu. She smashed the ground, forming a protruding earthly barrier just as roaring fireballs descended upon the duo, blockading them from the worst scorching excesses as the retreated to avoid any damage.

"Nice one there!" Sakura complimented, recognizing one of her signature moves. There a small flicker of pride, which was replaced by alertness almost instantaneously. The fight shifted onto the surface of the cliff as they dodged attack after attack. She then dug her fists into the ground, creating a crater on the rocky walls of the cliff, causing several ANBU to lose balance and tumble down into oblivion.

Sarada concentrated chakra into her fists until it glowed a dense blue colour, she pummeled another ANBU with it, sending him flying into the surface of the cliff, sinking into like an engraving.

A cat masked female ANBU almost knocked her off balance with a kick. Sarada channeled all her strength and chakra into the walls, digging her fingers through its surface until it formed a solid hold and then swept her legs up with a powerful burst, blocking an attack from the female ANBU. She the regained stability, retracting her hand and pursued to throw an explosive kunai at her assaulter.

One brief glance told her that Sakura had finished off many enemies. The woman dodged, punched, kicked with a lethal grace.

An ANBU with apparent mastery over the Earth Style made a few signs and his malignant chakra seeped through the walls.

Sakura flew back to Sarada in an instant.

"Stay close with me," the woman whispered. "I think I know what he's going to do."

Sharp edges protruded out of the surface, one by one, approaching the duo with an aim to destroy.

"We've got to get close to him and knock him out," Sakura explained. "Or kill him."

"Got it," Sarada nodded resolutely. "I might have the perfect way to counter this."

The two set off, circumventing the sharp obstacles that often bent and moved to attack them. It was as if the entire wall transformed into the domain of the attacker: it bent to his will. Sakura smashed a spiky column out of the way, pulverizing it into dust as Sarada followed close behind.
But they were still too far and the longer they take, the more the cliff's surface became a reflection of the ANBU's control. They had to act faster.

"Sakura," Sarada asked as she dodged another attack. "Can you use water style?"

"Yes," the woman replied. "A little."

"Enough to conjure a decent amount of water out of nowhere?"

"Definitely."

"Can you get up to near the top of this cliff and release a water jutsu? I'll take care of the rest," Sarada offered.

"Are you sure this will work?"

"About fifty percent chance?"

"I'll take a gamble."

The pink-haired woman leapt upwards, avoiding the profuse onslaught of sharp rocks. The attacker then refocused his attention towards Sarada, being slightly perplexed by the sudden turn of events.

Sarada bared her knuckles. She was so ready for this. She deflected a series of high-velocity rocks and waited for new developments, barely moving.

A sudden barrage of water crashed down – Sakura did her job. Now it was Sarada's turn.

It was a jutsu that her father had taught her during one of their few training sessions (most of his time was occupied on Boruto, to her slight dismay.) They called it chidori. She weaved the necessary hand signs one by one, anchoring her feet to the surface of the cliff securely.

And when all the preparations were done she flew into the air and landed back on the walls, hands first. The electrical energy erupted from her palms just as they collided with the cliff, overrun by flowing water. It shocked the entire surface, submerging with waves of lightning, powerful lightning that consumed every single ANBU member on it. Sarada doubled down on the chakra in her fists and the shocking continued. The sharp columns and protrusions were shattered, that one ANBU lost his connection with the cliff surface and members of the ANBU started falling down and down and down.

Sakura utilized this opportunity to charge down at them, knocking the still remaining ones off.

Soon, there were none left.

"We did it!" Sarada gasped.

Sakura smiled at her as they proceeded back to the cave.

Now comes the hard part.
Chapter 15

Somewhere in the sands of the desert, a woman swung her giant fan, unleashing a deadly torrent and sweeping the remains of her opponents aside, into the sand dunes. They perished in a volatile whirlwind.

A giant raccoon with a sandy pelt, coated in atavistic patterns and inscriptions that harkened back to an era where the Sage of Sixth Paths roamed the earth, grinned triumphantly: "We did it!"

"Yup Shukaku, you're free," Temari said emotionally, remembering her younger brother who did not survive the last war. Gaara would have been happy to know that his tailed-beast, a foe turned friend, was finally liberated from his sealed shackles.

"A troublesome effort, that was," Shikamaru remarked as he lit a cigarette.

One down, eight more to go.

Kiba gazed with awe at the spectacle in front of him. Something stirred through the crevices. He was in the midst of the rocky mountain ranges of the Land of Lightning.

The chakra ritual he performed with Akamaru had unleashed something, some primal force. He was sure of it.

He leapt away from a dangerous cluster of lightning.

The ANBU.

This fight was not going to be easy.

Kakashi and his group of shinobi approached the marshes of the Land of Water after a day's journey, which involved traversing a vast array of land and sea, keeping their profile low whilst travelling in a fisherman's boat that just so happened to be on its way to Kirigakure for business. The humidity of their surroundings bore an inexplicable oppressiveness.

"Are we any closer?" One of his companions asked.

"Not yet," Kakashi replied with professional curtness.

Boruto had reached the suburbs of Konoha. It was a reassuringly mundane place, with families, young children and teenagers laughing about in the park, seeping coffee in snug cafes and gossiping in the streets. It was just so, so ordinary; so out of place in this world.

Boruto wondered if any of these people he witnessed cared about who was in charge of running things or what sort of system they lived in at all. Then again, it seemed that all the vast majority of people anywhere really wanted was to go about their daily lives unperturbed. It didn't matter if the secret police arrested anyone, even if it was somebody they knew, for so long as they were safe, so long as they had a place in the world, nothing else mattered.

"Papers!" A gruff police officer interrupted his stream of consciousness.

"What?" Boruto asked in confusion.
"I said, papers. Your identification papers? You know… the stuff you're meant to carry all the time…?" The man asked again, irritated.

"Eh… I left them in my house," Boruto said, hanging his head in pretense.

"I'll let you off this time," the man growled, whipping out a small camera to take a snapshot of Boruto. "This is going in the records. Name?"

"Kenkou," Boruto blurted out the first name he could think of.

"Don't let this happen again Kenkou."

"Right, sir."

Boruto turned a corner, walked down a street, turned another and took a detour down an alley, venturing into a narrower street lined with small boutique shops and quaint cafes. This is where the bohemian teenagers and intellectuals go, having their erudite conversations, often foraying into the forbidden and political. But nothing ever comes out of here; it all stays safe within the confines of this corner.

He walked past another coffee shop: it was filled with youngsters chattering excitedly.

"So you came back," a grave, familiar voice sounded behind him.

Sasuke.

Boruto froze, holding his ground, his internals heaving up and down. Truly, he hadn't expected this. He mentally cursed.

Sasuke took his time and slowly, almost tauntingly, approached Boruto, placing his left hand on the boy's right shoulder. It felt heavy, Boruto acknowledged with discomfort.

"I do recall saying that I will kill you if you stayed in this world," Sasuke turned to Boruto with a fixed gaze, eyelids unflinching. "Or came back."

"I…"

"Go on, tell me why. You're running out of time," Sasuke threatened. He didn't need to brandish his kunai or give any indication of unleashing a jutsu. His glare was enough, as was the fear constructed by one's imagination of his powers.

Boruto gulped.

Sasuke chuckled slightly: "Feeling intimidated?"

Still no reply. Seeing Sasuke bemused expressions felt strange.

"I came back to get my friends, okay?!" Boruto gasped, flummoxed. "How on earth did you find-"

"Your chakra signature is fairly recognisable," Sasuke said, shrugging.

Boruto took a step back and surveyed the man. He no longer had his Hokage robes with him and was donned in a simple black T-shirt, being rather distinguishable from your average shinobi. The Uchiha fan was decidedly missing; perhaps he wanted to blend in with the crowd better while he-
"I followed you from Takashi's place. Poor guy, lost his parents to the secret police when he was 15. Still fairly loyal to the regime though, surprisingly. Though perhaps not to the extent where he'd turn you over immediately," Sasuke explained with an eerie nonchalance, as if he didn't mind his role in all of this. "It's amazing how compliant your average man can be isn't it?"

Boruto nodded slowly, afraid to demonstrate unnecessary emotions. He couldn't really disagree with the last point either after witnessing the world around him.

"You're heading off to the bookstore… I presume?"

"What?!"

Boruto was, for a brief moment, speechless. He then swiftly recomposed himself: "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Sasuke leant against the wall of the café, crossed his arms and continued, smirking slightly at Boruto's baffled reaction: "Did you really think I wouldn't have guessed by now? It's been almost 20 years. Hi no Ishi is not as secretive as they'd like to believe."

"Wait, what?!"

"Kakashi, Sakura, Shikamaru, Konohamaru and more – do you really believe I wouldn't notice their chakra signatures flickering and disappearing in this one particular area in the Land of Fire?"

"What?! So-"

"Yes. I knew. I've known for a good 15 years," Sasuke admitted, his gaze still unflinching, stone cold.

"What?!"

"Are you going undergoing some sort of speech impediment? Your vocabulary has been awfully restricted," Sasuke quipped.

"Hey! Okay, what the hell is going on? Also, weren't you going to kill me?" Boruto asked, his muddled thoughts spilling over. Never in his life had he been this confused.

"Would you like me to?" Sasuke said dryly, still fixing his impenetrable eyes on Boruto, who gulped. It felt like another autopsy.

"Not – not particularly, no-"

"Well, who wouldn't have guessed?"

"Shocking, isn't it?" Boruto started laughing nervously. His shoulders were reflexively raised; they have been like that ever since he encountered Sasuke.

"You'd be surprised at how many people have openly begged me to kill them," Sasuke mused.

Not a word from Boruto.

"Let's head inside. I'd very much prefer to discuss things over coffee," Sasuke said as he gestured towards a coffee shop.

Boruto frowned in response. He was still processing the events before him.
"Don't bother running away, kid. If you do, I really will kill you."

"Wait-"

In an instant, Boruto felt cold metal press against his throat. His traced his eyes down the kunai Sasuke held. It was delicately located, close to his vital spots but not yet cutting him – if he moved too quickly, he would have harmed himself.

Calm down, Boruto told himself. He tried to wrench his mind away from the present and into a tranquillizing memory – to little avail.

"Come with me," the man ordered quietly. He didn't need to raise his voice. Sensing Boruto was about to nod or say something in response, he then added: "Don't move. Unless you fancy a wound near your throat. Now, listen. We're going in there and we're going to request a private suite. But before all that…"

Boruto breathed a sigh of relief as Sasuke removed the kunai, pocketed it and snapped his fingers. Boruto could detect an emergence of chakra as it swirled around the air.

Both of them were immediately transformed into teenage boys. Boruto was still a blond, but he no longer possessed his characteristic facial whiskers. A hue of green replaced his clear blue eyes. Sasuke looked younger, had brown hair and his facial features became less sharpened, his nose flatter. His eyes, however, remained the same. They looked normal at first glance, but upon closer inspection, revealed the impenetrable depths of a ruthless killer.

"What is the meaning of this?" Boruto questioned, as he approached the window, looking quizzically at his own reflected. He then surveyed his surroundings, revelling slightly at his newly elevated position.

"They don't like it when non-teenagers go in," Sasuke said matter-of-factly, shrugging his shoulders. "Might I also mentioned I – we, I guess – would have drawn a lot of attention if we went in there as ourselves?"

"Okay, whatever. I was just asking," Boruto muttered.

This will not go well, Boruto told himself, a sense of unease creeping within him as he followed Sasuke into the café.

"A private suite, please," Sasuke asked a waiter, pulling of an impression of courtesy.

It felt unsettling to see him smile so politely, Boruto thought. And say the word "please."

On their way to the private room, Boruto overheard a gang of two boys and two girls discussing politics.

"Oh, we all know it's the regime's fault in Suna. They've been starving that place for ages – it's about time that people started protesting en masse!" A girl with the tips of her red hair dyed blue declared combatively.

"Definitely. Can you believe it? They're blaming the so-called Hi no Ishi for it?! People protesting about food shortages are somehow linked to an invisible, shadowy group that barely exists, come on!" A boy agreed vociferously with her whilst thumping the table.

Boruto shot a look at Sasuke as they approached their room.
As they shut the door and sat down in their quaint little chairs, with a window view overlooking the streets, Boruto anxiously whispered: "Did you hear what they said? Are you going to-"

"Of course I did. Your point?" Sasuke asked.

"And you let them?" Boruto said incredulously. "I mean, you hate dissent and-"

"Be honest, Boruto, tell me what do you think a group of harmless teenagers can actually do?"

"Uh…"

"Let me tell you something, Boruto. These kids are from middle-income to well-off families. Some of their parents even work for me. They love to fulminate about the injustices of this world, rage against its problems. But at the end of the day, they never do anything. They grow up and they start accepting the way things are. Indeed, just wait till they start selling each other out to informants…"

"They sound pretty angry to me. Maybe their grievances are real – I mean, all the stuff about a food crisis in Suna-"

"I didn't call you here to talk about current affairs, Boruto. But just to answer your question, yes, there problems over there. I'm getting it sorted – the incompetent administrator's position is being reconsidered. You can't help it sometimes. Incompetent people exist everywhere."

"And here, they just happen to be the administrator of Sunagakure?"

"I must confess, I did not appoint him. My … underlings did. Enough of this talk."

"Wait, hang on – what is-"

"I need you, Boruto, for my plans," Sasuke's voice lowered, before noticing: "You're awfully jittery since we've met. Is there anything wrong?"

Boruto couldn't stand this anymore: "You? You're asking me what is wrong?! Everything! Everything! That's what!"

"Well, it would help if you were less unspecific," Sasuke pointed out, completely unbothered by Boruto's outburst.

"Okay, for starters, you," Boruto said with a hint of accusation. He couldn't hide all this rising scepticism and revulsion anymore. "You caused all of this. You screwed this world up. And you're blaming it on anyone but yourself. Your incompetent administrators, your 'underlings' – who even uses the word underlings? Out-of-touch teenagers? Pesky rebels? What even?!

It felt good for all of this to pour out of his mind. Boruto was, for a brief moment, however instantaneous, no longer terrified.

Sasuke simply listened, not betraying an ounce of emotion. This infuriated Boruto even more: "This is what I hate about people like you. You think you know what's best for everyone – well, news flash, you don't! You're allowing a secret police to exist, for god's sake! One that frequently arrests and terrorises innocent people – yes, innocent, because people complaining about the government or voicing independent opinions about it aren't always out to destroy it! How arrogant can you be?! Self-righteousness. Your self-righteousness, your twisted ideas it's… it's destroying everyone! Can't you see it?!!"

Silence descended upon the room.
"Are you done with your ranting yet?" Sasuke finally spoke; Boruto couldn't discern his emotions. "You'll find that I'm not the most self-righteous person in this world – far from it. You haven't seen the worst." He sounded almost tauntingly, almost slicing through Boruto's confidence. "Moreover, if I really am so terrible, then why did I tolerate so much opposition?"

"I'm not sure 'tolerate' is the correct word, Hokage-sama." The sardonic disdain was emphasised in the last words.

Sasuke ignored Boruto's response and proceeded: "I've known, kid. I've known all along that there will be those who hate me, who oppose me. I knew it since the day I killed your father in this world and since the day I united the continent under a single regime. But being Hokage means taking all the pain yourself and allowing everyone to concentrate their hate on you." He paused for a second and for an infinitesimally brief moment, his cold and nonchalant mask slipped, giving way for a soft, vulnerable fragility that Boruto could not comprehend. "That... That is the only way we will all have peace. You cannot unite men under hope or love or compassion – none of that nonsense your father believed in! You can only unite them under fear and hatred."

"Utter horseshit," Boruto answered. "In my-

"You see Boruto," Sasuke continued his explanation, resuming his composure and reverting back to his methodological manners. "There are those who are united in their fear of me: all my surrounding sycophants, that idiot administrator in Suna, the Hyuuga, perhaps even folk like Ayame and Takashi. Then there are those who are united in their hatred of me. Hi no Ishi and their affiliates in their safe enclave known as Mount Myoboku. They want to decimate me into a million pieces and in the process, they've united ninjas all across the continent into the cause, formed some spirit of camaraderie. I can appreciate that. I almost feel bad for them. Don't you? They actually believe they have a chance. This way, there are nuisances here and there, but we haven't had a war for nearly 20 years. Even disputes between minor villages have ceased. Look at the bigger picture, Boruto."

"No. You're making everything worse," Boruto rebutted. "There is tension simmering below the surface and the longer the repression is, the worse it gets. One day, things will erupt as volcanoes long dormant do – they'll catch you by surprise and you'll be powerless to stop it."

"Oh you know nothing, Boruto," Sasuke said with a hint of bemusement. "Mass genjutsu is always an option."

"And when you die?" Boruto pressed on, mentally shuddering at what Sasuke was implying.

"I won't Boruto. Orochimaru has discovered a path to eternal life. That was one of the reasons I raided his lair. I've been examining his studies extensively in the past few days. Imagine, an ancient mask collect amidst the ruins of Uzushiogakure, a mixture of the chakra's of Indra and Ashura and a Hyuuga, a human sacrifice – just one, anyone – and immortality," Sasuke described. He sounded strangely grave and serious and seven soft-spoken, bereaved of the usual morbid fixation that accompanies such talk.

"Wait, you're really crazy enough to believe all of this?!" Boruto sank into deeper incredulity. This Sasuke was truly insane. Too far gone. What's worse is that he appeared to believe every single word that came out of his mouth.

"Oh Boruto," Sasuke said with feigned concern, shaking his head and unclasping his hands. "You know so little."

"More than you do," Boruto snorted.
"On to my main point today: members of Hi no Ishi have been attempting to retrieve the tailed-beasts and transform them into weapons against my regime. Your friends, Sarada and Mitsuki, are helping them. In fact… my sources tell me that Sarada is with Sakura. They're at a secret location in the land of fire – or more precisely, where the nine-tails are located."

"And?"

"You're going to bring both of your friends back to your world. Understand?"

"Why should I help you?"

"Let's look at things another way. They refused to accompany you back to your own world, right?"

Boruto slowly nodded.

"And you decided to come back… to retrieve them. Right?"

"Yes," Boruto concurred. And defeat you and stop all of this, you crazy old man.

Sasuke seemed to notice this flicker of annoyance.

"You don't look happy," he remarked.

"Why should I be?"

"Well, my apologies Boruto. We'll have to change the way we do things," Sasuke said, his eyes piercing through the boy. Boruto couldn't tear his gaze away from them. They began morphing. A blood red stain erupted amidst the coal black irises as three black commas emerged. "It looks like I'll have to stop them personally, with your help of course. That's if he doesn't kill them first."

Boruto felt himself falling through a dark, infinite abyss.

He collapsed onto the table.

Layer after layer of walls, barriers, fell before them as Sakura correctly undid the intricate seals, following the instructions from the scroll, until finally, only one giant stone remained before them. It was inscribed with a symbol of a giant fox with nine tails, coated with a sign that said "forbidden."

"The Kyuubi..." Sarada whispered.

As she was about to approach it, Sakura immediately reached out and grabbed her back.

"Don't touch it yet," Sakura warned. "This scroll said there was something dangerous in stall for trespassers. It didn't specify what. We need to be careful."

Sarada nodded and activated her Sharingan. She could not see beyond the stone – it acted as a barrier that blocked out all indications of chakra from the other side, like all the other layers they had to demolish.

"Still no sign of what's beyond that," Sarada said while frowning.

"Great," Sakura muttered.

"But we have to give it a go," Sarada insisted. "Does your scroll have any information about it?"
"…No," Sakura said uncomfortably. "Looks like this will be a leap into the dark."

"Indeed," Sarada agreed, with trepidation boiling inside her.

"We only need to touch the stone, according to my scroll – that's the last of instructions we have," Sakura said. "You ready?"

"Yes," Sarada declared.

Bright orange chakra flowed through the tracings of the Fox as Sarada placed her palm on the stone. The stone began moving to the right. Moving, moving, moving until an opening large enough to fit a person emerged.

"Let's go," Sakura said before walking in.

Taking a deep breath, Sarada followed suit.
Chapter 16

In the ragged cliffs of the Land of Lightning lay the shattered remains of a sealing gourd, all while splinters of lightning flashed in the distance. Fallen bodies of Hi no Ishi members and regime-backed ANBU were splattered throughout the place, with blood dripping through the crevices and bleeding the mountain ranges red. The sun was setting, fashioning a crimson sky: a fitting backdrop for this blood bath.

Kiba heaved and huffed, facing his opponents in front of him with his loyal companion Akamaru. They've been through hell and back – they're not giving up when they’ve already come this far. Yet in spite of their unrelenting, unwavering will, the present situation does not bode well for success. They were cornered, exhausted, depleted, sustained only by sheer determination. Their opponents, though incurring significant losses as well, still outnumbered them.

And reinforcements were coming from the enemy's side.

"Just give up," the woman in the tiger mask taunted. "You've lost. You're friends are dead. You're nowhere near to retrieving the Nibi. You're gourd – you're means of capturing the Nibi – is broken. Surrender now."

Kiba shut his eyes, still panting. Taking a moment to rub Akamaru's blood-coated pelt affectionately, he steadied himself. His life flashed before him, careening across his mental stratosphere before vanishing into the wide oblivion. His first memory of playing with his sister's dogs as a toddler. Him receiving Akamaru from his parents on his fifth's birth day. His mischievous days at the Academy (though still not as terrible as Naruto Uzumaki’s antics and what a guy that Naruto was.) His mild crush on Hinata Hyuuga and shattering heart break upon learning about the news of her death - she had refused to depart Konoha and her family and join the resistance, choosing to take her life instead and be with the love of her life. The Fourth Shinobi World War and its aftermath, where his initial dreams and hopes of a better world – like many others - were dashed as the continent descended into a repressive tyranny. His life as a rebel: freeing, temporarily, villages from the thralls of the regime and relocating survivors into Mount Myoboku and surviving mission after mission. No, this won't be his last one. It can't be.

"Never," came Kiba's husky and defiant voice. He was, he noted, severely dehydrated. "We'll never give up."

A better world may have eluded his generation, but it will not escape the next.

"A pity," the woman remarked.

Kiba took a deep breath and, with in the split of a second, charged at the half a dozen of ANBUs. He would go out in a blaze of glory.

This Konohamaru, Mitsuki concluded, was still a bubbly lad. Previously, the serious circumstances of their encounters made Mitsuki question this attribute. Yes, this Konohamaru was capable of extreme solemnness, no doubt a side effect of this unhappy world, but he was also capable of being absurdly cheerful. This Mitsuki noticed after spending hours and hours with Konohamaru. The man simply could not stop with all the small talk as they headed towards an island near the coast of the continent.

"How are you Takuo? How is your daughter doing? I heard she just learnt how to speak? That's
amazing!" Konohamaru beamed as he addressed one of their companions. "When she learns how to control chakra, you can totally bring her to me!"

"Thank you, Konohamaru," Takuo said, smiling politely.

"And Mito! Don't forget – we're making chocolate cake for everyone once this is all done! We'll need tons of sugar to make up for all the toil!" Konohamaru approached a kunoichi with purple-hair, rather conspicuously named after the Shodai Hokage's wife.

Then again, thought Mitsuki, Konohamaru's unbridled amiability may just be what everyone needs in times like this. Perhaps, Mitsuki wondered, Konohamaru was putting on a deliberate act to ensure a semblance of normality. That is all rebel outcasts can hope for.

"And you Mitsuki, how is… err… life like? You know, back where you lived?" Konohamaru tried to strike a conversation.

"Pretty good," Mitsuki nodded, not really sure what to respond him with.

"How am I like there? A well-known lady-killer?" The man asked, winking.

"Not that I'm aware of," Mitsuki said, trying to be as polite and inoffensive as possible. "You were an excellent sensei though – you led a team that consisted of me, Boruto and Sarada."

Konohamaru blinked and then beamed: "That's great to know!"

"You also taught Boruto the rasengan. I remember him telling me how he woke you up at four in the morning about it," Mitsuki described with a light-hearted snicker.

"Ah, yes… The rasengan. How's Boruto like?" Konohamaru inquired with curiosity.

"A prankster and very talkative. And very talented and brave. He'd go through hell and back for his friends," Mitsuki remarked. Just talking about Boruto made him miss his friend.

"Sounds like his dad…" Konohamaru sighed. He suddenly appeared tired. His shoulders slouched if only for half a second.

Kakashi whipped away his sealing scroll triumphantly.

They did it.

The Sanbi was within the possession of Hi no Ishi.

They were one-step closer to challenging the regime.

As they stopped by Kirigakure – a once large and mighty shinobi village now a shadow of its former self – they decided to eat in a seafood ramen store, which was owned by a Hi no Ishi sympathiser.

"How are you, Matsuo?" Kakashi inquired the old lady serving the ramen.

"Still hale and hearty," she joked before lowering her voice, "Did you guys succeed?"

"Yes," Kakashi whispered back.

She gave a grateful smile, clearly uplifted by this information.
"We've still got a long way to go, though," Kakashi remarked.

"I'm not worried about that, young man. I've seen tyrannies come and go. When the Fourth Mizukage was still around, no one could envision a future beyond the Bloody Mist. No one thought his repression would end. But it did," she noted. "All tyrannies end, eventually. What matters is what replaces it."

There was a coffin in the middle of the chamber. Chains ran through it.

Chakra chains, Sarada mentally noted.

But the sarcophagus, coated with esoteric symbols that she could not comprehend, was calling for her, beckoning her towards it. It exuded a strange magnetic pull.

Slowly, Sarada felt her feet shift towards it.


She was an inch away from it.

Touch me, it seemed to say. Free me.

Her resistance was melting away. It felt so sad, so lonely.

"Sarada, no!" Sakura yelled.

It was too late.

Sarada's palm traced the symbol of the nine-tailed fox, mapping its angry shape.

The whole place shook.

He was nowhere.

He was then somewhere.

He was on a battlefield.

The Valley of the End, Boruto realised.


The world around him was silent. Not a soul budged.

There were birds chirping.

No – not birds. Something else.

Chidori.

Boruto rushed towards the source of the sound, travelling at the speed of light.

He froze upon the sight of it all.

His younger father – no, not his father, but another Naruto lay dead in the arms of another man that
could only be Sasuke. A hole was punctured in his chest, ripping apart and obliterating a fist-sized segment of where the heart would have otherwise been. His clear blue eyes were lifeless, devoid of warmth.

And the man beside Naruto was weeping. Tears rained like torrents down Sasuke's face as he caused and witnessed the death of his only friend in this world.

The only bond he still had.

"Naruto..." Sasuke said, still gulping from the tears. "I'm sorry. This had to be done. You were getting in my way, the only way. You were my best friend. No. You were something more: you were like a brother to me. I cared about you."

What on earth is going on, Boruto's senses were muted by shock.

"Like me, the last Uchiha, you were always alone. At first, I thought you were just a weakling playing around. Silly, unworthy, a joke. You acted like an idiot so people would notice you, Naruto. Then, for some reason, I started keeping my eyes on you. Seeing you getting scolded all the time and getting right back at it relieved me. I can't say why. And then we were put in the same team. You were so annoying back then. But as we survived together, grew stronger together, I felt invisible bonds tying us together. When you felt pain... I started hurting too. I then began viewing you as a worthwhile opponent. I wanted to compete with you, spar with you, beat you. But you had something I never had Naruto – above all, I envied you."

Sasuke paused before laughing, laughing hysterically into the sky. The tears were gone. The sound of his guffaw reverberated through the whole valley. It lasted second after second. It seemed never-ending.

"Goodbye Naruto," he whispered. "I won't forget you."

I won't forget you.

I won't forget you. I won't forget you. I won't forget you. I won't forget you. These words rang through Boruto's head as he absorbed the spectacle before him. These words started hurting his head. The pain was accelerating. It was sharp, unbearable.

He needed to leave this place.

Now.

The whole room was, without warning, suffused in bright orange light.

The coffin shattered and the shards flew across the room. Sarada dodged one just in time.

"Sakura..." Sarada said, trembling. "This chakra it's –"

"-Naruto's."

He was in some cave underground.

His vision sharpened. He could see a young man with dark hair and an older man with disturbing serpentine characteristics interacting. He walked closer of them and they did not budge at his presence.
"You can revive him using Edo Tensei?" Boruto heard the young man ask with incredulity.

"Indeed," hissed the older one. "So long as you have... his remains."

"I do."

"Good, good," the older one cooed.

"Do it now," the young one ordered with little patience.

His vision fragmented again and he was whirled away.

Naruto stood in front of them. No. Not Naruto as he would be in Sarada's world, but still Naruto nevertheless. His eyes had grey scleras and there was something missing from them. He was unnaturally youthful – his age seemed artificially suspended or plucked from a certain moment in time and kept that way. Flakes of paper surrounded his figure.

"Naruto!" Sakura gasped, her eyes wide open. "Can you hear me?"

He turned his face to hers and gave no emotion, no indication whatsoever.

"Sakura," Sarada whispered to her companion, "I don't think he's in control of himself. Be careful."

And with that, a bright paw shaped out of chakra emerged from Naruto and lashed itself at the two, sending them flying backwards.

Sarada hit the wall with a thud. She took a moment to steady herself. No serious damages, she noted as she looked around to find Sakura, who was also struggling to get up.

"Uh... Looks like the Kyuubi is inside of him... We'll need to find a way to subdue this guy, seal him and then extract it," Sakura analyzed as she got up.

"Great," Sarada muttered. This will be difficult, immensely so.

He was submerged in a sea of red and when he looked above to the heavens, only two large spinning wheels remained. They spun and spun and spun, lulling him back to sleep.

He was back in the Hokage’s office.

The curtains were shut. There was no one there.

Boruto proceeded towards the central desk. It was stacked with paperwork.

Details about the construction of a new interrogation centre, food supplies to Kirigakure, roads in the Land of Lightning and newly gathered data on Hi no Ishi.

This was Sasuke's desk,

Out of the blue, the door creaked open. In came Sasuke in his early twenties, gloomy and impenetrable. His eyes were underlined by baggy purple sacks – one would have mistaken them from bruises if they did not know better.

Boruto stood up and found Sasuke standing right in front of him.
For a moment, the two locked eyes.

Then, Sasuke, sensing something but seeing nothing, blinked and blinked again before shrugging and proceeding to his chair.

Boruto quickly scuttled out of the room.

They were going to lose, Sarada was sure of it as Sakura threw her green glowing fists at the reanimated Naruto, now coated in Kyuubi chakra, who deflected the attack and hurled Sakura right back at the wall.

They dodged attack after attack deftly, but could never manage to land a significant blow. Their opponent was simply too powerful – not to mention, being a reanimated zombie, not easily destroyed.

"Naruto!" Sakura yelled. "Snap out of it!"

They needed a different strategy.

All of a sudden, Sarada recalled a mundane lesson in the academy, where the class learnt about the three great dojutsu. Good times. Shino sensei had mentioned something about the Sharingan being able to tame the Kyuubi. Yes. She needed to try that.

"I got it!" Sarada called to Sakura. "Lure him towards me!"

Sakura looked puzzled and then worried, not entirely certain about this proposal: "You could get hur-"

"Just do it!"

Sarada wasn't sure whether this would work and found herself shivering in trepidation. No, she told herself, I have to give this a go.

She focused her eyes on the man coming towards her, prowling through his exteriors and into his chakra veins. Being a reanimated man, his system was obviously different, grotesquely modified. His chakra was unlimited. But centre to everything was a bright orange-yellow flame lodged near where his belly would be.

Sarada realised it was the Kyuubi.

She had to get inside him.

Fast.

"Sarada – do you want me to lure him away slightly to give you more time?" Sakura called to her.

"Yes," she replied swiftly before lapsing back into concentration.

She was in him.

She was in a dark area, where water covered her ankles. Eerie green light, almost sickly, illuminated through the chamber. There was a fence – no, a cage, a cage with a seal on it. In it, a beast was slumbering.

"Kurama," Sarada whispered, emphasising the Kyuubi’s name.
It stirred. Just a little.

"Kurama," Sarada said, this time a little louder.

It stirred even more.

"Kurama – wake up!" Sarada yelled on top of her lungs.

Kurama opened his eyelids sleepily; he appeared confused.

"If you're Sasuke, don't bother talking to me, brat. Fuck off," he said in a drawl and then collapsed back into sleep.

"No! It's me! I'm Sarada!" She shouted.

Kurama looked up, saw her and frowned, growling: "So that brat has a daughter?"

"No! Okay – it's complicated," Sarada admitted. "But just trust me."

"Why should I?" He snorted.

"Because – because I've come to save you!" Sarada declared desperately.

"Oh?!" Kurama gasped with feigned surprise. "From your daddy?"

"Okay, fine, yes! I'll explain things later. Just tell me how to undo the seal and free you," Sarada said with an acute awareness that time is rushing by.

"You see the seal right up there?" Kurama gestured towards it using his right paw. "Break it."

"All right," Sarada nodded. "I'll do my best."

Sakura summoned all the might she had and shoved Naruto into the wall, punching his face repeatedly. They were only a few inches away from Sarada, who looked semi-conscious. Her eyes were ominously all white, being rolled towards the ceiling.

Sakura activated her Byakugou seal. It was time to use the Strength of Hundred. Purples laces spread from her forehead seal, extending themselves throughout her body, imbuing her cells with awesome regenerative abilities. A wound on her abdomen by the Kyuubi's offensive chakra healed instantaneously.

I have to keep this up, Sakura thought. I have to buy more time for Sarada.

"Damn!" Kurama shouted as Sarada's chidori-laced kunai failed to break the seal again. It clanked off and fell into the water. "Is there nothing better you can do?!"

"I'm trying!" Sarada said frantically.

"You'll need to pierce through the thing yourself!" Kurama suggested. "It's quite the jump and you have to maintain your jutsu for a long time…"

"I'll do it! Don't worry!" Sarada said, trying to assure both Kurama and herself.

She backed away from the cage and began sprinting towards it, weaving the necessary hand signs to
create a concentrated ball of lightning in her right hand. She leapt within a meter's distance away and struck the seal.

At first, her hand only graced the cover, but determined not to give up, Sarada fixed her feet firmly on the bars of the cage and continued channeling chakra into her hand.

"Not bad, brat!" Kurama quipped. "So, who are you exactly?"

"Sarada…" she said while trying to concentrate.

"All right, my bad. Won't disturb you now."

"Thanks," she remarked gratefully.

The first cracks started to appear. She was a little more than a centimeter's distance into the seal, but she felt her chakra flow weakening.

"Uh! I might not have enough chakra!" Sarada shouted, frustrated.

"You can do this!" Kurama said, deciding to cheer her on and lend whatever moral support he could muster. Her determination reminded him awfully of Naruto, his dear friend.

Deciding to risk it all, Sarada continued. More cracks. She made some more progress.

"ARGHHHHHHHHH!" Sakura screamed as she disregarded all her wounds and thrust the reanimated Naruto into another corner. "Get. Away. From. Her."

"Well someone's feeling over-excited."


"What's the matter, Sakura? Trying to steal the Kyuubi?"

"Leave!" She screamed, punching the floor

Sasuke side-stepped her attack easily.

"Oh be careful. He's going after her now," Sasuke said, taunting the woman who once loved him, pointing towards Naruto.

"How dare you do this?! How dare you do this to him?!" Sakura ignored his words and threw her fists at him.

"It… prevents similar alien entities from intruding upon our world," Sasuke explained.

"He was our teammate! He was our friend!"

"I don't need teammates or friends."

"How dare-"

"Leave this place now, Sakura, and take her with you," Sasuke said sternly.

"And why should I?!"

"You will die. And so will she. And so will… Boruto," Sasuke threatened as his eyes morphed into
a ringed Rinnegan and an eternal Mangekyo Sharingan. He weaved a few summoning signs and, with a puff, emerged the figure of an unconscious Boruto Uzumaki.

"The hell?"

"You heard me. Leave now," Sasuke uttered forcefully. He brandished a kunai and placed it right at the tip of Boruto's throat.

"Go ahead," declared Sakura bitterly. "You won't stop us from ending your rule."

"You're perfectly content with me slitting his throat?" Sasuke asked skeptically. He had not expected this.

"Yes. It is unfortunate, but he was a dead boy the moment you captured him."

"Well, who's the insensitive killer now?"

"You'll be dead soon. Enjoy your sadistic hobbies while they last."

"Oh I don't think so, Sakura… Hmmm…. perhaps I should switch a target?" Sasuke pondered as he drew closer to Sarada. "Her?"

"Get away from her you sick bastard!"

"Oh so now you care…"

"Leave her alone!" Sakura tried punching him in the face. He dodged it, albeit just.

Taking a moment, Sasuke waved his hand and the reanimated Naruto immediately stopped attacking and slouched. Like a hung corpse.

"Well, looks like you've left me with no choice. Boruto's dead meat. Sarada's next," Sasuke announced. He looked at his kunai and then at Boruto and then back again.

Meanwhile, Sakura gazed at the despicable man in front of her with slight incredulity. For such a prolific mass murderer, he sure was taking his time.

"Hang on a second, Sakura. I'll need to take care of something else first," Sasuke said, tearing his eyes away from the boy.

It was still not enough. There were cracks here and there and a few shattered shards fell from the seal onto the floor, but no substantial damage had been done.

And Sarada was exhausted; she felt drained.

"No…" she muttered. "Kurama – I will get you out of this place!"

She tried harder. Her chakra was running out. She had less than a minute to sustain.

Out of the blue, she felt a hand grab her and hurl her across the internal chambers.

"You!" Kurama gasped with bitter venom.

Her world went black.
Sakura cried out in horror as Sarada collapsed onto the floor.

"Now, back to business," Sasuke declared nonchalantly. "Are you sure you don't want to save his life?"

Sakura was too distraught to reply.

"Very well," Sasuke said with a sigh as he took out his kunai again. A clean, quick death this will be. He took a deep breath. This boy, Boruto, looked awfully similar to Naruto. They were almost carbon copies of each other. Father and son in another world. He had already killed the father; finishing off the son was the only logical conclusion. Right?

Bizzarely, Sakura thought she saw Sasuke's hands trembling. He couldn't do it, she realised. He couldn't kill Boruto. Focusing her view on his visage, she realised – with disbelief – that his eyes were, if only slightly, shell-shocked.

He was shaking even harder. He moved his hand and, with it the kunai, away from Boruto's throat.

She, in all honesty, didn't really know what to do. Had she attacked him now, he would have relapsed into his usual level or alertness and danger. Had she tried to grab Sarada and run, the same would have happened. But, as of now, the man in front of her looked so terrified, so incapacitated. She remembered a side of the Sasuke she used to know very well.

He dropped the kunai. It fell to the stone hard floor, clanging.

"Just… leave," he finally spoke.

Sakura was still in a state of stunned stupor.

"Looks like I'll have to make you then," Sasuke said, his eyes narrowing. He coated himself (and Boruto) with a half-done Susanoo. It swung a powerful blade at both Sakura and Sarada, sending them flying out of the cave and beyond the secret temples, all the way through the forest. Out of sight, out of mind.

He was now all alone again.

Almost.
He was still drifting in the midst of nowhere. He was suspended in space, a bleak, endless void where time is but a hypothetical concept.

Fragments of times bygone flew past him. A young boy rushing towards his big brother, dropping his dinosaur plushy in the process. The big brother poking his young brother's forehead with his two fingers. The boy grew older; he is rushing into his house and into a scene full of blood. He is running away from something, someone. He is shielding another boy in an orange jacket from shards of sharp ice. He is fighting with that same boy.

A thunderous roar then cruelly, unsentimentally stripped all of this away from Boruto's sight.

His eyes flew open.

"You're awake," rang Sasuke's voice from the other side of the room. It sounded peculiarly hollow.

Boruto blinked again.

Where was he again?

"You're in my living quarters," Sasuke explained as he approached the boy.

It was a strangely ordinary place – a rather typical house, if Boruto had to admit, characterized by tatami mat flooring, sliding doors that seemed paper thin and wooden verandas. There seemed nothing particularly extravagant or grandiose about it.

"What the hell just happened?" Boruto murmured, confused.

"A lot of things, Boruto," Sasuke said, not giving away any details.

"Gee – that's a useful answer," Boruto said, frowning and rolling his eyes. "What did you do with me after you knocked me unconscious?"

"That's none of your concern."

"Of course it was! You hypnotised me for god's sake!" Boruto demanded, feeling annoyed.

He was met with silence.

"Hang on, weren't you going to use me to do something against Sarada?" Boruto pressed on as memories of what happened returned.

Still no reply.

"Answer me!" Boruto yelled, a feeling of range swirling within. The more he remembered about their encounter, the more displeased he was at his present condition.

"My, my there's no need to get so fired up about this," Sasuke said coolly and quietly. "If you insist… I tried to ransom your life with Sakura and Sarada when I intercepted them at the Kyuubi's secret location. Sakura refused to make concessions."

"What? Wait, so-"
"Yes. You heard it. She refused to save your life."

"No. I mean, Sarada – is she okay? Is she still alive? Did you do anything to both of the-"

"They're both still alive. Though they have failed in retrieving the Kyuubi; it has been relocated elsewhere. I banished them with the Susanoo," Sasuke explained, focusing his eyes onto a still reclining Boruto.

"Then… why am I still alive?"

Boruto thought he saw Sasuke's gaze waver.

"You don't need to know why."

"Of course I do! You don't have more 'plans' for me right? More-"

Sasuke's voice sounded strangely soft: "No. Not at all Boruto."

"Then why?!"

Sasuke closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Boruto thought he looked more vulnerable than his usual self, for there was the impression of a man traumatised by internal battles. He seemed paler, more exhausted.

"… You still haven't answered my question yet."

"I was… preoccupied with something else Boruto," Sasuke said as he slowly unravelled from his previous state of impotency.

"Okay?"

His father's words came back to him: he could have just killed you. Indeed, Boruto deduced, if Sasuke were really ransoming him and Sakura rejected the deal, it would be the logical conclusion for Sasuke to end his life. Then again, the guy in front of him was clearly deranged and ordinary laws of logic did not apply to anything surrounding Sasuke Uchiha, or so Boruto believed.

"I…" Sasuke's voice trailed again – there was something the man simply couldn't spit out.

"You couldn't kill me?" Boruto suggested.

"I never said that," Sasuke snorted.

Boruto knew he needed to find a way to extract the necessary information from Sasuke. He needed to find a way to abscond the place and reach his friends, whose whereabouts remain unknown to him. Yet, at the same time, he began to understand what his father meant about this Sasuke, an unredeemed, tormented and lonely man. Thinking about all the potential atrocities the man committed and the monstrous, tyrannical system he set up made Boruto retch and, also, boil with frustration, for Boruto had seen a better world and knew that alternatives were possible. Nonetheless, for the first time in this world, Boruto also felt an inexplicable and irresistible urge to feel pity for the deranged and damaged man in front of him.

He decided to be more inquisitive, fully bearing in mind the delicate nature of this situation: "I saw what happened, Sasuke."

"I'd prefer you to address an adult with the appropriate honorifics," Sasuke commented, visibly irritated though – Boruto suspected – also half-joking.
"According to Dad, you never used it," Boruto shrugged, mildly jesting.

"Hn."

"Hypocrite."

"Hn."

"Anyways, let's not distract ourselves from the main point. When you knocked me out rather impolitely, I saw things. I saw, and correct me if I'm wrong, your memories," Boruto said, his tone growing more serious by the moment. "I saw what happened at the Valley of the End. I heard what you said to the dead body of my father, or at least the man who would have been my father in this world had you not ended his life. I know why – I know your reasoning behind everything, the philosophical underpinnings of your actions, Sasuke. And you're wrong."

Boruto paused for a second to rummage his thoughts through his mind, to organise them into coherent sentences and polemics against the man's beliefs. He then got up and stood in front of Sasuke.

Boruto resumed speaking: "What's tragic, Sasuke, is that you don't know just how wrong you are. You think fear is the only way to achieve peace; you've told me that. You believe humans, all of us, can only live in peace if we were repressed. That is, if our true nature, our liberties were restricted for our own good."

Boruto stopped again, debating whether to vent the ensuing words before deciding that they were essential, that they formed the crux of his argument: "You scorn upon any proposition that the good within all of us can also form solutions to our problems. Hope. Compassion. Love. Resilience. Faith. These were ideas that my father believed in – both in my world and yours. No, I don't resent you at all. On the contrary, I pity you. You shaped this world with your ideals, ideals that I don't think even you totally believed in. You knew you had compromised your integrity, engaged in reprehensible activities that subverted the happiness of many for a meagre consolation prize of what you call peace. But it is a fraught peace, a peace that leaves our hearts empty."

"Peace, kid, no matter how terrible it is, remains a thousand times more preferable to war. War is hell," Sasuke interjected, finally speaking up. "No, our world is hell and we are all demons that inhabit it. Naruto was naïve in believing the good of men and in believing that a simple heart to heart can win an enemy over and solve all the issues in the world." It was an obvious jab, Boruto could tell, for there was a tinge of scorn in Sasuke's last words. "Drop your efforts, kid. It's not going to work."

"But I've seen it!" Boruto rebutted. "I've seen how the good in all of us can help us create a better world. I've lived in it!"

"Oh?"

"No wars, no famines," Boruto declared vehemently. He was not going to back down on this. "Peace. Prosperity. The longest period of economic growth the continent has ever seen. New roads, railways, high-rise buildings, game arcades, libraries, hospitals, gyms and schools instead of weapons. Konoha expanded way beyond her past boundaries. What did the job was co-operation, not repression. You know what – take it, take them all. My memories. Look at them and I'll show you just what I mean."

"Do it, Sasuke. Use your Sharingan to look inside my mind, to observe every single event in my life, a life that is inextricably tied to a world borne out of my father's ideals," Boruto said as he got closer
and closer to Sasuke, pushing himself into the man until he occupied Sasuke's entire view. He continued staring at the man, a fierce resolution shining in his eyes, the grandiosity of this gesture somewhat blemished by his rather stunted height. Sasuke seemed to have noticed this, demonstrating a resigned chuckle. He then smiled or rather grimaced.

Sasuke pushed Boruto away gently, attempting to appear as neutral as humanly possible: "Another time, kid. We've got to eat late breakfast. It's almost midday."

How queer.

Mitsuki watched Konohamaru and Saiken combine their efforts, merging their chakra together, fusing the Rasenshuriken with a tailed beast ball and then hurling it at the last remaining ANBU guards. Its collision with their bodies unleashed an awesome torrent, which – unfortunately – sent Mitsuki, his companions and quite possible everyone else – flying on their backs. A bright, unquenchable light erupted amidst the marshes before ultimately fading away, leaving behind only the dust of their enemies. It was wind release in its most brutal form.

"Good job!" Konohamaru bellowed, holding his right palm up for a high five. Saiken returned it with a wet slap that accidentally knocked the man over and drenched him in sticky slime.

"Whoops!" gasped Saiken mildly apologetically.

"Hey Mitsuki, want a high five from this guy?" Konohamaru asked.

"Uh… I'll pass, but thanks for your kind offer," Mitsuki said curtly.

Everyone else burst out laughing. They were relieved, psychologically liberated after hours and hours of combat. Saiken was free.

They did it.

Mitsuki personally wondered how their other Hi no Ishi counterparts fared. They had, for the past few days, avoided all communication for fear of interception. Perhaps he could only hope for the best.

In the midst of the Land of Earth, corpses of men and women belonging to the Hi no Ishi insurgency were engulfed in torrents of lava, which licked away their skin and internals upon contact until only their bare bones remained. Even that was consumed too, eventually.

The unit tasked with retrieving the Yonbi had initially succeeded in subduing the regime's ANBU guard units and in extracting the tailed beast from its sealed location. Yet a misstep, the sparing of an enemy ANBU's life, led to a jutsu being cast that caused Son Goku to spiral out of control and embark on a rampage. It lost all consciousness, being immersed in a haze of fury and insanity.

No lives were spared.

"Run Chocho!" Choji bellowed at his daughter as his enlarged, yet weakened, body towered over their enemies. He was maimed by merciless torrents of kunai and pierced with hooks held by the enemy ANBU. They were jostling over control, with the ANBU pulling Choji towards them and the man fighting back with vigorous desperation. The corpses of his friends and allies lay around him, lifeless, and off to a better place, he supposed.
Chocho, for the first time since many missions, was paralysed with shock and fear and a mélange of emotions. She struggled to register what was occurring right before her eyes. She was going to lose her father. The only blood-related family she had. She had lost companions in missions before but never this. She wanted to collapse onto the floor in defeat and cry.

"Go! I won't be able to hold them off any longer! GO!" Choji yelled as he took a swipe at the ANBU below him. He plucked one off the ground, one that was headed towards his daughter, and was immediately struck by a seething ball of fire right in the middle of his belly. It seared his flesh, yet the pain was nothing compared to the agony and horror over the prospect of his daughter's survival.

"Father…" Chocho felt her feet shift, just a little. She was regaining her senses.

"RUN!"

Chocho bolted, channelling all of what remained of her chakra into her legs. She tried to toss everything else out of her mind. Yet just as she was running out of sight, she turned around, taking one last look at her father, who was still battling the surrounding ANBU.

His eyes met hers and he seemed to mouth three words.

It was only when Chocho had reached the safety of Hi no Ishi's nearest base in the Land of Lightning that she realised what he was trying to say.

I love you.

They were in the harbour and about to embark on a ship departing for the mainland.

That was when Mitsuki spotted the scroll. It was stationed awkwardly amidst a stock of a fisherman's tools, right beneath a pile of fishhooks.

"Konohamaru-sensei?" Mitsuki approached the man.

"You can drop the latter honorific, Mitsuki," Konohamaru said cheerfully.

"Can you excuse me for a moment? I need to get something," Mitsuki enquired respectfully.

"No problem – be quick though, or else we'll leave without you!" Konohamaru joked.

They ate in silence in Sasuke's kitchen.

It seemed to last for eternity.

It was a bacon and eggs sandwich, made rather deliciously, Boruto had to concede. Yet whatever pleasure he gained from consuming the food was dissipated by the sheer awkwardness and discomfort permeating through the room. Sasuke seemed reluctant to initiate any conversation, avoiding any excess human interaction with Boruto and focusing on his food. Eye contact was made minimal between the two.

Boruto kept his gaze fixed on his plate, toying with small bits of crumbs and bacon that fell from his sandwich. From time to time, he would shoot a nervous glance at the man before him, who then, or so Boruto suspected, would deliberately look as if he were preoccupied with something else.

"I'm done," Sasuke announced brusquely and promptly walked out of the room.
"Hey!" Boruto yelled, feeling surprised at his own outburst. "Where do you think you're going?!

"Work."

"Wait, so you're heading off to the Hokage's office?"

"No. I have an office in this place. I can't exactly leave you unsupervised, can I?" Sasuke said matter-of-factly, turning around to address Boruto. "Don't even think of running away."

"I know, I'm not stupid," Boruto muttered begrudgingly.

"Don't forget you're alive because of me," Sasuke lectured with a tinge of scorn. "Try to show a little… appreciation."

"Right" – the monosyllabic response.

"Good."

"But seriously, what do you want with me?" Boruto couldn't help but ask.

"You are a conceited one aren't you? What makes you think I want anything in particular from you?" Sasuke said, mildly chuckling.

"Oh come on!" Boruto said as he stood up and strode towards Sasuke. He pressed closer and closer to the man, causing Sasuke to frown.

"May I ask, why this sudden invasion of my private space?"

"You're one to talk about private spaces and privacy, considering how you literally stalked me and entered my living quarters without my permission and well, greeted me while I was still in my bath towel!" Boruto rebutted indignantly.

"That's different."

"Hypocrite."

"What a loser."

"Just do it," Boruto said as he forced his gaze onto Sasuke's eyes, like he was (ironically) challenging the man to a staring contest. "You know what I mean."

"No. And remember, you're only alive because of me," Sasuke threatened. "Now, why don't you grab a book, sit in my office and read quietly?"

"I don't do reading."

"That was an order, not an option."

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Boruto yawned for the umpteenth time. It had only been an hour, but he was practically being slaughtered by boredom.

Sasuke, meanwhile, was still fixated on his death, dealing assiduously with his papers.

"Hey Sasuke!" Boruto called out to the man in an attempt to feign blatant disrespect. "Whatcha doing?"
The man seemed to take no notice.

Okay, Boruto conceded internally, I must be really bored.

"Hey Sasuke! Hey! Hey! Answer me!" Boruto yelled again, finding this gimmick slightly more entertaining than that dumb book he was reading.

"What?" Sasuke said as he looked up, visibly irritated.

"Uh… You wanna go out for a walk?" Boruto stumbled a little.

"No."

"You know, back to what I was telling you about my world… It's actually really nice there. The five elemental nations really did manage to make peace with each other; they formed the Shinobi Union and have been holding annual Gokage summits. Things are much calmer in the smaller villages too. Heck, they've even cracked down on a lot of illegal mercenary activity and gladiatorial combat. My dad became Hokage and married mum and had me and Himawari. Loads of people lived. And you-

"Boruto," Sasuke interrupted the boy and stopped writing. "Please remain silent."

"-you ended up marrying Sakura, you know?" Boruto paused, hoping to gauge for a reaction from the man before him.

There was no reply.

"Aren't you going to respond to that?"

"Boruto, for the last time, I'm working," Sasuke scowled, the annoyance even more obviously displayed. "And if you don't shut up, I'll knock you out."

"How kind of you," Boruto snorted.

"You're behaving like a pestering brat and for the last time, about that other world of yours: I. Don't. Care," Sasuke said, enunciating his words strongly. There was a hint of menace and the atmosphere of the room darkened, though only slightly, for Sasuke seemed to resume his indifferent calmness a split second later.

Boruto sighed: "Can you at least not keep me locked in here like some naughty schoolboy on detention?"

Not a single word.

This sure was tortuous.
Chapter 18

Her head still hurt, but at least she was awake.

Sakura lay beside her, still unconscious.

She still felt too weak to move.

It was still in the early afternoon yet the skies were obscured by a murky overcast; it was a tranquil, picturesque grassland where, occasionally, sparse travellers and traders roamed and rested yet Sarada was clouded with anxiety and despondency.

It dawned on her that they must have failed their task to retrieve the Kyuubi. Someone must have intervened – an opponent so formidable so as to demolish Sakura, knock her unconscious in a splinter of a second and cast them both far away from the clandestine monasteries of old. Sarada had an inkling of who just showed up, moments before she was about to break that seal.

It was none other than the Hokage, of course. Or otherwise known as her father, Sasuke Uchiha, had they been in a different world. Sarada sighed as she tried to grapple with the reality of their situation, their futile attempt at subverting the regime he established. With Sakura unconscious, she could only piece together vague fragments and deduce the events of yesterday (or was it the day before yesterday?).

And so she lay, on the ground, somewhere in the middle of nowhere, waiting and waiting for her companion to waken.

"Wake up, idiot," rang Sasuke's mildly irritated voice.

Boruto stirred, but he was still securely within the thralls of his dreams.

He was having dinner by the campfire with Sasuke – the non-crazy one from his own world, of course – after a long, exhausting day of training. It was a simple, plain grilled fish, rather delicious Boruto had to admit. It was shortly before the third round of the chuunin exams.

Boruto had spent the entire day struggling with his shurikenjutsu, much to Sasuke's disappointment. He felt indignant both over his inability to master the right techniques and by Sasuke's constant chastisement. That man's expectations were sky high, absurd, unrealistic, or so Boruto believed.

"Shut up, master Sasuke… Sarada is supposed to be the one good with shurikens…" Boruto murmured in his sleep.

Sasuke, the one in the other world, frowned as he heard Boruto's words.

"I swear… why are you so strict all the time…" Boruto mumbled even more. "I know… I know… My father… he overcame his weaknesses… you…"

The phrases were barely coherent.

Sasuke shook his head, mentally insisting that these were the words of a delusional otherworldly boy. Still, he couldn't really just leave the boy sprawled over a chair, sleeping, in his office.

And thus came the loud slap that instantly wrestled Boruto into reality and resulted in a loud scream:
"AHHHHHHHHH! What is wrong with you?"

"One, you wouldn’t have woken up otherwise. Two, I can't exactly leave you sleeping here while I'm receiving a team of ANBU – they'll be here in minutes. Three, you were sleep talking," Sasuke exploited succinctly and, much to Boruto's ire, remorselessly.

Boruto grunted as he got up from the chair: "Well, where am I supposed to go now?"

"Feel free to wonder around the rest of the house, but this room is off bounds. And don't you dare try leaving the place because I'll know if you do," Sasuke explained.

"Great, so detention has been upgraded to house arrest? You're messed up as hell and a bastard who seems to enjoy torturing people physically, emotionally and spiritually for the sake of it. I hope you realise this-"

"Boruto," Sasuke interrupted the boy brusquely. "Out."

Kakashi knew something was wrong the moment he sensed Sakura and Sarada's chakra's as he arrived at the Land of Grass to assist Shino's efforts in capturing the Nanabi.

They were, at least according to the information Sakura provided, not supposed to be here.

He informed his team of his desire to locate Sakura and Sarada and they subsequently decided to split in two.

They were not too far away, for they were close enough for him to detect them and he was not a particularly exceptional sensor (still faintly above average though.)

Crossing his fingers in hopes that they would remain safe, he sped towards them.

"... you mean... we passed out for more than a day?" Sakura asked, still dazed and confused.

Sarada nodded, relieved that Sakura was finally awake and conscious.

"And no one noticed us at all?" Sakura sounded rather puzzled. Surely, an insurgent as prominent as her lying in the middle of nowhere was bound to attract some sort of attention.

"From what I've observed, we're at a relatively obscure corner in the Land of Grass. I've only seen a couple of travel merchants pass by and they seem way too preoccupied with their journey to care," Sarada analysed.

"Well, we've got it lucky this time," Sakura concluded. "But the Kyuubi…"

Her sense of disappointment and despair were palpable. Her emerald eyes lost all their shine and gave way to a dull, green rust that spoke of an exhausted woman, tired of life, tired of failure, tired of the world.

"I'm... I'm so, so sorry," Sarada said as she bit her lips. She deliberately averted her eyes from Sakura, being unable to deal with the tumultuous feelings emanating from the woman and within herself.

She was shaking and on the verge of tears, Sakura couldn't help but notice.

Yet Sarada opted to resume conversation, for she desired to obtain more information on the events
that occurred within the derelict monasteries, asking, "So what happened, Sakura?"

The woman appeared reluctant to speak. Sarada wondered whether it was because she was still recuperating from being unconscious for so long. Yet something told Sarada there were other reasons motivating the Sakura's hesitancy.

"He came," Sakura spat with surprising venom. "He ruined everything Sarada. He did all kinds of despicable things. He dishonourably manipulated Naruto's zombie corpse, he attacked you at your most defenceless, and then he banished us with his Susanoo."

"Oh…" Sarada's voice trailed.

"And Sarada," Sakura admitted before taking a long pause. "There's something else that happened. He's got Boruto."

"What?! What happened?!"

Sarada could feel her insides trembling with trepidation. Images of Boruto suffering sifted through her head as she wondered about the state of his well-being. Memories of their argument resurfaced and she felt an unquenchable guilt creeping through her senses. He came back for her, no doubt. He must have.

"He was unconscious," Sakura explained slowly, trying to search for the right words. Sarada could tell that she was holding back on something. "I assumed Sasuke must have kidnapped him and knocked him out or something."

"And?" Sarada asked. There had to be more to this.

"Sasuke tried to bargain with Boruto's life," Sakura finally said. "He… threatened to kill the boy if we did not leave the cave."

"What did you do then? Did you try to save him?"

Now Sarada was really worried. She itched for answers.

It was her friend, her best friend, whose life was clearly in danger and she wasn't going to leave him there.

"Sakura," Sarada spoke up. "Can you… can you please tell me more about Boruto? Is he okay? Is he still alive? What did Sasuke do to him?"

"Sarada…" Sakura sighed. "Yes, Boruto is still alive. At least from what I last remembered."

"Did you take the bargain then?"

"No."

The word came with a heavy thud. The sense of foreboding that Sarada had long felt finally unmasked and manifested itself. So this was what happened: Sakura refused to leave the cave, deeming Boruto's life unworthy of saving, perhaps. Or was it out of futile resignation? Did the woman feel that her friend was doomed either way?

With all these tumultuous thoughts festering in her mind, Sarada could only muster one syllable: "Why?"

Sakura took a deep breath again, steadying herself for the explanation. "Any prisoner of Sasuke's is a
dead man anyway. I'm really sorry but your friend, this boy Boruto, there was no way I could have actually saved him. I... I couldn't take the chance… I-

"What do you mean by that?!" Sarada sounded baffled. "You could have at least tried to get him back!"

Sakura shook her head adamantly. "You don't know who we're dealing with-"

"But I know Boruto! He was… he was my best friend, someone I could always count on, someone-"

"Sarada," Sakura interrupted the girl even after seeing how she was trembling with bewilderment boarding on anger. "Sacrifices have to be made. Us insurgents, we lose comrades and loved ones all the time, but we need to reflect rationally on all our losses and, above all, persist for the greater good."

"No goal, no high honour could ever be worth the cost of Boruto's life," Sarada rebuked coldly. She was starting to feel pissed at the woman in front of her. As Sakura aimed to pull her into an embrace – out of an attempt to comfort her, most definitely – Sarada only shrunk back in disgust. "I don't need your hugs and honeyed words."

She had misjudged the pink-haired, supposedly courageous matriarch in front of her. The woman was not her mother, will never be her mother. This was someone entirely alien. The exterior features remained largely the same, but prowl inside and one would see a woman bent and battered, twisted and ruthless by decades of revolutionary lifestyle. Such is the way of this world then, Sarada concluded grimly.

"Sarada, you have to understand-"

"I already do, Sakura," Sarada responded, the sheer wintry demeanour exposing just how instantaneously all the toils she endured with this woman, all the goodwill they built up together in the past few days had evaporated. "You know, call me an idiot if you want, but I still stand by the beliefs passed down to me by Naruto Uzumaki and his team, the belief that those who abandon their friends are worse than scum. The point wasn't that you failed to rescue him, it was that you didn't try at all."

"You don't know-"

"Let me finish first," Sarada snapped. "You didn't give a damn about his life, didn't you? Well guess what? We still failed either way. The Kyuubi escaped your grasps and we're no closing overturning this regime. Well done."

"Sarada…" Sakura uttered these three syllables gently, attempting to nudge closer Sarada after she initially moved away.

Kakashi's voice, out in the distance, came as a welcome respite: "Hey you two! Are you guys alright?"

Boruto could understand why Sasuke didn't mind him ambling around the house because it was an awfully dull and ordinary place. No photos, no books save for the day's newspapers and no personal items of value whatsoever. The sofas were of a bland brown colour and the tables, desks and cabinets were of a plain and simple box-like design. The windows were covered by curtains decorated with yellow and green stripes.

It was truly indistinguishable from your average house. Small wonder why no one suspected it
belonged to the Hokage.

Still, there was a sense of unease that accompanied this mundanity, almost as if no one had lived here. It bore resemblance to the typically customised houses that a real estate agent would show a client about, without any extra furnishing since the house's purchase.

There was an enigma shrouded by this mundanity. Boruto found himself wondering about what Sasuke did in his free time. That is, if the man had any free time at all.

Boruto arrived before the fridge and decided to examine its contents, for it was perhaps the only thing that had no excuse to be empty. Some vegetables, some salmon, eggs and a little milk. Boring.

He trudged down the stairs (it was a two storey house) and began comparing the place to his home. The wall that lined the stairs were furnished with photos of him, father, mother and Himawari in their house, but here it was empty. The floor was of a typical chestnut hue. Nothing exceptional there too. No luxuriant carpets, no nothing. Just a dirty white rag near the door.

Eventually, Boruto reached, what he assumed to be, Sasuke's own room. The bed was slightly larger than the one Boruto slept in, though Boruto wondered why Sasuke needed an extra bed in his house the first place. It seemed, well, frankly uncharacteristic of a man who controlled much of the continent with an iron fist. There were a couple of drawers near the bed, a modestly sized wardrobe and another larger wardrobe facing the door.

Boruto desperately tried to search for signs of life and colour around the place, to little avail. He sighed and resigned himself to the sheer mediocrity of the place. He hesitated when approaching Sasuke's bed – it was best if he stayed away.

An underwhelming sight, it all was.

He ultimately settled on the sofa in the living room, lying in it and staring at the ceiling ponderously.

Boruto felt trapped, a prisoner to boredom. A sense of agitating was boiling from within the boy as his mind wandered to his friends Mitsuki and Sarada. They were most likely still with the insurgent Hi no Ishi and participating in missions relating to the retrieval of tailed beasts, or at least that was what Boruto gathered from his conversations with Sasuke.

All of a sudden, he feared for their safety.

He feared for their lives.

Just what the hell are you doing, Boruto? He mentally chided himself. Look at you. You're resting in the house of the very man who is endangering the lives your friends you care about, friends who are risking their very lives to do something about this wretched world. And you? You're being pathetic, just languishing here, waiting for nothing.

Boruto got up and began pacing back and forth.

Helplessness, impotency and self-loathing were invading his thoughts again, poisoning all tenets of reason and rationality, infecting his previous state of comfort.

He had to do something.

But, alas, what is there to do?
They journeyed in silence towards the nearest base.

Kakashi could detect the tension simmering through the air between Sakura and Sarada. Not only did they maximise the space between them, but they also avoided all forms of eye contact.

Sarada, he could tell, was seething with rage. Her face adopted a livid colour. Her eyes, though not basking in her legendary dojutsu, still smouldered like the top of a volatile volcano.

Sakura, on the other hand, appeared absolutely distraught. Her dark circles were deepened, augmented by her misery. Her stature sagged; her shoulders slouched as she trudged lethargically through the dirt paths in the grasslands. Kakashi couldn't pinpoint whether this was due to her complete, total exhaustion, her failure, or her emerging gulf with Sarada.

It was strange, the way Sakura had become so attached to the girl, Kakashi observed. Sarada, mallyhaps, unwittingly morphed into the woman's substitute daughter, her replacement for the child she never had, the child she should have had.

If only the past was kinder.

"The Ichibi, Sanbi and Rokubi have fallen into enemy hands," Sasuke briefed Boruto after finally admitting the boy into his office, which was, of course, preceded by hours of agony and aggravating sofa contemplation. "The insurgents targeting the Nanabi and Hachibi are in the process of being neutralised. The rest have failed. That, Boruto, is the pitiful state of Hi no Ishi."

"Uh… I mean, they've already gotten three tailed beasts. I don't think that qualifies them as a failure," Boruto rebutted.

"That is of no major concern. I've already sent further reinforcements. Worst comes to worst, I'll deal with them personally," Sasuke explained, his expressions giving way to something Boruto would personally describe as a smug smirk.

"Then what is the purpose of you telling me all this?" Boruto asked, his brow furrowing.

"Hn. You'll see."

A hush descended upon the room once more. Boruto's gaze shifted to his two feet, which were still steeped in his old, Konoha-emblem-patterned socks. A sense of urgency overtook him again. He needed to get out as soon as possible. Fast. But first, he needed to find a way to get to Sasuke and that's easier said than done.

"Actually, there's something I really have to show you. And no, it's not really about my own world. It concerns yours too," Boruto began, suppressing whatever instincts that veered towards hesitancy, with a grave and somber tone. It was a gamble. A terrible one. But it was the only thing that came into his mind.
Chapter 19

Chomei breathed the liberating fresh air with a sense of relief. Free at last, she was, from years and years of captivation. It was a man, a rather subdued and introverted man in his olive-coloured long coat and dark glass, that unlocked her seal.

She could instantly tell that he was an Aburame, a shinobi that meticulously specialised in handling insects. His chakra and the cloud of bugs swirling around him, seeping in and out of his sleeves, betrayed his identity. She was an insect herself, sort of. She wondered what his intentions were. He was unlikely to be affiliated with her devious captor, for she distinctly remembered the man's resolute declaration that she and her siblings – the other children of Hagomoro – would spend eternity in incarceration.

Curious, she sought answers: "Who are you?"

Sasuke didn't seem fazed at all. Granted, years of Machiavellian politics and ruthless slaughter had made such tactics seem rather blasé in his eyes.

"Go on. Enlighten me me," Sasuke snorted.

"It's... complicated," Boruto said, striking a balanced tone. "But, in short, I believe this world could be in danger. Existential danger."

"And what makes you think that?" Sasuke asked, more amused than concerned.

Boruto panicked, for just an instant, struggling to select the correct words to proceed. He had to get this right. He was no match for Sasuke in terms of physical strength, but if he could find some way to lure the man into a battle of minds, into his memories, he might have stood a chance – a barely existent fragment of hope.

Boruto was sure of it now. This man wanted to avoid talking about his past, the bonds he had forged back in his halcyon days with Team 7. That was why he fought and killed Naruto in the first place. That was why he refused to interact with Sarada, for she reminded him of Sakura, a woman who once loved him deeply. That was why he dealt with Sakura in such a brusque manner. That was why Sasuke approached the two with ruthless precision, batting away all emotions when dealing with them. That was why the man slaughtered so many members of the Konoha Eleven and wiped out the Taka. He wanted to severe his past completely and totally.

But in the midst of all this carnage he, Boruto, stood out as an odd case. The more he thought about, the more he realised that while Sasuke's hostilities haven't entirely subsided, the man did not want him dead. Perhaps it was sentimentality: Boruto had, much to his personal irritation, been reminded on a regular basis his physical similarities with his father. Perhaps Boruto represented something else, a sliver of humanity Sasuke never truly wanted to relinquish.

"Boruto," Sasuke scolded. "I'm warning you, if you're going to say something, say it now. I want none of that nonsense you've been spewing before."

"Does the name Otsusuki ring a bell?" Boruto finally began. He needed to be a little vague, to pluck the man's curiosity.

"Why of course, the Sage of Sixth Paths was an Otsusuki, as was his brother, as was his mother… Kaguya Otsusuki," Sasuke replied, still not entirely impressed with the boy's words. "And you're
bringing them up because…?"

"Has it ever occurred to you – I mean, have you ever even contemplated about the possibility that… there may be more of them out there?" Boruto explained carefully. He had to appear levelheaded lest Sasuke started dismissing his words as part of a delusional rant. "Because there are."

In a different world, a frustrated Naruto Uzumaki punched a tree. It shook furiously, almost crashing down.

"Naruto," Hinata said as she approached him, gently placing her arms on his shoulders. "Calm down, please."

Naruto considered himself a fairly even-tempered, sensible man with occasional outbursts explained by his inherent hyperactivity and vestiges of brashness back in his younger years. Yet he hadn't felt this infuriated, this helpless, this impotent for a long time. Even when Momoshiki and Kinshiki attacked Konoha, for at least during then, he still had the ability to do something about them.

Not this time.

His son was still trapped in the other dimension and he had no way to reach Boruto.

The boy was on his own now. No. He still had his teammates, Naruto assured himself. Mitsuki and Sarada will help Boruto overcome all the obstacles; they'd do everything for each other, follow each other to hell and back. The three were a close team.

Yet, Naruto reluctantly admitted, that that wouldn't be enough. They still wouldn't stand a chance against Sasuke. Naruto found himself wondering just how his friend turned out in that other world. Would the man spare Boruto? Does he regret any of his actions? Feeling exasperated, Naruto slammed his fists into another tree.

"Naruto! Stop!" Hinata sounded very worried now.

All of a sudden, Naruto felt bad about his behaviour. His wife was likely just as agitated as him, yet here she was, doing her best to calm him down. He hung his head in shame.

"I'm sorry for my outburst, Hinata," he apologised to her and pulled her close.

"There's no need to," she simply replied. "I share your frustrations too – but we have to believe in our son. He's not a weak child. He will find a way, together with his friends."

"It's just… I wish I could have been there to help him," Naruto confessed. "At the time when he needed me most – I mean, you know, survival wise- I'm not going to be there for him. If only I could find a way to reach him."

"I know, Naruto, I know. But he's not going to live under your protection forever. I'm worried sick for him too, yet there comes a time in every person's live when they must stand on their own," Hinata said, trying to convince both herself and her husband. "Besides, he won't be alone," she added with even more desperation present.

Oh the irony. The most powerful man in the world and he could only hope his son was fine and nothing more.

"Remind me again, how is this suppose to be relevant?" Sasuke pressed on Boruto.
"Momokishi and Kinshiki," Boruto began with a slightly accentuated dramatic tone. He was so going to milk this. "Ever heard of them?"

"No," Sasuke admitted, frowning. "How am I supposed to know if you didn't just make up these names out of thin air?"

"Because they exist," Boruto rebutted confidently. "A year ago, in my dimension, they attacked. They invaded Konoha because they were after the Kyuubi."

"Right – and who are they exactly?"

Boruto could sense a shift in tone. The man was starting to appear interested.

"Two aliens from a different planet, Kaguya's planet to be precise. They absorb chakra from their enemies to form chakra pills and they've been roaming around different planets in search of concentrated forms of chakra. Hence why they were after the Kyuubi," Boruto explained. "They have, at least according to what I've heard, devastated entire planets."

"So… you believe they'll come for us eventually too?" Sasuke asked. "Interesting theory." His expressions were unreadable.

"I have proof," Boruto insisted. "See for yourself."

"…Fine."

Boruto cheered internally. This was his chance. There was no room for messing up.

"Shino Aburame," said the man with dark glasses. "Pleased to meet you."

"Chomei."

They were interrupted by hurried footsteps. Shino disseminated a few tracking insects to determine whether they were reinforcements or from a hostile party.

"On behalf of Hi no Ishi, I've come to free you."

They were whisked to an alien landscape, where the sky was blood red and where they looked more like shadows than fleshed human beings.

"Tsukyomi," Sasuke explained matter-of-factly. "It was my brother's favourite genjutsu technique. Three days here can be but three minutes in the real world. We'll have plenty of time."

Boruto nodded.

Crap, he thought, I'm in Sasuke's territory now. He controls everything here; I'll need to be careful. Then again, the odds were never stacked in his favour.

"Allow me then," Boruto said. "To show you my childhood. There's a good reason for that."

"Remember: one word about that bullshit idealism of yours and we're out."

"Got it."
They were in Boruto's Konoha now. It was only a few weeks before the graduation exams and ceremony at the Academy.

"Yup, we're here," Boruto remarked. "Let me show you around my hometown."

They strolled around the streets, walking past multi-story buildings, laughing families, game arcades and large, colourful neon billboards advertising women's clothing, family activities, bars, children's toys and other less… savory products. It was about 9 or 10 in the morning.

"Hmmm… I know this place," Sasuke simply said.

"Well, the streets haven't really changed since the village's foundation, it's the stuff in it that has," Boruto responded.

"This sure is different," Sasuke noted. Boruto thought he could detect a faint trace of awe – but then again, there's no real way of knowing with this guy.

"And that place, is where my mates and I always go during our free time," Boruto said as he gestured towards the games arcade. "I suppose you've never heard of video games." Witnessing Sasuke's lack of response – presumably the closest indication of incredulity possible – Boruto continued: "It's like virtual reality? I mean, games come in all shapes and forms. My favourite is the one where you get to join a team and you guys have to complete missions, fight other teams, retrieve rare objects, whatnot.

"And what's the point of that?" Sasuke asked wryly, "That's pretty much what you do as a genin in real life anyway."

"It's different! It's so much cooler!" Boruto said, almost pouting. No one insults his favourite game. No one. "Plus, there are other games. There's this one that I got Chocho addicted to for a while, much to Sarada's irritation, which involved one playing the character of a waitress and serving people food in a restaurant. Oh and another one where you start a virtual family."

"You haven't really answered my question, kid," Sasuke sighed.

"I'll show you!" Boruto offered, not waiting for a response. He started dragging the man towards the archive.

Sasuke pushed Boruto away: "I know how to walk."

They've spent almost and hour there and Sasuke was visibly annoyed.

"And this is what you wanted to show me?" Sasuke asked skeptically after they finished another round of "Dinner Dash," which involved two players racing to serve the most people in a take-away restaurant. Boruto was topping the scoreboard – though not by astronomical levels. Sasuke seemed nonchalant as ever, but Boruto could tell that he got annoyed whenever he lost. The competitive spirits were up.

"It's great isn't it?" Boruto beamed.

"Irrelevant. I'm warning you-"

"Hey, it's okay to admit you've enjoyed this!" Boruto said, grinning in the most irritable manner (from Sasuke's opinion, at least.)
"Boruto," Sasuke said, sounding serious again. "We didn't come here to waste time on silly games."

"Yeah, silly games that you've spent an hour playing!" Boruto remarked gleefully. He was so going to enjoy taunting the man about this. "You gotta admit, the fact that I've constructed this place out of my memories is pretty impressive."

Indeed, Boruto had been in that arcade for so many hours that he could almost recall every nook and cranny, every trick and cheat of every single game there.

"Explains why you've been winning so much," Sasuke quipped.

"Are you accusing me of cheating?!" Boruto yelled indignantly.

"I never accused you of anything, kid," Sasuke said in a mildly mocking tone. "Now," he continued as the room around them suddenly darkened and the air turned colder, "We're leaving."

Boruto gulped.

"And that kid over there," Boruto commented as he gestured towards a virtual duplicate of himself, "is me."

"I can tell," Sasuke scoffed.

"And the girl he's handing the bento box to," Boruto resumed, ignoring Sasuke's words, "is Sarada Uchiha."

"… yes…" Sasuke noted, nodding. "I've seen her."

"Yeah you knocked her unconscious," Boruto responded with a hint of accusation. "Then again, you've done the same to me, sort of."

No reply from Sasuke.

Whoops.

"Anyways," Boruto continued describing the unfolding scene, "Sarada is heading off to find… well… you're counterpart in this world, who has been gone pretty much since she was born. But here, she's actually following Naruto because he was going to meet up with, well, the other Sasuke."

"Right," Sasuke said as he folded his arms and nodded. "And I'm presuming there's a reason for that?"

"Correct," Boruto answered. "According to dad, the you in my world – my god this is confusing isn't it? – had been hopping between different worlds in search of a threat beyond Kaguya, a threat that the rabbit-goddess herself tried to subdue. In the process, Sarada was left to being raised by Sakura alone. Heck, she even thought she was adopted for a while. But after this affair, well, she's been much better. She wants to be Hokage now-"

"Stick to the point," Sasuke interjected. He appeared rather uncomfortable, or at least as uncomfortable as someone who has spent his past decade hollowing out his emotions could be.

"The threat came during the chuunin exams," Boruto explained.

"Would you like to take me there?" Sasuke pressed on. This wasn't a question, nor a request; it was an order.
They were now in Boruto's house and a scene of celebration transformed into one of disaster right before their eyes. Himawari burst into tears as Naruto's shadow clone evaporated, dropping a vanilla and strawberry cake. Boruto recalled his own feelings of rage as he witnessed himself yell about his father in fury while his mother's disappointed gaze did not go unnoticed.

"You know, being the Hokage's kid wasn't all that great. I hated it at first. Dad was so busy all the time he'd always just send his shadow clones to spend time with us. I really resented him back then," Boruto started speaking. It came out spontaneously – he hadn't planned to tell Sasuke all of this.

"And may I ask, what changed that?" Sasuke asked. There was no semblance of impatience, no irritation at Boruto's disclosure of information and affairs unrelated to Momokishi and Kinshiki.

Boruto paused and took a deep breath: "A lot of things."

"Who's the vague person now?"

"You'll know later."

Enemy forces and Hi no Ishi reinforcements are approaching at roughly the same speed. Shino sighed as his reconnaissance insects informed him about the status of the newcomers.

"Chomei, looks like we've got to battle our way out of this."

"Oh, I'm so on! It's been seventeen years!"

"Has it?" The man didn't even realise he had spoken, feeling surprised at his own wistful voice. Yes, of course, it has been such a long time since the Fourth Shinobi World War.

"Did you have to try and punch me?" Sasuke raised his eyebrows.

"I was really mad back then," Boruto shrugged. "Besides, that guy wasn't really you."

"True."

They started walking out of Boruto's house.

"So," Sasuke asked, "what did you try to do after that?"

"Watch." It was Boruto's turn for monosyllabic replies.

Sasuke watched the scene before his eyes unfold with amusement. "So it is true… you were my apprentice," he muttered. "They weren't ravings of a delusional kid."

"What?"

"I overheard you sleep-talk," answered Sasuke in an attempt to clear the confusion.

"Yeah, I suppose," Boruto said. "I really wanted to beat my dad, surpass him and become known by my own name and not just some kid of the Hokage."

"Forever in someone's shadow then?" Sasuke asked, this time with a trace of sympathy. "Yeah I know how it can feel like."
"You do?" Boruto questioned surprised at Sasuke's sudden emergence of emotions.

"It's not easy being a second son," Sasuke simply explained, sighing. "Especially if you're brother's a prodigy. But then again, I suppose your case is different."

"Yeah probably," Boruto agreed. "I mean, I'm sort of over this now. I have absolutely zero desire to be Hokage – it's all Sarada's for the taking."

They stood their grown as their surroundings shifted again, morphing into a forest. The grey pavements gave way to soil and dirt, the houses with their dim lights to dense dark foliage, the somber street lights to solid tree trunks, night to day.

"What do you want to be?" That was Sasuke's query. He sounded mildly curious and invested.

"I… I want to protect all my friends and family and my village from the shadows," Boruto answered. "I don't need titles or honours. Just a trail of good deeds would be enough."

"Well you're more articulate than that idiot ever was," Sasuke commented, his attention being completely fixated away from the two figures camping in the distance. He didn't care what the other equivalent of himself and Boruto were talking about. It did not concern him whatsoever.

"Yeah I haven't exactly succeeded much to be honest," Boruto remarked in a self-deprecating manner. It was true, brutally so.

"You're still young."

"I guess," Boruto said, sighing. "Anyways, I probably should tell you more about what's going on here."

"You really don't have to."

"I was just really frustrated with everything," Boruto continued talking. "It was a bad day of training. I tried asking if my dad had any weaknesses. You know, from what I've heard, he overcame a lot. Loneliness, abandonment, resentment. He was a pretty bad loser at the beginning – heh, he still is at times – but bit by bit he learnt how to conquer his weaknesses. That's what's important. And you? You helped him along the way, a great deal more than you could have suspected."

There was no reply.

"Right, we should get going," Boruto announced, sensing the awkwardness.

They arrived right in the midst of a fight. Boruto was facing off against Shikadai Nara in the third round of the chuunin exams. And he was losing. To be precise, it was the moment when Shikadai had encircled Boruto with his shadow binding jutsu.

Then Boruto turned everything around almost miraculously (if one hadn't noticed his usage of the scientific ninja tool), producing hundreds of shadow clones that instantly overwhelmed Shikadai, overstretching his jutsu and forcing him to surrender. On the distant balcony, Temari and Sakura chuckled while Ino facepalmed in annoyance.

"You cheated," Sasuke commented.

"I did," Boruto said, wincing as he remembered that infamous day: the humiliation, the shame and the tumult that came after. "I used the scientific ninja tool-kit. It was a pretty recent invention."
"Technology has progressed a lot in your world, hasn't it?"

"Indeed."

"So not only were you a loser, you were also a cheater," Sasuke said, switching the topic.

"Yeah I was," Boruto concurred.

Sasuke looked taken aback by the boy's acquiescence: "You're not offended?"

"It's true," Boruto admitted frankly. "I'm ashamed of it, of course. But no, I'm not offended when people point it out. I can't exactly erase what I've done."

Naruto was now descending the stairs, making his way towards Boruto, who was still basking in his triumph in the middle of the stadium.

"Oh you're about to get exposed," Sasuke noted.

Naruto was now holding out Boruto's arm, stripping away his sleeves and revealing his hidden cheating tool. The boy hung his head in shame. As the whole stadium was gripped in disbelief, Katasuke – head of Science Ninja Weapons Team – approached centre stage and began talking about the marvels of the scientific ninja tool, boasting about its ability to enhance the strength of its user.

"I know," Boruto said, more resigned than irritated. "What happened already happened. That," he continued as a giant, otherworldly ogre descended upon the stadium and stripped everyone's attention away from Katasuke's ramblings, "was when Momoshiki and Kinshiki appeared."

Sasuke's gaze was now fixated on Kinshiki. Naruto shielded his son from the encroaching enemy. Kinshiki hurled his finger trips, which were laced with bright red chakra weapons, into the ground, creating a huge way that sent everyone flying on their backs. This guy was dangerous – it would be problematic if he indeed decided to target the world.

All around them, the stadium was crumbling, crumbling, crumbling.

In fact, Sasuke and Boruto were the only ones not running around in panic. The boy pointed the man towards members of the Konoha 11 and their descendants, much to the latter's displeasure ("For the last time Boruto, stop with all that distraction," Sasuke would complain.) The other Sasuke rescued Sarada in the brink of time, saving her from a collapsing structure – Boruto especially emphasised this to the man standing next to him. He thought he could detect a tinge of emotion. Was it regret? Shame? Boruto couldn't tell.

Then, out of the blue, emerged Momoshiki, who eyed Naruto excitedly with his Byakugan and proceeded to kick the Nanadaime right in the gut, causing him to fly out of the stadium.

A dangerous scenario indeed. None of Boruto's attacks via the scientific ninja tool worked. Yet Naruto emerged from behind and attacked Momokishi while Shikamaru used his shadow binding jutsu to temporarily paralyse the two. But soon, Momokishi was able to dispel the jutsu by absorbing it into the Rinnegan embedded in his left hand.

"We can't use our powers out here, everyone will get dragged in."

"It seems like I'm the one they're after."

Those were the words spoken between the Naruto and Sasuke of Boruto's world. The intimacy and
"I am Kinshiki Otsusuki and this is Lord Momoshiki Otsusuki," the giant ogre explained.

"Just what do you want with me?" demanded Naruto.

"We'll turn the scattered chakra into one fruit and finish what Kaguya failed to do," came Kinshiki's raspy voice.

"The scroll said these guys would come to retrieve the chakra from the divine tree, which is why Kaguya was amassing an army of white Zetsu," the other Sasuke elucidated.

"And this fruit stuff?"

"They want to use it to make pills."

"Pills?"

"A kind of medicine."

"That's right," Momoshiki said smugly, smirking at the inferior beings that lay right before his eyes. "As long as we have this, we remain young, immortal and invincible." He brandished out a red pill, which resembled some sort of fruit. "You poor awkward humans," Momoshiki taunted, "unless you train and preserve endlessly and pointlessly you get nowhere at all. But me, just watch, with this pill I can acquire true power instantly, with no effort whatsoever."

"Don't make me laugh," Naruto rebuked resolutely. "True power is something you have to earn."

Momoshiki laughed as he swallowed the pills and summoned a giant tailed beast ball surrounding by swirls of fire, water and wind: "Here's a jutsu I acquired."

The other Boruto trembled in fear, creating a shadow clone in hopes of better protecting himself and Sarada.

"How brave," Sasuke noted sardonically.

Momoshiki hurled the giant tailed beast ball at them and out of the ashes emerged the giant head of the Kyuubi as Naruto guarded everyone from the attack. The other Sasuke quickly coated it with the armour of the Susanoo. Yet the relentless barrage of jutsu coming from Momoshiki began mercilessly peeling the purple layer off, even snipping into the Kyuubi's left ear.

Finally, Momoshiki summoned an even larger tailed beast ball, preparing to finish this battle once and for all.

They were now in the Hokage's office, or to be clear, Naruto's office. They were alone with a despondent Boruto, gazing at the portraits of other former Hokage's in shame.

"The two are indeed dangerous," Sasuke said gravely. "If they were to attack my world… Things would be very difficult indeed. No, near impossible."

"It took five Kages, plus me and, well, you in the other world to defeat them," Boruto added. "So yes, things are very bad indeed."

"Or they might not even decide to attack. Still, it's good for precaution to plan for the worse
"You know, you can't take on these guys alone. Right?" Boruto asked.

Silence.

"Do you... regret anything?" Boruto added after sensing unease in the air.

"... Boruto, being Hokage is a solitary job. Like what you said, you can't erase what you've done. There is no doubt that things... turned out differently in your world." Sasuke was mincing words. "But it has all come to far, things have diverged too much for me to be thinking about any alternatives. In reality, the five nations are united into one. In reality, there have been no wars for nearly two decades, not even minor skirmishes. In reality, even those who hate me and oppose still have their place under the sky."

"And Sakura?" Boruto gently prodded on.

"I never understood why she liked me," Sasuke said, sighing. "Truth to be told, her turning into the leader of Hi no Ishi, her resentment of me is... more preferable to all the heartbreak that would have happened. It was all so long ago."

"And Sarada?"

"You the girl who could have been my daughter? What about her?"

"Do you... have any feelings for her?"

"Ah what could have been... She may be his daughter, but she is not mine. She is but a person from another dimension," Sasuke whispered.

"So am I?" Boruto pointed this out.

"So are you."

The door opened and in came Sasuke Uchiha.

"I think we can skip this," the Sasuke from the other world stated.

"You got that right," the other Sasuke told the other Boruto.

"Er... I think we may have missed something," Boruto said while scratching his head. "We may have spoken a little too much."

"Whatever."

They stayed quiet as they observed the other duo interact.

"... without the sister who adores you and your mother who cares so much about you, you'd be just like how your father used to be. Well, what now?"

"So my dad..., can you tell me what he did?"

"So it's not just his weaknesses you are interested in? Ask him yourself. I'm to go rescue him."

"I can sense his chakra. In other words, he's still alive."
"I don't get it uncle Sasuke, why are you even bothering with me at all?"

"You're actually quite a strong shinobi. I may have lost to him, but you can be the one who surpasses him."

"But how are you able to tell that?"

"Well, you are his son aren't you? And my number one student. But even more than that, you're a worse loser than Naruto ever was."

"Loser – what do you mean?"

"All I mean is that you hate to lose."

All of a sudden, the world started turning and turning all around Boruto. He was whisked out of the room, out of that genjutsu-induced world and into the real one, or at least one particular version of it.

The remainder of Boruto's experience? It seemed that Sasuke would have none of it.

Sarada sat in silence in the Hi no Ishi base, listening with hostile disinterest at the way Sakura communicated with Kakashi and her fellow comrades. The way the woman talked, the way she smiled, the way she gestured – it all disgusted Sarada.

"We've got a prisoner!" declared a Hi no Ishi operative as he walked into the room, dragging in a man covered with seals.

"Get a Yamanaka to interrogate him. We need to obtain as much intel as possible," Sakura ordered.

"Permission to use torture?"

"Permission granted."

Of course, Sarada thought. Of course torture was a phenomenon. Who would have guessed?

From the corner of her eye, Sarada caught a glimpse of Sakura's worried gaze. If that woman was afraid of saying such things in front of Sarada, she can bugger off. Granted, Sarada tried to rationalise again, torture was a thing in her own world too. Though it wasn't used as sparsely as in her parent's childhood. But still, her personal exaggerations aside, she could not get rid of the nagging feeling in her stomach that this Sakura had other things hidden from her.
"Sarada!" Sakura called desperately after the girl as she strode unsentimentally back into her own room. "Sarada, hear me out!"

Sarada ignored the woman's words. She needed to be alone; she needed a quiet moment to think for herself, away from all the mayhem in the world. Alternatively, she needed her friends Boruto and Mitsuki, people whom she could trust and confide in.

But the woman behind kept persisting, much to her displeasure.

Sarada sped up, hoping that Sakura would eventually relent. It was to little avail.

"Please, Sarada. Please, you have to understand-"

"There's nothing to talk about," Sarada interrupted Sakura, turning around briskly to face the woman. "Why do you care about me anyway? I'm not from your world."

And with that she continued, brushing Sakura's comments and apologies away.

"I thought you would have wanted to stay," Boruto remarked. "Don't you want to see how we fought Momoshiki and Kinshiki."

"Why would I need to?" Sasuke rebutted. "Momoshiki has the Rinnegan and he can absorb all forms of ninjutsu. Kinshiki is immensely strong and relies on brute force. Ergo, taijutsu is the best way out. Am I missing on anything?"

"Not that I can think of," Boruto muttered.

"Besides, I'll have you to ask about if they actually were to attack this planet," Sasuke reasoned. "Hence, there's no point in wasting our time wallowing in your memories."

"Glad to be of help," uttered Boruto not entirely sincerely. "Truly."

"Lovely," Sasuke quipped. "Anything else you want to know?"

"What are you going to do now?" Boruto prodded for signals of emotion.

"What do you mean by that?" Sasuke questioned as his eyes narrowed.

"You know… now that you know how everything could have been-"

"Boruto," Sasuke interjected. "Drop all that talk, please."

"What do you not care at all? Heck, does it not bother you one bit that all of this could have been avoided if you only managed to reconcile with my dad?!" Boruto said as he gesticulated wildly. "Does anything bother you at all?"

"It wouldn't matter if anything did."

"Does it bother you at all that you're practically running a police state? People get intimidated all the time, get inspected regularly and aren't free to travel around all the time without regular documents?"
"I believe we've had this conversation before," Sasuke dismissed Boruto's accusations brusquely.

"I'm not going to stop asking questions until you answer them properly," Boruto insisted. He had surprisingly managed to suppress his temper. Somehow, he was unable to stay angry at the man in front of him.

Sasuke sighed: "Very well. Believe it or not, I think your memories – the ones we revisited together – were authentic all right. You're not too wrong. Your world is peaceful, mostly, and far more technologically advanced than mine. Its people are freer. But your world isn't my world."

"A solution like that could never happen here, not anymore," Sasuke continued. "This world has no saviour, no messiah." He stopped, paused speaking and began scrutinising the boy before him. "You must have heard about the prophecy, no?"

Boruto nodded. Then asked: "You have too?"

"Of course. I have my sources in Hi no Ishi," Sasuke explained nonchalantly.

"And… you're not afraid?" Boruto asked. "I mean-"

He was interrupted by Sasuke's laugh. "Of course not," Sasuke said as he chuckled, for it took a while for the laughter to die down completely. "Why would I be?"

"I mean, maybe I could overthrow you and save the world?" Boruto hinted, shrugging his shoulders and privately gauging for a reaction.

"Would you?" Sasuke's voice quieted.

"Or I could doom it to perpetual darkness, whatever the hell that meant."

"You don't sound very serious about all of that," Sasuke said as he noticed Boruto's slackening demeanour. "For someone's who is awfully critical of what I'm doing, you seem pretty … casual, at home even."

Boruto's eyes widened at the suggestion. A preposterous idea, he internally asserted. There was no way in hell he'd ever feel comfortable here, in Sasuke's big bland house. But he couldn't exactly tell the man that. He had to be more rounded and less provocative with his words. He remembered Shikadai's wry comments that one time when they saw Shino sensei wearing an appalling clown costume at the village festival (it was a few years ago – long story, mind you): if you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all. Boruto intended to do precisely so. Boruto had wanted to approach their Academy instructor, but Shikadai's vociferous objections resulted in one less prank that night.

"Anyways, Boruto," Sasuke resumed talking. "I knew what you were getting at."

"What?"

"The whole fear surrounding Momoshiki and Kinshiki, it was all an act, right? To get me to look into your past?" Sasuke whispered.

"What?"

"Don't look at me like you don't know anything," Sasuke's said as he sighed and shut his eyes, shook his head.
"When… did you realise that?"

"I figured that out while we were playing 'Dinner Dash' in that arcade."

"What? That early?"

"You lacked urgency. And let's face it, we played that game for an hour. You seemed very eager to show me around your world – in hopes that I might come to appreciate it, perhaps?" Sasuke said, eyeing Boruto, scrutinising the boy for every quiver of emotion. "Not to mention, in that other world, you explained that my counterpart there frequently travelled between worlds and ultimately encountered Momoshiki and Kinshiki. There's a considerable chance that it was my counterpart's encounter with them that triggered their invasion the first place."

"If you suspected so, then why did you stay?"

"I was curious. And… I wanted to know more about you. Who you are, where you grew up, what you wanted. Don't be too upset about this," the man added as he noticed Boruto's ashen, disappointed expression. The boy simply couldn't hide it. Sasuke almost felt bad for him. Almost. "Far greater men have failed to convince me."

Sarada couldn't stop thinking about Boruto. She missed him. It hurt, the fact that they left each other on such terrible terms and the fact that she may never see him alive again. She wanted to find him, dive into his arms, cry and apologise for the animosity she displayed when they last met– in a non-romantic manner, of course.

She lay in a bare, barren cell where the walls were dull grey slabs of concrete. The door was shut and the small room was illuminated with one singular light bulb. It constantly flickered on and off – its functioning abilities were precarious, inconsistent, much like Boruto's fate, or so an anxious Sarada speculated.

She didn't know what to do, quite literally. Ever since her rift with Sakura, she started feeling out of place in Hi no Ishi. Sure, most counterparts of her friends and acquaintances in her world belonged to it. Konohamaru, Chocho, Shikadai, Inojin, Kakashi and all. Yet if Sakura turned out different in this world, what's to say if the others aren't the same? Her friends seemed amiable enough, but they were also hardened people. Sarada began wondering whether she belonged with them at all. Perhaps Boruto was right, perhaps she should have simply gone home with him and refrained from making such a fuss over things.

She heard a knock on the door, and she promptly ignored it. Sakura entered anyway.

"Sarada," the woman gently uttered as her voice choked. Her eyes were slightly swollen. "Can I talk to you about something?"

"What?" Sarada asked impatiently. She twisted her body away. She wanted no such conversation; she wanted to ruminate in silence and wait for Mitsuki's return.

"Please," Sakura implored. There was a trace of desperation. She moved closer to Sarada and sat on the bed with the girl. "Sarada, please. Hear me out on this, just once."

"Heh," Boruto grunted as he refused to budge from the chair in Sasuke's room. "You put on a pretty convincing act."

"Why thank you. Though it wasn't entirely an act Boruto. It was an interesting experience,
notwithstanding all the scheming involved," Sasuke remarked with a caustic politeness.

"What do you want me then, Sasuke? Why are you keeping me here?" Boruto uttered these words forcefully. He felt himself being overcome with frustration. His efforts – to make Sasuke see the other side of things – were going nowhere. Yet he was also trapped here, being unable to reach his friends. He tried to edge his vision closer to the window to catch a glimpse of the world outside - or at least the landscape of some generic Konoha residential area. "What's the point of all of this?"

Boruto spoke again. "You know, you forcing me to stay at your house and not letting me go out… it's kinda unbearable…"

Sasuke snorted: "A walk then?"

"Huh?" Boruto sounded confused.

"Would you like to go out for a walk?" Sasuke repeated, enunciating in a rather condescending manner, this time with more clarity.

"You'd allow that? I thought you objected to that before-"

"Yes or no?"

"Sure, beats staying here with nothing."

"I'll admit Sarada, I hid so many things from you," Sakura began speaking, her sorrowful expressions suggestive of the torrent of apologies about to come. "I didn't want you to know a lot of things about me, about Hi no Ishi. But I guess there's no point in me obscuring anything anymore. Yes, as an organisation, we of Hi no Ishi have attacked low-level bureaucrats of the regime and their families. We've raided and attacked many offices of the regime – we've slaughtered hundreds and thousands of people that way."

"So the epithet 'terrorist' isn't exactly too off the bar," Sarada squirmed as her face contorted into a blaze of revulsion. She shook with disgust as droplets of cold rainwater began dripping down on her from the ceiling – it must have been raining outside.

"And the regime isn't? They arrest and torture people, innocent people on a regular basis. They…" Sakura fulminated, her complexion livid with rage and vexation. No matter what she said, the girl in front of her only seemed to resent her even more. Sakura slowly began to resign herself to this new reality. It was best if she avoided moral expoundings and cut straight to the truth. The pain would be quick and sharp, but nothing compared to the sluggish torture as more and more of her wrongs were wrenched from her. The girl deserves to know, even if it meant she'll remain hated forever. "No. You're right. I shouldn't be making excuses. Some of the people we targeted were indeed horrible accomplices of terror, or corrupt bureaucrats. But many were innocent people too. And their families… you're right Sarada. We're all sinners in this world."

And after those words, the woman heaved a sigh and made her way towards the door. The past was a heap of broken images and she was still basking in its debris in the present. The girl, still languishing in the room, was but a reminder of how things could have been different.

The tarmac streets were soaked, dyed into a darker hue as the skies rained on them ceaselessly. Boruto felt splashes here and there dampening his black jacket as he walked through the neighbourhood, umbrella in hand.

"There's not many people out here," Boruto remarked dully. Most residents, it seemed, preferred to
stay indoors during the rain, for flickers of light could be seen here and there out of the windows.

"I've noticed," Sasuke deadpanned as he led the way. He claimed he was going to take Boruto somewhere important.

"May I ask, why do you live here?" Boruto asked, switching topics.

"Do you have a problem with this place?"

"It's just… it's so dull – no ordinary. Anyone could've been living here. And I mean, you're technically in charge of everything thing so I thought your place of resident would be a little more…"

"… lavish?" Sasuke suggested.

"Yeah, that."

"It gives you a sense of anonymity," Sasuke said. "Plus, paradoxically, it's safer. Think about it, if no one suspected that I live here, no one would conduct foolish attempts on my life. Not that I'm actually bothered by assassinations – they're never as threatening as they seem. They're just… an irritation."

"Right…" Boruto's voice trailed off as he, again, heard Sasuke so nonchalantly discuss subjects related to death and murder. From the way the man talked about it, one would suspect such matters are now second nature to him. Then again, that was probably true. "And why is there literally nothing in your house?"

"What do you mean nothing? There's a bed – more than one, I believe. There's my office, my desk, a bunch of papers-"

"I meant there were no photos, no books, nothing personal at all!" Boruto rebuked. "That's not very normal."

"There's no point in them," Sasuke said as he shrugged. He didn't seem bothered by the weather at all, his pace unfaltering. Boruto had to force himself to keep up with the man next to him.

So there they were, two souls trudging along the road in the middle the rain. One lost boy, and one empty shell of a man.

"This is where you buried him?"

"Yes."

They stood before a slab of stone located in an unassuming area of the forest. It was unnamed and passersby would, at best, shrug at its banality, if they noticed it at all.

"I see."

"I come here once in a while. Not every day of course, just when I want some peace of mind."

"Why?"

Boruto was met with silence.

He felt queasy on the inside as his internals performed summersaults amidst the impending sense of awkwardness. Having spent more time with the man, he observed that Sasuke always seemed unsure
when touching on the topic of his long dead arch-rival. It took a while to pinpoint all the emotions present but Boruto thought he could detect bitterness, resentment, loathing, love, regret, frustration, admiration all concentrated in one man.

Even in death the bonds were never truly severed. That was why Sasuke Uchiha visited Naruto Uzumaki's grave, a grave he himself had erected.

Boruto's contemplations were rudely punctuated by some casual culinary query: "So, Boruto, are you up for late dinner in town? We're putting on disguises, of course."

"Sure."

His chakra levels were dangerously low, Chomei could tell.

The Hi no Ishi and ANBU reinforcements clashed violently, ripping the picturesque terrain into pieces as trees, flowers and other flora and fauna were shredded by blasts of wind, fire and lightning.

"Link your chakra with mine," Chomei ordered as she approached a physically depleted Shino. "Bump your fist against mine."

"There are too many of them Lee!" Tenten yelled desperately as she fired a string of kunai at the enemy.

"Sixth gate!" bellowed the man in the green spandex as he glowed and charged towards a band of hostile forces. He was going to give it all. They needed to win this one.

"Kakashi…" Sakura's voice was hoarse from all the crying, the silver-haired man observed with concern. He hadn't seen her weep for ages, not since her friend Ino perished in a mission five years ago.

His former student, his comrade, his old friend.

"Sarada?" He gently prodded for answers. The woman had grown especially attached to that girl from another dimension. That daughter of Sasuke and hers.

Sakura nodded: "I know she probably hates my guts now, but oh I just wished I had been honest with her at first. And I wished I had at least tried to do something about Boruto." She paused for a moment to steady herself. "I – I just don't want to lose her, you know what I mean?"

Kakashi looked at her and felt pity surging within. Sakura had grown very attached to Sarada, Kakashi suspected, because she was paradoxically an anchor to the past, a reminder of how things could have been.

She had loved Sasuke – not the childish infatuation of her Academy days but passionate love that can hurt and harm – with all her heart, waited for him, waiting for him to come back. It changed after Naruto's death though, with her love morphing into a bitter hatred. (They had banded together, Sakura, the rest of Konoha 11 and many shinobi who were unwilling to accept the new reality.) And to think that they could have had Sarada together, it seared an unbearable pain in her heart.

When the girl had arrived, Sakura had felt a mixture of emotions bubbling within: she didn't know whether to hate the girl or befriend her. She chose the latter partly out of regard to the prophecy but partly because no matter how hard she tried to banish it, there will always exist a small segment of
her mind reserved for a fantasy world where Naruto managed to bring Sasuke back.

Without realising it, she had poured her feelings into the girl, coming to regard Sarada like her own daughter.

And now she blew it.

And she knew, in her heart, that she deserved it. For sugar coating everything for the girl and for indulging in her own fantasies.

Sarada lay unmoving in her bed. That is if you can categorise a cold hard slab of concrete with a thin sheet over it as a bed.

She thought about what Sakura had said, all the things the woman had confessed. At least for this time, she was honest about it all. Still, it wasn't so much the fact that Sakura had shielded Sarada from some sordid aspects of revolutionary life. No, not really. It was the sheer truth that everything was so different here that totally, utterly disorientated Sarada for a second time. It was sinking in, slowly at first but crashing down at an increasingly accelerated rate.

Sighing, she wondered if she acted a little too extreme towards Sakura. The woman had lived a hard life. Sure, she wasn't Sarada's mother, but she was nevertheless human. At the very least, Sarada began wondering, a cordial but more distant attitude would have sufficed.

An explosion.

A scream.

Those were what interrupted Sarada's stream of thoughts.

Something had happened.

Something big.

"Sarada! They've found this base! Get out and get ready to fight!" Kakashi's voice rang somewhere near her door.

She activated her Sharingan instantly and detected a cloud of unwelcome chakras.

The Hyuuga.

Hanabi.
The richly flavoured vapour from the kitchen wafted through the entire ramen stall. The warmth was peculiarly satisfying, Boruto thought, even if the humidity it brought about was slightly suffocating. He paused for a moment to bask in the smell. It made him feel at home. Boruto, bizarrely, tried licking the air to catch a trace of the tonkotsu broth he so desired, which drew puzzled looks from Sasuke and other customers. He simply grinned brilliantly back at them.

"So, remind me again, why are we here?" Sasuke interrogated the boy accusatorily, having so vehemently complained against ramen for dinner. He relented in the end though, much to Boruto's incredulity. "I recalled you saying you hated ramen. I hate it too. This makes no sense."

"Well, you asked me what I wanted to eat and I said ramen. I came and you came along," Boruto justified himself sheepishly. He received his bowl of hot tonkotsu ramen from the store owner and stuck his tongue out in delight at Sasuke. "Besides, I kind of miss eating ramen. My family would go out for ramen at least twice a week." His tone immediately took a nostalgic turn.

"Why am I not surprised…" Sasuke muttered.

"I mean, you can always just starve yourself and not eat anything while watching me eat?" Boruto suggested sardonically. Now that they were in their disguises – he was now a flamboyantly dressed boy with bright red hair while Sasuke was a young adult with a plain black t-shirt, blue jeans and brown hair – he thought he could afford to act a little more cheekily and conspicuously, for public attention did not hold the same level of inconvenience it otherwise would have.

"No thanks."

"Just sit back and enjoy the meal!" Boruto declared triumphantly.

The owner of the ramen stall gave Sasuke his bowl. He gave the owner a nod and uttered a polite word of thanks.

"See? It's not that bad," Boruto insisted. "Sure, it's pretty unhealthy. The flavour can be too strong at times and consuming it on a daily basis can really strain your sanity and –"

"Hey I'm not the one complaining about the taste," Sasuke quipped with a deadpan. "But here we are, slurping on the food of the heavens." The last few words were stressed with a tinge of displeasure, borne out of an inexplicable attempt of masochism. Because ramen, in his opinion, was truly garbage.

Boruto could tell that the man next to him was cursing internally and he snickered loudly. For a brief moment, his entangled web of consternations was dispelled. Much to his own surprise, he felt…nice.

"You know, you're not that bad of a person," Boruto blurted out before chastising himself mentally. He hadn't planned this at all. That and, so he reminded himself, he still had a lot of work to do – notably, finding his friends and bringing them back whilst doing something about the situation of this world, which would most likely involve dealing with the man next to him in a manner that is not entirely non-hostile.

The sheer abruptness of it all caught Sasuke off guard. He almost choked on his ramen. It made everything worse.
The sound of explosive kunai's in the distance triggered her sense of awareness, causing adrenaline to course through her veins. Sarada, burst out of her room and launched herself into commotion.

She dodged a kunai that flew in her direction before deflecting a couple more shurikens. A group of enemy shinobi encircled members of Hi no Ishi (there were none that Sarada recognized), who were being plucked off one by one. Yet a sea of enemies stood between her and them. She punched the floor, creating a large fissure and sending a few enemies flying off their backs, temporarily disarming them. This gave her a moment, however fleeting, of respite, which allowed her to examine her surroundings.

Chaos reigned supreme. Dead bodies lay prostrate on the floor, blood seeping out of them. Small, blue slugs – Katsuyu's detachments – were abound, frantically attempting to heal the wounded. Slowly, but surely, Sarada was coming to grips with reality. This was an absolute massacre.

"Sarada!" It was Sakura. The woman was charging towards Sarada, agitated, with their last icy conversation well banished to the back of her mind.

"What's going on?" Sarada asked, not exhibiting any particular indication of remorse, though mainly because the hectic situation meant remorse was the last thing on her mind, paling in comparison to the more rudimentary impulses of survival.

"The prisoner we captured earlier was a deliberate ploy set up by the enemy. He somehow managed to find a way to-" She paused to sidestep an explosive kunai, pulling Sarada away from harm in the process."- to get our location out. I'm not one hundred percent sure how that worked. But this had to be the case. And now the forces of the government, mainly the elite Hyuuga unit, are out to exterminate us. They've already done some pretty severe damage."

Sarada noticed that. The corpses around them were disproportionately comprised of Hi no Ishi members.

"Experience the flames of YOUTH!" Lee bellowed as he kicked away the last member of the enemy forces. As he deactivated his Seventh Gate state, he immediately collapsed onto the floor out of sheer exhaustion. His muscles and tendons have all been strained till breaking point, roaring with a sharp pain that threatened to consume his consciousness at the very moment. He fought back the desire to pass out, biting his lips with a vigorous zeal. "Tenten, the rest is up to you! Unseal the Hachibi, quick!"

His companion inclined, unfurling her vast inventory of seals and scrolls. They were in a tenuous situation, in spite of having just extinguished their enemies, for they were both fatigued by hours and hours of fighting. Any more reinforcements and their survival would have been imperilled. She had not a moment to waste.

Boruto slurped the remaining tonkotsu soup from his bowl and sighed in delight. Sure, it was way too flavoursome, too salty, too creamy for his taste but, inexplicably, it made him feel so satisfied. His stomach was full and bulging, perhaps for the first time in days.

"So, what are you going to do?" He asked Sasuke, who was also finishing his ramen.

"What exactly do you mean by that?"
"I mean, what are you going to do afterwards? Not just work, but… you know… what do you plan to do with your… life?" Boruto struggled for words. He didn't exactly know how to phrase 'so are you ever going to let me go and find my friends and return home' in a polite way. He winced, realizing just how vague his question was. In all likelihood, he probably made things worse with it. "Okay, what I wanted to say was what do you plan on doing? And errr what are you going to do with me? I'd really appreciate some clarity on that matter."

Sasuke looked taken aback; he hadn't expected Boruto to abruptly insert an inquiry like that. "Come on, Boruto, let's go."

"Don't-"

"I'll tell you on the way, how about that? We're not really in the most ideal location to be discussing sensitive information." Whatever semblance of Sasuke being at ease had evaporated instantly.

"Fine." Boruto pouted.

"Good."

Sarada dodged the deadly blow of the gentle fist just in time. She weaved a few hand signs and sent a giant fireball hurling in her opponent's direction. He easily blocked it with his juken, scoffing arrogantly at Sarada for the juvenile nature of her attack, only to realize that she was right up close. She concentrated a strong pool of chakra in her right palm and punched his stomach, all in quick speed, retreating before he could attempt to seal off her chakra pathways. He fell to the floor and coughed a few drops of blood, glaring at her with venomous cold pearl eyes.

"Leave her," a familiar icy voice commanded. It was Hanabi, striding towards Sarada, her eyes gleaming with excitement. "Find someone else to finish off – she's mine." The other Hyuuga man scuttled off in search of another opponent, in partial relief, all while Hanabi fixed her gaze on Sarada like a nefarious predator. Sarada, even after their last deadly encounter, still found it difficult to reconcile the menacing, ambitious woman in front of her with Boruto's laid-back, affable aunt. The other woman had baked cookies, gave Sarada cheeky relationship advice and frequently imparted to Boruto snide, snarky remarks that he would later try (and fail) to regurgitate during their missions and training sessions. Perhaps the past has simply diverged too much. Sarada braced herself for another fight, this time opting for her opponent to strike first. Sarada drew a defensive stance, much to her opponent's amusement.

The Hyuuga were a defensive bunch, the kind that would wait for their rivals to attack, falter and then counter with a deadly precision. Sarada had learnt her lesson from last time. In terms of physical strength, she had the definite advantage. But she had to deal her blows sparsely and carefully, for Hanabi possessed the ability to seal off her chakra. And being a kunoichi that relies a lot on chakra-enhanced strength, she knew that once her chakra is sealed, she'd be virtually incapacitated, helpless against a ruthless opponent.

"What's the matter, afraid to fight?" Hanabi's voice sounded taunting, almost goading Sarada to attack. "Did last time scare you a little too much?"

Sarada ignored the woman's words, focusing instead on her opponent's every stance and gesture, waiting for an indication of an attack.

"Capturing you alive last time didn't yield the desired results," Hanabi remarked with mock disappointment. "The Hokage gave that brat Boruto an order to release you. You won't be so lucky this time."
"No," Sarada refuted the woman in front of her, suppressing the internal urge to impulsively punch the ground. "You're the one who won't be so lucky this time.

And with that, Hanabi went on the offensive as her fists, laced with chakra on their tips, targeted Sarada's vitals. The girl somersaulted backwards; her Sharingan saw those movements just in time to avoid being hit.

She breathed a small sigh of relief.

She shifted the bulk of her chakra on her right foot and gently kicked the floor, opening a few cracks and sending off a blast wave in hopes of knocking Hanabi off balance. The woman evaded the trap delicately, with gracefully light and lethal footsteps.

Not enough, Sarada analysed, ignoring Hanabi's eyes and the bulging veins that surrounded them. Hanabi attacked again, this time targeting her arms, seeking to cut off the chakra supply there. Sarada shunshinned away and began weaving the necessary hand signs for a fire jutsu.

"Phoenix flower jutsu!" She yelled as swirls of fireballs propelled themselves at her opponent, who dispelled them with ease. Without even a millisecond of respite, Sarada threw a giant shuriken laced with explosive tags at Hanabi, using the few seconds Hanabi spent deflecting the weapon to formulate hand signs that conjured the chidori.

She charged at her opponent, the sound of a thousand birds fuming in her right palm.

"So," Boruto broke the silence again, revealing signs of irritation at being kept in the dark about his own fate. "What do you want with me?"

"The real question is, Boruto, what do you want to do?" The man's reply only served to rile Boruto even further.

"Me? I think you already know. I want to find my friends, find that scroll and go home. But, you know, you've been keeping me at your house for a couple of days now, so I was just wondering, what was the point of it all?"

"The point of it all… I suppose there is no point, other than keeping you away from Hi no Ishi, kid."

"Why though? My friends are there, so it's the only logical place I'd go if I wanted to find them!" Boruto complained. That was mostly true, although he left out the part about wanting to do something about this world.

Sasuke's face bore a stony expression; it was hard to tell what he was thinking.

He started speaking: "But that's not how they think of you Boruto. You're one of the children of the prophecy. They'll use you as their soldier, their tool. And… my sources say they were originally planning on making you the new jinchuriki of the Kyuubi. That is now out of the equation, of course. Now you may think I'm just making this all up. That's fine. But if you think for one moment that they'll let you go without any requirements, you're wrong."

"Wait, what?! Me? The hell are you talking about?!"

"There aren't many Uzumakis left in this world, kid. In fact, I don't think there are any at all, apart from you. Uzumakis have a speciality in dealing with the Kyuubi. This is what my spies have told me."
"Spies? Yeah, how on earth am I supposed to believe-"

"The same spies that have leaked the location of Hi no Ishi's base in the Land of Grass. The same spies that have informed me of the prophecy. Don't bother finding out who they are, Boruto, for they're just nameless shinobi. Probably too insignificant for the upper command of Hi no Ishi to even bat an eye."

There was something chilling about the way Sasuke spoke, the way his coal-black eyes pierced through Boruto. This was the man whose very name struck fear into the hearts shinobi and civilian all over the continent. Boruto was rudely reminded of that – it was something he had forgotten over the past few days. He felt himself shivering all of a sudden, petrified, nerves frozen.

"Boruto, are you going to just stand there?"

"I'm coming…" The boy muttered.

She missed, barely, slicing off a portion of Hanabi's hair, leaving the woman visibly annoyed.

Hanabi initiated the Eight Trigrams Sixty Four Palms formation. Sarada knew this meant trouble; she recalled reading about its ability to completely seal off an opponent's chakra if successful.

She dodged the first blow by substituting herself using the henge jutsu. She read her opponent's moves just in time. A head on confrontation might not be the best idea, Sarada reflected internally.

Sensing another attack, she leapt far, far away from Hanabi.

The Hyuuga were great short-distance fighters, Sarada concluded. Best if I use more long-range jutsu, even if the likelihood and effectiveness diminishes due to their defensive capabilities. Seeing that Hanabi was about to close in within attack range, Sarada bolted again, spitting out a major fireball jutsu in the process.

She turned around and Hanabi was behind her. Crap. Sarada cursed mentally. The woman had evidentially used a shunshin to get close to her. Her left arm avoided an attack in the nick of time, yet the suddenness of her movements caused her to lose balance. Sarada tumbled onto the ground. She quickly brushed off the dust and steadied herself, only to be forced back again by Hanabi's onslaught.

Sarada looked around quizzically, surprised at her turn of luck. It was Sakura.

"Careful Sarada, she's one of the most difficult ones out there," Sakura warned, with concern etched into her visage.

Sarada nodded, this time gratefully. Regardless of her muddle sentiments towards the woman in front of her, for this time at least, she was thankful of Sakura's timely intervention.

Hanabi got up from the floor, noticeably frustrated at the deterrence of her assault. She had a cold, murderous gaze fixed onto the two of them, both Sakura and Sarada.

"Looks like we're in this together," Sarada noticed, frowning in concentration.

"Looks like we are."
They were back in Sasuke's house and Boruto dreaded the impending boredom as he crossed the threshold.

"Hey, out of curiosity," Boruto began initiating conversation, because he was always the one who did, "when are you going back to your actual office?"

"Why do you ask?" Sasuke responded as he took off his sandals.

"I mean, aren't people going to feel a bit worried or weirded out at least if their boss isn't in the office? Don't get me wrong but from my experience at least, Hokages never leave the Hokage Tower."

"Boruto, enough," Sasuke commanded bluntly.

"What a jerk. I was just asking you a question."

Sakura had activated her byakugou seal and purple laces were spreading throughout her body.

"This should help neuter some of Hanabi's advantage," she explained tersely to Sarada. "The massive chakra storage within the seal should at least negate some effects of the gentle fist, that is if Hanabi did strike a few successful blows. Oh and," she added as she placed a small slug on Sarada's left shoulder, "Katsuyu's detachment should help heal you and restore some of your chakra if need be."

"Thanks," was all Sarada could muster before Hanabi attacked again. She sidestepped a blow aimed at her heart, only to suffer another one on her left arm. It came rapidly, mercilessly. To say it hurt would be a mischaracterization, it was numbing yet at the same time disseminated a piercing deadness. Her arm felt heavy, useless. She could still raise it, move it, but something was off. There was no chakra flowing through it anymore.

Fortunately, Sakura managed to deflect another attack from Hanabi, throwing the woman off her feet.

"Are you okay?" Sakura called with a hint of worry.

Sarada nodded. She drew close to Sakura.

"We need a plan to finish her off," Sarada whispered.

"How good are you with genjutsu?" Sakura asked.

"Slightly above average," Sarada replied.

"Do you reckon you can distract her for just a few seconds?"

"I'll try."

And with that, Sarada switched places with Sakura, facing Hanabi in front while Sakura stayed at the back, waiting for the right opportunity to intercept.

"Oh poor Sarada," taunted Hanabi. "Unable to-

Sarada slammed her other fist, the one still able to access chakra, into Hanabi's gut. Her opponent didn't seem too disturbed, largely dodging the attack and waving it off as a mild form of nuisance – it hurt at the side, but it was by no means fatal. Hanabi capitalised this as an opportunity to seal off the
chakra pathways to Sarada's other arm. Not wasting a single instance, Sarada looked at the woman straight in the eye and cast a genjutsu.

Hanabi froze, dazzled. Sarada had designed the illusion such that it showed Hanabi a version of the end of their fight, one with Sarada lay defeated and dead on the ground. The woman's expressions revealed delight, relief.

Out of the blue, before their opponent could recover, Sakura kicked the woman in the face, causing her to crash into the ground, and, before she could react, aimed for her heart with a chakra-coated palm.

"A disaster," Kakashi concluded grimly after surveying the array of dead bodies around them. Indeed, Hi no Ishi had lost many men and women that night, with less than a quarter of their base members surviving. They were depleted and diminished, at least in the Land of Grass.

Sarada winced in pain as Sakura healed wounds all over her body.

"I'm afraid the chakra pathways to your arms are sealed off for the moment," Sakura observed. "Give it a few hours and it will unblock itself naturally. You'll have to stay safe for the moment though."

Sarada nodded in acknowledgement. Just as Sakura was about to turn away and direct her efforts towards other shinobi, Sarada uttered the words: "Thank you, Sakura. I would have died back then without your help."

"There's no need for that," Sakura replied as her mouth contorted with an unreadable emotion. "I would have done it any day. We were comrades in battle, after all."

Unable to search for the right words, Sarada merely smiled back at her. The girl still felt awkwardness creeping up upon them but her previous feelings resentment had faded. This woman was by no means her mother, nor is she some familiar acquaintance, yet she was still fundamentally human, Sarada thought. She has her own set of goals, her own sources of motivation, all shaped by the divergences of the past. She lived a hard life and she became cynical and better because of it.

She was by no means a bad person, Sarada concluded. At the very least, I can offer her some sense of understanding and respect.

"We better leave here soon," Kakashi cautioned, jolting Sarada back to the urgency of their situation. "Enemy forces will know we are here. This base is as good as gone."

The next day

Boruto languished on the chair, half-asleep and agonizing from sheer boredom. Sasuke was on the other side of the room, at his desk, working on more paperwork. It was mid afternoon, a few short minutes before dusk settles in, meaning Boruto had been in Sasuke's office for hours and hours. He tried reading, he really did. But in no less than ten minutes did words stop registering in his mind – they became an array of blots and symbols that meant nothing and told of nothing. It didn't help that they were all mediocre, government-sanctioned and sanitized texts.

"Hey, I'd really appreciate it if you'd just let me do something fun!" Boruto moaned, expecting to be shot down, as was what regularly happened in the past few hours.

He saw Sasuke's brows furrow and quiver in discomfort. Without warning, the man activated his Rinnegan and Mangekyo Sharingan, the spinning, kaleidoscopic eyes making Boruto jump out of his
chair in fright.

"Hey! I was just asking, there's no need to overreact!" He defended himself frantically.

"No, Boruto, I sense a strange presence in this land," Sasuke whispered, shocked. For the first time in this world, Boruto thought he saw anxiety in the man's eyes. "A disturbance. Boruto, you were right."

Chomei, Shino and the remaining members of the Hi no Ishi unit breathed in relief as the last of their enemies were defeated. It has been a long, draining fight that lasted more than a day, straining and testing one's endurance, perseverance and resilience – and chakra supplies. Shino knew Hi no Ishi would have lost if it weren't for Chomei's vast pool of reserves.

Yet the sense of fatigued jubilation was interrupted by dark swirling clouds in the skies.

Two celestial beings, with ghostly pale white skin and empty pearl eyes descended from the heavens, though Shino could tell they were no saviours. One of them was large, stout and bulky in his physique, resembling a giant ogre with his horns. The other was thinner, more regal in appearance, striding towards Chomei with a lethal grace.

"We're in luck, Lord Momoshiki."
They needed to return to Mount Myoboku for recuperation - Sakura and Kakashi had decided that it was an absolute necessity. Yet prior to all of that, they needed to re-connect with the rest of their struggling comrades still engaged in their respective missions.

Fully aware of the risks of interception, Sakura still gave the order to send out messenger birds, having concluded that the enemy seemed to possess uncanny knowledge of their activities and whereabouts anyway, possibly through internal moles. The messenger scrolls contained a single order to meet in a small town in the Land of Fire, one that is adjacent to the location of Sayuri's bookstore, a portal to their safe haven. And so it was there that Sarada was reunited with Mitsuki (and Konohamaru and the rest of their unit.)

She leapt into him with such force and fury that he was taken aback. They shared a warm embrace, both relieved to be in each other's company again.

"Mitsuki… So, so much has happened. I'm so glad there's finally someone I can tell it to," Sarada said, feeling relieved and comforted by the presence of someone from her own world.

"Me too, Sarada," Mitsuki concurred, before whispering, "I've got the scroll."

Sarada's eyes widened in surprise and hope.

"All we've got to do," Mitsuki continued speaking, "is to get Boruto."

"That might be a little more difficult," Sarada grumbled, being reminded of her friend's incarceration by the Hokage.

"What's the matter?"

"He's captured by the regime. The Hokage holds him ransom, at least that's what I've gathered." Mitsuki noticed Sarada found it very difficult to spit those words out. "But I suppose before that," she continued. "I should first update you on what had happened."

Noticing the furrowed brows, the agitation etched on Sarada's somber visage, Mitsuki's expressions darkened, fully expecting a new string of ominous news.

"We're in trouble," Boruto immediately blurted out. "What the hell do we do?"

For a moment, the man in front of him looked shaken, disorientated and vulnerable. His dark black eyes, now that he had deactivated his dojutsus, were hollow and they seemed to be peering into nothingness.

"Hello, Sasuke," Boruto said, waving his arms for emphasis, "You're not just going to do nothing, right?"

"No, Boruto," Sasuke answered after blinking multiple times. He looked so tired all of a sudden, so exhausted, so drained. "No ... I'll confront them. It's the only way."

Taking a deep breath, he recollected himself, got up from his desk and strode towards the door. If he was afraid now, he certainly made no indication of it. His expressions resumed their usual impassiveness.
"Let me come with you!" Boruto called after Sasuke, hurrying behind the man. "You'll need my help! You can't do this alone!"

Sasuke turned around and stared into Boruto's eyes, bemused and amused. "You can't do this alone" wasn't something he would usually hear – no, he hadn't heard those words for 17 years. 17 damned years. Without warning, he pulled the boy up close, fixing his hands firmly on Boruto's shoulders. He kept staring, not uttering a single syllable.

"So...?" Boruto broke the silence awkwardly.

"Those two," Sasuke noted grimly, "they're very dangerous. I am... not sure I'd be able to make it out alive, truth to be told. I must admit, I never expected this – not in- never mind. Point is, Boruto, I understand you want to help. That's fine. I want you to show me the scene where you actually defeated them. Afterwards, I want you to leave."

"What?! But-"

"Leave this dimension immediately. Take Sarada and Mitsuki with you. It's far too dangerous for any of you to stay. This business with Momoshiki and Kinshiki is nothing you should concern yourself with." For once, Sasuke appeared genuinely disturbed about the welfare of others. There was almost an air of pleading about the way he conducted himself, or so Boruto noticed. Was it panic that coursed through her cold, coal-black eyes?

The boy took all those words in and thought about it all. It felt strange listening to them, for they sounded very similar to some twisted form of self-sacrifice. Boruto couldn't exactly pinpoint his own feelings. They were far too confused, distorted, befuddled. Before he could refine his ruminations properly, twin kaleidoscopes were already peering into his soul, sifting their way through his memories.

They were in the town centre when the apocalypse dawned. Clear skies became overcast in just an instant. Birds fled the scene in droves, screeching, suffusing the air with suffocating panic.

It was those two again, Sarada realised, palpitating with horror. Those two unnatural, ethereal men. Momoshiki and Kinshiki.

They made their way through quickly dispersing crowds. Spectators cowered.

Kinshiki grabbed a member of the ANBU, holding her close to him and began an interrogation.

"No," Sarada gasped, her eyes wide open. She resisted the urge to collapse into the grown in fear, onto her knees, again. She will not allow herself to do this.

"You know those two?" Sakura whispered, feeling just as unnerved.

Sarada nodded reluctantly. "They attacked my world too, a while ago." She turned around to see Mitsuki, who appeared afraid too. He turned and threw her a look that almost said not again.

She began contemplating the scenario before her. Why now? Why did those two have to show up no? Why not earlier? Why? Questions fired themselves through her head. Right, she theorized internally, in her own dimension, the two had attacked a year ago. Her father there had encountered them whilst traversing through different worlds. A fight took place and the fight itself catalyzed their appearance. Here, however, Sasuke - being a dictator is, needless to say, rather time-consuming – never managed to hop through all the different worlds and encounter Momoshiki and Kinshiki. This, then, thought Sarada, may have pushed back the day of the attack.
"What are we going to do?" Mitsuki hissed in her ear. "We're no match for them. And Boruto's not with us so we can't escape now."

"Wait," Sarada replied tersely, shooting a quick look at Sakura, Kakashi and the remainder of their companions. "They must be after the Kyuubi. They don't know where it is, yet."

"Lie low," Kakashi said, nodding in acquiescence. "Don't attract too much attention."

"No, I want to go with you," Boruto rebutted Sasuke defiantly after the man pulled out of his memories.

"You could die," Sasuke replied coolly. "Does that not trouble you one bit?"

"You could too, you know…" Boruto's voice trailed off. "We all could. Besides, I've fought them before. You haven't. I may have shown you what happened last time, but still, I'm better than nothing. You'll need my help – I just, I just know it."

"Boruto," Sasuke's voice turned steely. "I don't know whether I'd be able to keep you alive. They're after the Kyuubi, which is… Never mind, where it is doesn't matter."

"It does! They're after it! And stop thinking you can do this all alone damn it!"

"Hn."

"They're going to go after it, the Kyuubi. It's-

"- in the Land of Fire. Not too far away from that bookstore Hi no Ishi uses. They'd never realise it, of course. One should always expect the unexpected. It's a world's difference from the rest of the esoteric hiding places."

"Then we've-

"No, not we. You are, for the last time, not coming with me," Sasuke declared with adamant resolution. The two locked eyes.

"I don't care if I might die, Sasuke. Do you take me for some kind of coward? Every shinobi faces the possibility death every time he goes into battle. It's going to take more than that to put me off!" Boruto's complexion was livid with frustration. Surely, Sasuke did not seriously believe that he would be content to stay here and wait while the rest of this world burns. He was the son of Naruto Uzumaki, a shinobi of Konohagakure.

"You're just like him," Sasuke merely snorted with what Boruto believed was fond disdain. "Fine. But remember, I'm under no obligation to protect you. Understand? If you die, it's your own business." His words were curt, but Boruto thought they betrayed a hint of worry. Not that this Sasuke would ever, ever admit it.

Boruto nodded while rolling his eyes.

"And fix your attitude, kid," the man added didactically.

Ignoring Sasuke's words, Boruto asked, "So, where do we go?"

Sasuke sighed. He seemed resigned to the reality before him. Purple concentric rings emerged and engulfed his eyes, giving them an inhuman quality. "Follow me," Sasuke simply replied as a portal emerged.
"I- I don't know where it is…" stuttered a mortified ANBU member.

Kinshiki drew the man closer, peering into his eyes with a menacing glare.

"I really don't!" The ANBU member was on the verge of tears. With a sensation of mild revulsion bubbling within, Sarada realised he had wet his pants. "Please – please – spare me – please—"

"Enough!" Momoshiki interjected as he whipped out that accursed hand with a Rinnegan engraved on it.

Momoshiki will suck out his soul, the horrifying prospect dawned on Sarada.

The man's screams pierced through the air, reverberated throughout the streets, sending chills down the marrows of men and women. A pale humanoid whisk left the man's body and gravitated towards a giant demon's mouth. The King of Hell.

"No luck," sighed Momoshiki after a moment of processing. He flicked the carcass of the soulless man aside.

Then, in the split of a second, he turned around and fixed his eyes on Sarada's, noticing her Sharingan. His lips gave an intrigued quiver. With horror, she realised he was making his way towards her. The crowds parted before him as ordinary citizens scrambled aside in fear.

Within seconds, Momoshiki was facing her, holding her up close. "Maybe she can tell us something useful," he sneered as he addressed his companion.

"Leave her alone!" Sakura yelled as she tried to punch Momoshiki. He deftly dodged her attack and Kinshiki gave her a vicious kick, sending her flying on her back.

"I know nothing," Sarada said as she bit her lip, glaring at him defiantly. "I will never give you what you want."

"The Kyuubi…" came Momoshiki's silky voice. "We'll see if you're lying or not." He opened the King of Hell again. Sarada felt a strange sensation coursing through her, like some unexplained source of gravity was trying to extract some unexplained essence that resided within her. Her soul, of course. Momoshiki wanted her soul.

"Noooooooote!" Kakashi yelled as he charged at Momoshiki with a palm coated in purple lightning. Momoshiki nonchalantly absorbed whatever jutsus he launched with a condescending glee, like a child playing with toy soldiers.

She grunted, twisted in pain as she fought the pull. She will not die like this; she cannot die like this. In another world, another universe, her mother and father – not their broken equivalents here – were at home, waiting for her.

Then all of a sudden, it all stopped. Momoshiki, to her surprise, was knocked aside.

"Get the hell away from Sarada you creepy bastard!" That boisterous, familiar voice resounded through the pavements. "No one, no one harms my friends!"

Boruto. He must have used the vanishing Rasengan, she concluded.

"Boruto!" she cried out in relief.

Mitsuki, in spite of their dire situation, couldn't suppress a grin. "You made it, buddy," he
congratulated his friend.

"I did! Long stories, friends, it was a long story," Boruto remarked, allowing himself to smile splendidly for just a moment. He then lapsed into seriousness. "Momoshiki and Kinshiki are here… they're after the Kyuubi."

"We know," Sarada said.

"We've got to defeat them," Boruto declared. "By all means necessary."

"You cut off my horn – how dare you?!" roared an enraged voice. It was the giant oafish ogre Kinshiki, fighting with-

"What's he doing here?!!" Sarada exclaimed, flabbergasted, as she gestured towards the clashing figures of Kinshiki and Sasuke Uchiha. Her mouth hung wide open.

Boruto coughed a little. He had accidentally inhaled some dirt from the pavement. "Like I said, long story. All you guys need to know is, we all need to work together to stop these two."

Beside them, Kakashi Hatake was stunned into silence. Konohamaru shifted in discomfort. Other members of Hi no Ishi just stood there, petrified, unsure of what to make of the current situation.

Sakura, recovering from the unexpected attack, glared at her dark-haired ex-teammate with pure hatred in her eyes.
"You." One word. One syllable. One woman, directed towards one man. And all the bitterness and venom acquired over the long, hard years condensed within it. The smoldering, poisonous green eyes did not hold back Sakura's emotions one bit; the woman herself was, physically – and Boruto was glad for that – more restrained. She resisted the temptation to charge into the fight and pummel Sasuke with her fists, that is, if she possessed the ability do so in the first place. Instead, she stood there, frozen. Boruto didn't blame her at all.

The confrontation between Sasuke and Kinshiki was a sight to behold. They whirred and clashed their weapons in the speed of light. Momoshiki swung his axe, tinged with a red and demonic hue, at Sasuke, who then dodged it deftly and nearly impaled his attacker's arm with his lightning-coated sword. It was truly a match of equals where neither was holding back. It was then that Boruto grasped just how powerful the two were: living deities among a sea of mere mortals.

Yet deities can be defeated. His father and Uncle Sasuke's triumph over Kaguya was testament to that (though Boruto would wager that the two did not qualify as simple mortals themselves), as was his own defeat of Momoshiki in his own world. Everything, every being, every sentient creature that inhabits the universe possesses weaknesses, regardless of power. Last time, Momoshiki's downfall was partly attributed to his own hubris, believing that insignificant beings like Boruto possessed no mortal threat and partly due to his less impressive taijutsu abilities.

"Boruto," Sarada said his name again. He snapped back to reality, his reality, with his friends by his side. "I'm joining you on this one." She drew out her kunai and fell into a defensive stance. He gave her an encouraging nod, masking his private despair. He knew, selfishly, that he did not want to involve her for fear of endangering her life – he also knew that, given the dire situation he was in, he badly needed her help, any help.

Momoshiki had gotten up, yet he was ignoring Boruto's presence. It seemed that he had sensed something. He leapt towards somewhere.

[The Kyuubi, why else?]

Boruto knew where it was, of course, from Sasuke's indirect briefings. Or at least he had an inkling about Kurama's rough location.

[Not too far away from the bookstore.]

Great.

"Sakura and Kakashi!" He found himself yelling frantically. "Come here! There's something important I need to tell you guys!"

Once the two had scrambled over, Sakura still not yet fully recovered from witnessing her old flame turned bitter enemy, Boruto explained under a hushed voice, "Momoshiki over there – he's vulnerable to taijutsu. Do not use ninjutsu or genjutsu on him because he can absorb them through the Rinnegan on his hand."

"Got it," Kakashi said. "Sakura and I will go after him immediately."

"I'll come too," Boruto replied. Like hell he was going to be left behind.

"We'll come too," Sarada and Mitsuki concurred.
"Someone will need to summon reinforcements," Kakashi remarked with urgency. "We'll need as much help as we can get. Sakura?" It was a gentle, prodding question. No doubt, he was concerned about the woman's ability to cope with the scenario before their eyes. She would, as much as she could willingly suppress her raw feelings of hatred towards Sasuke, struggle on the battlefield with him not as her opponent but, rather, some twisted form of temporary ally. She seemed to take hint.

Her face contorted, squirmed. A woman conflicted, battered, tortured.

"You're their leader," Sarada agreed with Kakashi. "They all – all of Hi no Ishi – put their ultimate trust in you. They'll believe you when you say this world is embroiled in an existential confrontation. We all need you."

Sakura nodded, too weak – emotionally – to muster a rebuttal.

They were blasted backwards before they could land a blow on Momoshiki.

"Pathetic mere mortals," he sneered, baring his teeth. They had acquired an eerie, ghostly quality. Synthetic, almost. Most definitely not natural, Boruto thought as revulsion coursed through him. "I have little time to spare for your silly games."

"You won't win," Sarada shouted defiantly. "You'll never find what you're looking for."

Momoshiki cocked his neck with amusement. "On the contrary, I believe the Kyuubi is well within the vicinity." His smooth, deceptively honeyed voice sent uncomfortable lacerations through Boruto's spine. It was all too real, too familiar.

[Find it before he does. Use it against him]

Erase that thought. Erase that damned thought.

[Your father, Boruto. Dad is still present in this dimension. He has to be. Remember? He failed to come here with you. Think. Rationalise. Build on what you know.]

And what did he know?

1) As per the properties associated with that inter-dimensional travelling scroll, those with chakra present in both dimensions are unable to journey between them.

2) Uncle Sasuke's counterpart killed his father's counterpart in this dimension 17 years ago at the Valley of the End. This was when history diverged.

3) His father failed to come here with him.

[He failed because a fragment of his chakra was still present.]

Applying further deduction, Boruto came to the conclusion that some form of Naruto's chakra – the other Naruto – not his father – was still preserved over the years. How? Chakra storing scrolls? A possibility. But of what purpose? It seemed strange that Sasuke should choose to do so, should authorize an action that had little tangible benefits or purpose in the present.

And then it flashed before his mind. The memory of the cave. That hissing voice –

[Orochimaru]

The younger man.
The hushed, hissing conversation. Secretive, clandestine, a touch of shame from one of them, hidden securely under a mask of omnipotence and cruelty.

"My dad," he whispered to Sarada beside him. "He's still here isn't he?"

To his surprise, she inclined furiously. The intensity of it all shocked him.

"Edo Tensei?"

Another nod.

"The Kyuubi sealed within?"

"I'm surprised by your deductive abilities. In that respect, you are slightly different from your father…" That was Kakashi trying to be mildly sardonic, nostalgic and funny all in a life-threatening situation. Boruto snorted.

"My dad."

"Yes Boruto, your dad?"

"He can help us."

"What?!"

Sarada looked confused, even mildly irritated. She must think him crazy. Kakashi was eyeing him with a perplexed expression too.

"We need someone to match Momoshiki in terms of their abilities," Boruto tried to say this with a calm voice. Judging form Sarada's frown, he wasn't succeeding very much. "This has to work."

"We'll be giving him exactly what he wants!" She protested.

"Boruto… you are aware of the downsides to the potential, and I must say very likely, failure of this plot?" Kakashi cautioned with a hint of understanding. Locking eyes with Boruto, the boy then realised that the man followed his train of thought.

"Do both of you really think that something as powerful and potent as the Kyuubi's chakra can evade the detection of the Rinnegan for long? We'll have to get Dad and free him from the yoke of whoever is controlling him, which, in this case, may be no one, meaning that he may be in possession of his own free will. Then, we'll get him to help us!"

"Idiot…" Sarada muttered. "This better work."

It better.

"I can try to distract Momoshiki – not for long though. I'll do it when you two are absolutely certain of his location," Kakashi volunteered.
only figure capable of singularly confronting one of the two eerie deities that emerged out of the blue.

The man in front of him whirled and wielded his sword with lethal grace, cutting off another one of Kinshiki's horns. Then, a purple coat of chakra erupted around Sasuke, engulfing him in the same deadly armour that he used against many of Konohamaru's own fallen comrades. The Susanoo: a legendary deity, a protector summoned from the heavens. It fired a powerful, mythic arrow, rumoured by many to be owned by Indra Ootsusuki himself. The arrow barely scraped by Kinshiki as the giant ogre evaded its attack just in time. Instead, it struck an array of business establishments in town, planting the seeds of an earthquake and destroying building after building in the vicinity.

Realising the potential infliction of civilian casualties, Konohamaru leapt to the rescue of many terrified bystanders, launching a giant rasengan to blast all the building structures out of harms way and carried a young girl – no more than 5 years of age and trembling in stupor, teddy bear in hand – away from a sinking structure. Sasuke wasn't want to care about collateral damage, Konohamaru snorted internally. Of course, he wasn't – being the cruel, unfeeling bastard that so heartless struck down big-brother Naruto all these years ago in spite of everything they had gone through together and plunged the world into darkness. This was an arrangement (not even an alliance) of convenience that would shatter soon after the common enemy was vanquished.

"Get the civilians out of harm's way! Evacuate to the nearest village for safety!" Konohamaru belted out these orders to other members of Hi no Ishi. They were outmatched in this gambit of gods but they must do their share of work. Human life, it was something these two supernatural monsters clashing in front of him wouldn't understand. Human life was precious: a shinobi should never maim another man or woman that was more than necessary. And Hi no Ishi's bombings, attacks on low level (but innocent, damn what Sakura insists, innocent) officials ended up causing them more harm than good. Playing violence with the likes of Sasuke Uchiha would not end well.

The girl is crying, sobbing onto Konohamaru's shirt. He understands her perfectly. At her age, he would have done the same too. So he pulls up a cheerful smile and tells her: "It will be okay." Then, he gives her a thumbs up and calls Hiroku to evacuate her. She thanks him quietly.

In the distance, Sasuke was finally gaining an upper hand, slashing through Kinshiki's spilling array of weapons, manoeuvring his way up close. Sasuke, noticing Momoshiki was far away from their site of battle, smirks a smirk that Konohamaru knows only too well, for he has seen it before, during the day when Ino and Sai both-

Konohamaru isn't surprised when Kinshiki was engulfed by a black raging inferno. The ogre's grotesque cries pierce through the sky and still managed to strike terror into the hearts of mortals. In front of him, Sasuke's eyes, patterned like kaleidoscopic wheels, glistened with cold fury. Yet Kinshiki was no normal victim, he was a deity and, by definition, less destructible. The blaze lingered perpetually on his skin but made little way inwards. It hurt, Konohamaru could tell, it most certainly hurt. With horror, Konohamaru then realised that Sasuke was controlling the flames, directing them towards Kinshiki's eyes, blinding the ogre, then moulding the flames into shards that threatened to penetrate into the skull.

It was a macabre sight that no normal human being should have witnessed. Perhaps, Konohamaru philosophized, only a monster could hurt another monster.

"My dad's there!"

Sarada frowned at Boruto's declaration. They were at a dank, obscure alleyway not too far away from Sayuri's bookstore. And the boy was pointing at nowhere. Okay, scratch that: he was pointing
down at the floor, which was coated by a mélange of well-fitted stones.

She caught Kakashi frowning too, yet his expression differentiated itself from hers in that his was a frown that suggested contemplation. The man was deep in hard thought. Then, he weaved a few handsigns for an earth style jutsu and placed his palms on the ground experimentally. He was testing out something.

"Boruto's not wrong, the ground here," he said as he walked over, "is hollow. This could very well be a storage sight."

"How do you know?" Sarada questioned, activating her sharingan. She could sense another almost deliberately obscured space underground, where evidence of chakra seem too deliberately erased. It was a clumsy hiding place, she concluded, hastily conjured up by Sasuke as a last minute response to the breaching of the Kyuubi's original hiding place. It was its location that made it so secretive, for no Hi no Ishi member would dare to imagine just how close the Kyuubi would be to their clandestine hiding place. That was it. Wait – that must mean that –

"I just do," Boruto explained. "I can feel it, I can feel that his chakra is somewhere down there. Sasuke told me the rough location of the Kyuubi off-handedly, probably didn't expect me to do anything with it. Heh. Said it was Hi no Ishi's gateway to Mount Myoboku. Long story, lets break in."

They scurried over, testing out the stone-laden floors that Kakashi had stood upon earlier, testing them for signs of a passageway.

"Quick," Kakashi whispered, "Momoshiki is nearing. I'll stand guard and distract him if need be. You two should hurry up."

There's something strange about these stones, Sarada thought. She coated her fingers with just the barest trace of pure, unmolded chakra and graced the stones one by one. They absorbed it within seconds, unflinching.

"Chakra stones," Sarada blurted out. "Chakra stones, Boruto. These are stones that respond only to a specific kind of chakra."

Boruto took her words in and coated his palm with chakra, slamming it into the ground. Little harm came, for the stones sucked in all the chakra, depriving him of all potential superhuman enhancements.

"Hold my hand," he said, realization dawning. "We'll combine our chakras. It might work. It could be the Sage of Six Path's chakra they were looking for. I'm a descendant of Ashura, you of Indra. It might work." He placed his hand over hers and then gripped it tightly, his warm chakra enveloping her hand. She did her part of the job too and their two chakras, miraculously, fused. The stones took them in and then, instantly, the ground gave way to a giant hole.

They fell.

Defeat was within sight. Kinshiki was bloodied and huffing and panting. His right arm was sliced off, his eyes a blackened scab and his horns were long gone. Facing him, Sasuke looked pushed to the brink of exhaustion too, stretched to his limits, sweat dripping down his harsh visage – but still alive and whole.

The civilians were, thankfully, mostly evacuated. Out of the thousands of spectators, Konohamaru would wager that only a hundred or so had received serious injuries and that was the best they could
have hoped for. The vast majority of Hi no Ishi members have left the sight of battle too if only to safeguard those they had just protected. Not Konohamaru.

Just when Kinshiki's fate appeared sealed, just when Sasuke was about to charge towards the ogre with full fury and decapitate him, he was mysteriously whisked away, suckered into oblivion, laughing all the way.

Things were about to get worse, Konohamaru recognized, dread creeping through him.

Kakashi stood there, alone, in a dingy alleyway, facing Momoshiki with horror as the pale, unnatural man licked his lips and consumed a giant, grotesque, blood-red fruit, transforming into an eldritch abomination that chilled the hearts of even the bravest men. Steadying himself, Kakashi clasped his kunai and readied for the final confrontation of his life.
Sarada swore she almost broke her leg when they landed, key word being almost. Boruto, on the other hand, experienced an ear-splitting crack and, squirming, cast his eyes on the macabre distortion that was his left leg.

"Shit, Sarada! Go on without me! Find him!" He yelled, no, implored with desperation. They had not a second to waste.

Naruto was here. No, not her Hokage, not the man she had long admired from afar, but the boy in this world, who had died when he was barely five years older than her. His chakra was detectable.

A coffin. It was the very same coffin that she encountered back at the cave in the mountains and monasteries. She made her way towards it, wincing at the pain that was nowhere closer to fading. She could tell she wasn't permanently or severely injured in any way – but the pain is pervasive nonetheless. All she could do was ignore it, tuck it away at the back of her head for less pressing and dangerous situations. Remembering the procedures at the cave, she placed a palm on the lid of the sarcophagus.

And then the room was engulfed in a ray of warm, brilliant orange light.

Mitsuki sped through the streets in a frantic aim to reach his friends in time. He arrived there at perhaps the most opportune moment possible, leaping into battle, stretching his limbs and pulling Kakashi out of harm's way. Momoshiki, he realised, had just fired a particularly destructive fire jutsu that threatened to roast the man alive.

"Thank you, Mitsuki," Kakashi remarked gratefully before hurling another kunai towards Momoshiki again. It was a futile effort; the kunai graced off Momoshiki's skin without even making a meagre dent. More than that, Momoshiki seemed stronger, more terrible. His appearance had changed from consuming the chakra fruit. Long horns, black at their tips, sprouted from his hair and his skin was laced with ominous black tattoos. His eyes were now a searing pit of amber, his pale aristocratic hands now nefarious black claws, his delicate feet now grotesque webs.

Kakashi wasn’t trying to win, Mitsuki hypothesized, he was merely trying to buy time for Boruto and Sarada.

There was only one option as things stand. Kakashi could do with some extra help.

Konohamaru stood dumbstruck in the middle of the deserted street, now filled with debris and destructive black flames. Kinshiki had vanished, simply vanished.

Sasuke, catching eye of him and his companions, frowned and made his way towards them and then past them, brushing by Konohamaru with not so much as rudeness but a lack of concern. Then the man increased his speed and was soon out of sight.

"Check out the surroundings for any survivors! Scout everything you can!" Konohamaru ordered everyone again. Anything they could save, they will, they had to.

Chocho was still running for her life, chakra reserves utterly depleted and her pudginess had withered until her arms and lean were reduced to a lean – what she would, under less dire
circumstances, consider desirable – frame, her face became thinner, round cheeks burnt off in desperation, and her waist shrunk by a gobsmacking magnitude. Still, she didn't dare stop. Her father - her dearest father, the man who she knew would always be there for her, in spirit if not in person – was gone. He had sacrificed his life for her and, in the only possible way she could reciprocate him, she swore that she would survive this so that he would not have died in vain.

It had been days since their failed mission and the town containing the gateway to Mount Myoboku was within sight. She had barely rested on the way, taking naps of scarcely an hour and stopping only for water here and there. Genetics ensured that whatever deficiencies from lack of food were covered comprehensively.

Briefly, she wondered how everyone else was doing. Did any of her comrades succeed? How is Sarada – that strange and wonderful girl from the other dimension – faring? Did she reunite with her friend Boruto? So many things unanswered, so many things she wanted to know, so many things she wanted to fill her mind with instead of her father's death

[Don't think about it, Chocho. He wouldn't want you to mourn – he would have wanted you to live your life to its fullest. Honour the dead by living, by carrying on their dreams. Dad will be with mum now, in heaven. Pity the living instead, who currently inhabit this utter clusterfuck of a world. Damn Chocho, don't deviate. Think about other things. Anything.]

Mother. Bright red hair, chocolate skin (her skin too), fiery temper and the light of Chouji's life. Karui had left this world [She died, Chocho. She died. She didn't leave you, she died. She died for a cause she believed in] when Chocho was only seven. It was a mission to the Land of Lightning – that was all the detail Chocho had received from her father. Further inquiries yielded nothing new. She had cried for nights, insomnia overtook her and everywhere she went, she thought she would see and hear Karin's laugh. In spite of his occupied schedule, for rebellion is a time-consuming business, Chouji tried to spend as much time as conceivably possible with his daughter. It wasn't until a few years later when the cruel realities of the world finally peeled away her childish innocence and ignorance [Weren't they two sides of the same coin anyway? Now, now Chocho, don't get too unhappy and cynical. Dad wouldn't like it at all, no, no. What did he say? Be happy and persevere no matter what], that Chocho realised just how much the man was mourning too, just how much his cheerful demeanour was a façade, just how much he needed her comfort too.

And now he was gone too.

[What happened to thinking about other things?]

Smoke was rising from the distance. The town was flattened. Debris was everywhere – screams and shouts too. Evacuees left in droves, directed and protected by familiar faces.

She found them. She found Hi no Ishi. Relief washed over her as she heard Konohamaru's voice: "Chocho! My God Chocho – is that you?"

She soon realised just how short-lived her relief would be.

Sasuke Uchiha. The man's chilling chakra was palpable in the air and it made her blood curdle. She had encountered that chakra before, potent and powerful and the very essence of darkness. "Did the Hokage do all of this?" She asked Konohamaru, agitated. Had he finally discovered Hi no Ishi’s hiding place and retaliated in fury?

Konohamaru sighed. "Chocho, you will soon find out that Sasuke Uchiha is the least of our problems..."
Naruto Uzumaki stared at them, dazed and confused. Sarada let out a gasp and Boruto felt a slight relief enveloping him. Judging from the man – no teenager's confounded expressions, which was an encouraging sign of independent thought, he was not under the thrall or control of anyone. Not yet. It was strange seeing his father's younger self. Naruto was wearing godawful orange and black clothing and a Konoha headband. He was certainly taller than Boruto but still had much to grow before reaching dad-Naruto's height. Internally, Boruto mused about whether this was how he would look like when he had reached 17 years old.

He cleared his throat, preparing for a concise briefing. "Hi, my name's Boruto Uzumaki. I'm from another dimension and I am your son. I know this may sound confusing to you but I promise you I'll offer a much better explanation once we get out of this mess. At present, the planet is being invaded by two extremely powerful beings on par with Kaguya Ootsusuki in terms of destructive abilities. They are after the Kyuubi and we all need your help." The words were fired rapidly, like kunais from a kunai launcher. Naruto seemed more confused.

"What… what happened? The last thing I remembered was Sasuke and we were… we were fighting and – and – oh man!" Naruto frowned and then pouted and then pursued to rub his head in a manner that Boruto would have deemed comical had they not been in such a dire situation. He suppressed the urge to scream at not-dad Naruto to hurry up. "I lost, didn't I?" Naruto's voice quieted suddenly, hollowing out. There were lingering traces of disappointment as he registered the reality of his failure.

"And this world kind of went to shit. A semi-totalitarian dictatorship stretched across the five elemental nations, to be precise. And it's about to get, well, worse. Way worse. We don't have much time to lose!"

"Okay, okay geez," Naruto complained. "Who are you anyway?"

"I told you, your son from another dimension," Boruto said, sighing. Was his own father this impossible at the age of 17? "I got here accidentally via a dimension travelling scroll and got entangled in this whole mess-"

"Who is she?" Naruto asked softly, pointing towards Sarada.

"Sarada Uchiha, Sasuke and Sakura's child – from my dimension," Boruto explained, still squirming with discomfort as she sat on the ground and desperately tried to patch up his distorted leg with the meagre first aid tools Sarada carried with her. "They were happily married there after you won and brought Sasuke back to the village. Here, in this world, they're mortal enemies."

Sadness flickered across Naruto's features as he bent down and examined Boruto's leg gently. "I might be able to do something about this." And all of a sudden, he was engulfed in bright orange chakra. His hands glowed, emanating brilliant white light.

Crack. The sound of bones rearranging. He felt numb and he was sure it would have hurt otherwise. Quite disturbing, now that Boruto properly thought about it – he didn't want to delve into the anatomical mechanics about the process of the healing. Within seconds, he was all good.

"Amazing…" Sarada's mouth was wide open and she stared at Naruto with an expression that can only be described as admiration. Boruto found himself sharing her looks too: his father was impressive, even as a teenager. And his own days of resentment and jealousy were long gone.

"Heh." Naruto scratched his head again; Boruto suppressed a snicker. "Glad it worked for you."
Now, let's go and kick some butt dattebayo!"

And there goes the same verbal tic too. Not-dad-Naruto was, in some respects, remarkably similar to dad-Naruto.

"Insolent human beings!" Momoshiki bellowed as he swept Mitsuki aside and hurled a giant cloud of fire at the boy, which quickly took shape of a blazing phoenix. Mitsuki leapt out of the way just in time and, to be safe, conjured a water shield.

Kakashi Hatake lay in the rubbles. Alive, but certainly incapacitated - injured, not fatally, but enough to render him useless in combat for the moment. The man groaned and tried to get up, failed and collapsed again.

Despair overtook Mitsuki. His friends were in there. He could not fail them. He will not allow himself to fail them. He will buy more time; he will do this for Sarada, for Boruto. Taking a deep breath, he activated his sage mode, a surge of raw natural power coursing through his veins. He knew that he was still no match for the deity before him. He didn't care.

"You will never win!" He muttered through gritted teeth and flung a long-stretched arm into Momoshiki's face. The man merely stepped aside with playful nonchalance and proceeded to unleash a torrent of carnivorous insects, which gathered themselves around Mitsuki's arm, latching themselves onto it and began biting it.

Insects. Momoshiki specialized in absorbing jutsu, especially that of his enemies. Insects. This could only have originated from a member of the Aburame clan. Mitsuki privately wondered whether Shino [not Shino-sensei] was a casualty of the Ootsusukis. It stung, the knowledge of even the possibility of Shino being harmed. That man had been Mitsuki's academy instructor for several years in another world.

Mitsuki pulled back his arm to avoid further damage.

"How tedious. Begone!" Momoshiki announced as he fired a paralyzing ray of lightning at Mitsuki and before Mitsuki could dodge it, Kakashi leapt in front of him and cancelled out the electricity with a jutsu of his own.

And then –

"Get away from Kakashi-sensei you bastard!"

A voice, familiar and yet unfamiliar. It was younger, certainly less sagely than the one Mitsuki had grown accustomed to, but it was unmistakable.

Naruto Uzumaki.

Sakura rushed back to the scene of destruction, having disseminated the messages to members of Hi no Ishi scattered all over the continent. What greeted her made her feel uneasy: death and destruction everywhere and barely a soul in sight. If it weren't for Konohamaru's explanation and reassurance that the vast majority of civilians had been evacuated to safety, she would have considered this one of the bleakest conflicts of her life.

Chocho Akimichi was there too, haggard, skinny and thoroughly depleted of chakra but nevertheless alive. Yet that could only mean one thing - she had failed. Judging from her red eyes, the casualties of her mission were high, perhaps even consisting her own father.
Chouji.

And another one bites to dust.

Sakura bit her lip bitterly. So many lives sacrificed – and all for what?

[Overthrowing Sasuke? Remember? You took a vow, the day he murdered Naruto. You took a vow that you would carry on Naruto’s dream.]

Naruto's dream of a better world...

[Dead bodies. All the dead bodies. All the people that died, that died because of you and your dream. All the people that died for freedom. How will he think?]

So many friends dead and gone and – and if Momoshiki and Kinshiki destroyed this world, it would be all for nothing. In order to retain even a semblance of hope in overthrowing Sasuke, she would have to tolerate the man and, heavens forgive her, work with him temporarily.

She approached Chocho, byakugou seal activated, and endowed the girl with parts of chakra. She then handed Chocho a granola bar, a far cry from the bags and bags of potato chips the girl loved but adequate for the current situation. As Chocho munched on the food, Sakura slit her left hand with her kunai and, after swiping her thumb over the gushing blood, weaved the correct handsigns and whispered the words: "Kuchiyose no Jutsu."

Katsuyuu split into a thousand parts and distributed herself over the area, latching onto relieved Hi no Ishi members and wounded civilians.

Then, she turned towards Konohamaru. "Where did Sasuke go?" Her words were cold, curt and clinical. There was no need to engage in impassioned rants. He gave her the directions and she nodded in response.

She would go after Momoshiki too. Everything else be damned.
"Let's do this!" Boruto heard Naruto say as the man (boy? it was hard to pinpoint the terms to refer to one scarcely on the cusp of adulthood) cracked his knuckles. "This guy is going down!"

Momoshiki gazed at them smugly and greedily, no doubt setting his eyes on the Kyuubi that resided within Naruto. "Oh you poor mortals, thinking that you stood a chance against me. Pathetic…"

"You won't win!" Sarada yelled, defiant. Her eyes betrayed no hint of fear, yet Boruto simply knew – call it a sixth sense if one must – that she was terrified on the inside. A sudden urge to wrap his arms around her, an inexplicable feeling of protectiveness, welled inside him. She was brave, very brave, he thought, for bravery isn't defined by one's lack of fear but one's ability to overcome fear. "And we'll fight you together."

"One, two, three, three hundred human beings – it doesn't matter," Momoshiki proclaimed. "I will end you all." With that, he conjured a gigantic vortex of fire. A pure, simmering figure of a phoenix emerged and launched itself at them. It flew with the speed of light – there was no way to avoid it, Boruto realised with horror.

Naruto's warm coat of chakra engulfed them - Boruto, Sarada, Kakashi and Mitsuki. It just was like last time. Spasms of déjà vu unwittingly coursed through Boruto's mind: the burning stadium, pillar collapsing all around them, civilians wailing, palpable fear coursing through the air. Momoshiki was just as unrelenting this time, hurling blasts of fire, water and ice all towards them in a blind frenzy. Naruto squirmed and wavered a little, but ultimately held firm. Sheer determination was what prevented any major falters - for the time being.

"You can't resist me for too long," Momoshiki continued his taunting, "Look, you're barely holding up against me even now."

"He can absorb ninjutsu," Boruto whispered to Naruto, "Be careful."

Naruto gave a tiny inclination. "I've fought men who could do the same."

A crack emerged on top of the Kyuubi's head; the barrages of justus were making their impression. [This won't last forever.] Defense alone won't save them, won't save this world from annihilation, for all it accomplishes is delay. Apocalypse now or apocalypse later – the difference between the two seemed too minuscule to matter. [Act fast – no, act strategically.]

Something else then. Take a third option.

Think like a shinobi. Boruto had no concrete idea of what that meant in the context of his current situation. The same old strategy like last time? An unexpected attack with his vanishing Rasengan? Either way seemed like a more useful application of his abilities than hiding under Naruto's protective chakra cloak.

The ground was crumbling beneath them, owing to Momoshiki's whirlwind of destruction and conscious efforts to create an earthquake. Boruto felt himself shaking and turned around to see Sarada shaking too. "Hold on to me," he offered, extending his hand to her, "We'll keep each other rooted and hold our ground together." She accepted without a word of complaint; she squeezed his hand tight, her sweaty palms infusing with his sweaty palms. Seconds, silent seconds, passed between them.

"We need to go on the offense," Sarada finally suggested, a little apprehensively. "We can't hold him
back forever like this. I don't know – I'm not sure how we're supposed to do this. But we can't keep going on like this."

It was like she read his mind.

Boruto nodded. "I'll form a distraction."

"No," Sarada rebuked him almost instinctively. 'I'll do it – you're still –"

He rushed out before she could argue further.

Boruto was truly the biggest idiot she had ever met, a fool who would cast away his life like it meant nothing out of a desire to protect the people he loved. And that was why he was so precious to her. She was not as impulsive as him, yet she shared his fierce determination to see those she loved and cared about live safely and soundly, which was why seeing him jumping out of Naruto's protection, taking on Momoshiki and risking his own life pained her so, so much. She could not bear the idea of losing him, she realised. He meant something to her, something important. For most of her life, ever since the academy at least, he was always just there, boisterous, loud and cocky to an almost lethal level, never failing to induce laughter. Their friendship had undergone its fair share of rollercoaster rides, especially at this strange alternate dimension, yet she knew he would have always been there for her, just as she would always be there for him. To lose him… it was unimaginable…

"He's just like me in some ways – heh," Naruto chuckled with a hint of melancholy, as if pondering on how things could have turned out. "He really is my son." For a moment, he didn't look seventeen anymore.

Indeed, Sarada wanted to respond. But at present, all that she could feel was worry and rage at the utter bravery and stupidity Boruto had just displayed.

"Hey! Idiot! What are you doing? Come back!" Angry yells.

He didn't care. When it came down to putting one's life at risk, he would choose himself over Sarada all the time – and anyone else too, he assumed. Perhaps he had inherited his father's saviour complex. He dodged Momoshiki's jet of electricity in the nick of time before flashing the correct hand signs of the shadow clone jutsu, which then propelled themselves towards Momoshiki. (They were shortly dispatched, with minimal difficulty.) In the meantime, he molded his chakra onto his right hand, sensing its convergence and formation into an ever-spinning whirlwind. Locking eyes with Momoshiki's sneering face, he hurled his Vanishing Rasengan at the god.

"Pathetic," Momoshiki mused as the attack disappeared inches before meeting its target.

Bang. Momoshiki flew backwards, his mouth wide open, clearly indignant at the sheer effrontery of a mere mortal daring to fight back. Within seconds, he had recovered.

Bang. Boruto felt himself being blasted with a beam of pure, electrifying energy that threatened to tear apart every fibre of his body, his precariously fragile flesh vibrating at a frightening rate. Maybe he should have heeded to Sarada – no – he was stubborn in his own way. Nothing could have convinced him otherwise.

"Boruto you crazy idiot!" Sarada was screaming, on the verge of tears. The agony apparent in her expressions caused Boruto to wince in guilt, but he would fight on. Oh yes he would.

"You…" Boruto enunciated as he got up. "You'll never win!"
"How cute," Momoshiki drawled. "You humans are really quite delusional. Well, to spare you from your self-delusions – and I consider this a rather kind and charitable act – I'll end things quickly then. How would you like to die then, little human?"

"Boruto Uzumaki," Boruto corrected as he clutched his kunai tightly. "And as for your question… Hm… At the age of 92, happy and drunk and surrounded by hoards of children and grandchildren. And dango too."

He thought he could hear a snort from Sarada. You really shouldn't be joking at a time like this! Heck, he could practically hear her castigations.

His heart sank when he saw the gigantic whirl of black, fluid substance that emanated from Momoshiki's palms. It grew larger and larger, casting a dark shadow over him. When it was released, there was nowhere for him to go.

And then he was somewhere else. Hundreds of meters away from the decimated street and the recovering figures of Naruto, Sarada, Mitsuki and Kakashi, who took a residual hit when the coat of Kyuubi chakra dissolved upon contact with Momoshiki's powerful attack. In his original place, stood Sasuke Uchiha, stumbling with discomfort as his gigantic Susanoo's limbs and visage was reduced to a waxy, distorted pile of mess. He was saved – by Sasuke. Amenotejikara. That must be it.

"Sasuke?! Sasuke, is that you?!"

The man's dark eyes collided with Naruto's bright blue ones. Sasuke froze, unmistakably haunted. His gaze flitted tersely back to Momoshiki, not wanting to dwell on awkward reunion conversations. Boruto himself was surprised at the lack of malice present in Naruto's voice. Considerations of Sasuke's degree of remorse notwithstanding, if he was reanimated and had just met his killer, he was sure he'd be a little more pissed off. Perhaps – what was it that the Sasuke in his world, his mentor and friend, had often mused? – Naruto Uzumaki was too much of a saint for his own good. Or maybe his feelings were too complicated, too blurred, too confused for any coherent expression of indignation.

Sarada frowned as she saw the man that would have been her father manifest himself in front of the enemy. In spite of Boruto's numerous encounters with that man, in spite of the immeasurable pain he had inflicted on Sarada and the rest of Hi no Ishi, in spite of all the things she had heard about him, this was the first time she had met him, conscious, face to face.

"… Sasuke…" The man beside her was stunned, his mouth agape, undeniably shaken and emotionally gripped. His bright orange aura seemed to have dimmed. She didn't blame him; what was happening now, it must have been a traumatic encounter. Beside them, Kakashi was silent too. Mitsuki was deep in thought, just as she was.

"Naruto," Sarada unwittingly spoke up. Then, she hugged him. "I know this must be very hard for you – you too Kakashi. Mitsuki, I… oh God I don't know how…"

"It's fine." Naruto smiled – a false, strained smile. "Come on, it's time to take some action. We can't let my would-be son and Sasuke fight that creep alone!" He really was trying, trying to appear unperturbed. Concealment, an art perfected by the shinobi, yet Sarada saw right through it.

"Yes," Sarada agreed. The figures of Boruto and Sasuke and Momoshiki were getting further and further away as they spoke. "We'll go after them – all of us!"
"Go screw yourself, you creep!" Boruto roared as he charged towards the alabaster-skinned demigod, who deftly dodged his punch.

"Boruto!" Sasuke shouted, alarmed – this time, he didn't even bother hiding it. "Be more careful!"

"How adorable," Momoshiki cooed. "Humans, so concerned about each other. Interesting, isn't it?"

"Well, guess what? We're not callous assholes like you! For us – bonds – the relationships we forge – they actually mean something!" Boruto declared under gritted teeth. "That and we don't eat our dead comrades by making them into weird ass chakra pills."

Another cocky smirk. Oh how Boruto hated that face.

Unfortunately, his rather grandiose declaration did not seem to have gone well with Sasuke, who appeared extraordinarily… shaken. "Boruto," the man whispered frantically, "Not a time to go around proclaiming your heroics and love for humanity. Save it for less dire times." Could Boruto's statement, indirectly, have touched a nerve?

Sasuke grabbed him and they both dived out of the way. A close miss. The building Momoshiki struck was instantly vaporized, with only a handful of dust to commemorate its existence. Momoshiki was not holding back anymore. Fear, Boruto felt fear almost overwhelm him. [Calm yourself. He was beaten once, he can be beaten again.]

"Watch it, Boruto!" Sasuke hissed.

"Don't worry about me," Boruto naturally rebutted.

"Then don't get into this fight!"

"This is my fight, just as much as it is yours." The level of tranquillity in his voice surprised Boruto himself.

"Then – damn! Don't die, okay?"

"I try my best."

"Not by the looks of it. Oh, and a shinobi should never go into battle without his headband," Sasuke said with a thin smile.

"That's a bit rich coming from you," Boruto huffed indignantly while pointing at Sasuke's bare forehead.

"Young, inexperienced genins, I mean," Sasuke corrected himself with a quirk in his lips. [Smug bastard.] "Here, I believe this is yours," he uttered those words slowly as he pulled out of his pockets, Boruto's – his old headband. "You deserve it more than I ever will."

"I…" Boruto's streak of rebuttals faltered.

"Now don't get to sentimental, kid. This is for… purely health and safety reasons. Take it."

Boruto accepted it and quickly tied it over his forehead, rolling out of another sharp jet of wind's way. He caught Sasuke's gaze as the man blocked a fireball for both of them.

"Whatever you think. Look, my dad – I mean – Naruto – the one in this world – he's coming over, with Sarada, Kakashi and Mitsuki too. We won't be facing Momoshiki alone." Boruto stared at Sasuke intently, hoping to reach some form of understanding.
"That's the problem."

"You need help! –"

Another save in the nick of time. The ground beneath them collapsed, giving way to a dark, impenetrable abyss that Boruto most certainly did not want to fall in. This time, however, he had been fortunate enough to manage to pull himself out of the assault's way, preventing another round of paranoid and - no matter how hard the man tried to hide it - protective rants by Sasuke.

" – You need my help! You need our help! Look, I know about your past. I know who you are. I know you've done things – terrible things – that you've regretted and things you've still yet to come to terms with. Heck, maybe you're still awful and as self-righteous and self-justifying as ever. Guess what? It doesn't matter now. I'm in no position to forgive you – that's the business of Naruto, of Sakura, of Kakashi and all the people you used to know. They may or may not exonerate you for your crimes – but that's not the point. What I want to say is that you're actions, your choices now, the person you want to be now, the things you will do, they don't have to be determined by your past. If you – shit – this guy is fast. Thanks for pulling me out of harm's way... heh. Point is, to me, what matters is what you do now. You can stop being the person you know Naruto and... and your brother would have hated. It's all up to you." Boruto panted as he finished.

A small, barely detectable, yet rare and genuine smile.

"And grow a pair of balls. Stop avoiding eye contact with Dad- I mean Naruto," Boruto added with a cheeky grin.

"That's right Sasuke!" Naruto Uzumaki descended upon the right with a dramatic kick at Momoshiki, which was repelled. He landed effortlessly next to his former comrade, his killer, his – his best friend. "Let's finish this bastard here and now."

"Dear me, really? You humans, mortals, all so emotional, all so bound up in your petty feelings and relationships. I'm beginning to think I'm doing the universe a favour by getting rid of all of you," Momoshiki said, bored and recognizably irritated at the drama unfolding before him, all while casually casting dangerous blasts of Dust Release around them.

Boruto threw another Vanishing Rasengan. Momoshiki stepped out of the way in a blasé manner. "Really, did you really think the same trick would work on me again?"

Taking a deep breath, Boruto crossed his fingers and weaved an array of handsigns: "Ultra-Pornographic-Sexy-Jutsu!"

Poof. A hundred lithe figures, lithe and naked figures – of women in rather compromising positions, doing not entirely child-friendly actions with each other – manifested in front of Momoshiki, who, for the first time since their encounter, appeared genuinely baffled.

"What the-"

"Rasengan!" Naruto charged.

"Chidori!" Sasuke charged with Naruto.

"Gaaaaahhhhhhhhhh Boruto. Why?!" Came Sarada's horrified voice. "Where did you learn that?!"

"Learn it? I invented it!" Boruto's eyes gleamed mischievously. Sarada looked like she was about to slap him in the face. She managed to suppress that urge but he knew that his comeuppance would come later - when they were no longer in such a dangerous and tenuous situation.
"Jiraiya would have been proud," Kakashi chuckled.

"Boruto, we're going to have a word about the books you've borrowed from my dad's lab," Mitsuki sighed.

"Your dad reads pornography?!!" Sarada gaped. She was positively unwell. Granted, the image of Orochimaru being engrossed in tomes of erotica made Boruto lose his appetite too [and he was slowly realizing that he was, in fact, starving.]

"Never mind guys, let's focus on the battle in front of us. Oh and, also, I have an even greater masterpiece under my sleeve!" Boruto declared triumphantly.

"You're impossible," Sarada murmured.

"Expect the impossible," Boruto simply responded.

"At this age, it's expected of guys and girls to be a little … curious about the workings of the human anatomy and, well, reproductive biology. Some things will never change," Kakashi mused humorously.

"Focus on the fight," Mitsuki reminded.

"I'm on it!" Boruto ran towards the clashing figures of Naruto and Sasuke, who were engaging Momoshiki, cloaked in a stone golem made out of sizzling lava, much like last time: the two, even after all these years and all the heartbreak and death and turmoil, effortlessly conjured a gigantic cloud of chakra shaped like the Kyuubi, clothed by purple Susanoo armour. This time, Sarada went after him.

Even in the darkest hour, all of this made Boruto smile.
Chapter 26

All his life, he had been searching for something, propelling himself towards some nebulous end goal.

It would be a lonely path, one destined to be tread alone, and he had hardened his heart, perfected his abilities after hours and months and years arduous training, and severed all his bonds to prepare himself for it. Nothing would stop him; nothing could stop him. He thought he had reached it in the brief moments after Itachi's death when – in the expected rush of relief and excited and fulfillment – all that came was emptiness; he thought he had reached it – was close to reaching it, at the very least – as his spear of lightning pierced through Danzo's chest and as he so casually cast aside that foolish girl Karin (who became less and less foolish as the years passed); he thought he had finally reached it when he held Naruto's limp body upon the ruins of what used to be called the Valley of the End, the waterfall having been flattened in its entirety as entire landscapes and mountains transformed throughout the cosmic course of their legendary battle, and yet what came after was but a certain numbness he tried fervently to supplant with artificial conviction.

Even after he had singlehandedly slaughtered the Gokage in their sleep, united the Five Elemental nations and fashioned the Continent under his own image, something was still missing. He was not always bothered by the persistent deficiency that remained within him; as time went by it became easier and easier to ignore. Rationalisation became a daily habit: Naruto simply had to die for him to establish peace – no, enforce peace amongst the squabbling, small-minded nations. A sacrifice, he told himself. The closest thing he had to a best friend performed what could only be described as a noble and necessary duty. For the greater good. Yes, he would quietly honour the man his regime so publicly vilified by erecting a small, unassuming gravestone – a place, a holy site of pilgrim where he would visit from time to time to remember the reason for everything, for why he continued to do what he did. The rationality behind it all was infallible.

The anonymous, pitiful monument was an image he would burn into his memory, trace vividly in the mind all while he surveyed the lands he ruled. Quietly, it resided in his consciousness as he went through his daily paper work and ordered his underlings around in his high and mighty Hokage robes, as he patiently formulated the Land of Water's fishery laws (because bureaucrats were just so damn useless – but a necessary evil), as he clinically dispatched secret task forces against pockets of insurgencies, as he caught faint glimpses of civilians – defenseless civilians – cowering under the interrogations of his thought police (again, a necessary evil: a small portion of the population is repressed in exchange with the inevitable chaos that must happen if minds were really allowed to roam free because that was simply the way humans were), as he occasionally punished officials that had expended his tolerance for incompetence (because he would like to think that he still held some standards), as he thwarted Hi no Ishi's plan time after time and had his own plans delayed from time to time. It was all for Itachi and, paradoxically, Naruto for Naruto's death by his own hands had to mean something. It meant that peace, however sordid its origins and however morally dubious its means of maintenance, would reign universally. It meant young children no longer had to die in wars – and young children no longer did. The last war - when discounting the petty conflicts Hi no Ishi and isolated cells of resistance instigated occasionally, which were often sniffed out in days – happened 17 years ago.

He tries not to think about his old acquaintances that still lived, crystallize whatever affectionate times he shared with them into stale, unchangeable shards of memory that he stored, temporarily, in his psyche and then tossed away into the cesspit of time when he was finally ready to be rid of them. Sakura, Kakashi, Ino, Chouji, Shikamaru, Lee, Karin, Suigetsu, Jugo – they were as good as dead to him. His heart scarcely flinched when he dispatched them from the realm of the living. Their lives
were like paper (his too); death, after all the pain, ultimately ended in sleep. It was needed. Those people, they knew him from before he was Hokage, they were a connection to his past and the past world that was so chaotic, degenerate and evil. He severed, tried to sever, every single bond he still had. It became progressively easier. Gradually, he became omnipotent, untouchable, unquestionable, unapproachable. The Hokage became a figure across the nations so feared, revered and hated depending on who you were that he united everyone in relation to him. Boundaries between the Wind, the Leaf, the Sand, the Stone, the Mist, the Rain, the Grass and all villages big and small dissipated.

(Power begets loneliness and absolute power begets absolute loneliness.)

He was finally alone.

Haven't it been what he always wanted?

It was what it meant to Hokage: to shoulder all the darkness and hatred in the world.

For years, he was content on living in his version of reality, being unperturbed and unceasingly determined to continue what he had started that fateful day by the Valley of the End, to consolidate and perpetuate his rule, his peace. The advent of the prophecy hadn't disturbed him as much as it should have – as if a few unknown strangers from a foreign world could succeed thousands of others shinobi and kunoichi failed. Hi no Ishi, the naive and misguided bunch of fools they were, believed they could harness the three peculiar newcomers to their own advantage and finally instigate a successful insurrection. As if. Perhaps Sasuke still needed time to ready himself for the deaths of his two remaining teammates, or perhaps the existence of Mount Myoboku as a refuge for those that hated him was necessary: it was a contained flame, useful in channeling the frustrations of the implacable, in settling in those who would never have belonged in his society – provided that it did not get out of hand.

He was no saint; saints were useless.

Then, after seventeen years, he was met with the same earnest, brilliant blue eyes, the same spike of blond hair, the same whiskers around the cheek, the same self-assured and sheepish grin. For a moment, he let his fantasies run wild as he imagined Naruto Uzumaki's conception of a secret child with Hinata Hyuuga or even Sakura Haruno and conceived the preposterous scenario of the child seeking revenge for the father after all these years. When these imaginations went out of hand, Sasuke went somewhere even more improbable – he began to think about what could have happened (if this really was a child from another dimension.) What if Naruto was the one who had won? What if, during any point of their fateful friendship, Naruto had managed to drag him back to the village? What if things could have been different? He shut down those poisonous thoughts before they could inundate his mind. Still, the sudden existence of Boruto Uzumaki was a curious phenomenon that left him insatiate.

Draw the boy in – that had been his strategy. That was why he offered the job instantaneously. Find out more; gather information as a shinobi would, while being fully aware that the boy was likely attempting the same. When he re-familiarized himself with the existence of the dimension-travelling scroll after a sleepless night of scouring through his personal library, he already had a strong inclination of just who the boy was. The subtle verbal antics, the small fidgeting acts (and surprisingly enough, not the undying love for ramen) and the uncanny resemblance seemed to confirm his hypothesis. (His worst nightmare – no. Not that.)

During their interactions, Sasuke would try to discern every facet of Boruto's personality, his being. The boy who he expected to be so predictable, to be an exact carbon copy of the deceased father, possessed his own unexpected elements. His familiarity with the Uchiha shuriken technique (which
led Sasuke to suspect their relative… closeness in Boruto's own world), his boisterous but at the
same time wry mannerisms, his mildly spoilt demeanour and frustrating carefreeness, a clear
indication of someone who had grown up in a time of peace, his relative cynicism and selfishness
(because when it came to idealism and self-sacrifice, no one bested Naruto), his surprising
pragmatism with regards to this world and his own, at least initially, set him apart too. Sometimes,
Sasuke felt he could see traces of himself in the boy too. Then again, he could say the same with
Naruto himself. Nevertheless, the boy's unflinching dedication and desire to protect his friends
reminded Sasuke too much of the father, something Hanabi Hyuuga – curse her name – later had so
unhelpfully pointed out.

It was the last thing he wanted. Sasuke gave Boruto the scroll in hopes that the boy would take it and
be gone forever – out of sight, out of mind, or so they all say. Like banishing the demons of your
past would be so simple. He was faintly pleased when the boy took it, albeit in a fazed and baffled
manner, and relieved when the boy agreed to try to take his friends with him back to their own
world. (He did not even want to think about that Sarada girl Boruto brought up – a possible future
with Sakura seemed so absurd, so unreachable after all that had happened.) The threat to kill the boy
was made rather offhandedly; he didn't think he would actually have needed to enact it. Something
had gone wrong though, he could sense it. Out of the three pieces of chakra that abruptly arrived in
this world, only one made its way back.

(When Sakura shows up with a girl with his dark raven hair and, very likely, dark black eyes, he
does his best to suppress the strange whirlwind of confused emotions coursing through his mind. He
did his best to minimize their time of interaction.)

When Boruto returned again, Sasuke felt a mild irritation blossoming in his chest. The peeved
sentiments soon revealed themselves to go way beyond condescending annoyance, as the emperor of
them all directs towards his underlings. Curiosity, a thirst for knowledge, was what drew him back to
the boy again, a boy who represented what the world could have been, what he could have been. It
prompted introspection and Sasuke hated introspection. He never wanted to see the boy die; he had
no reason to wish for Boruto's death. And when they were alone, conversing in that café, he felt the
inexplicable urge to convince the boy, to justify what he was doing, to prove to Boruto that he was
not a monster. Somehow, he thought the boy would understand, or come as close to understanding
as anyone still alive would. (The dead were dead and there was no point in contemplating about their
reactions to the living.) Having the boy as a confidant also made sense: when he was gone, back to
his own world, all of Sasuke's secrets would go too.

When he let Boruto reside in his own dwellings, he experienced the peculiar desire of opening –
parts – of himself up. When the boy spoke so passionately about his own beliefs, seemingly renewed
by his experiences in this world, which were also Naruto's beliefs, Sasuke felt an uncomfortable tug
in the heartstrings that he managed to mask behind his long perfected façade of blankness. It should
have irritated him, for a young boy to display such an act of insolence, of boldness, of brashness, of
bravery right in his face. Instead, all he felt was numbness. As they shared awkward meals,
progressed into quaint small talk and even laughed as they exchanged a few jokes, a feeling of
fondness – almost avuncular in its nature – crept through Sasuke's heart. Eventually, he could no
longer resist Boruto's proposal and plunged into scenes of the boy's world. He claimed he was
interested (and he was) and he was, in fact, mildly concerned about the possibility of an alien
invasion; however, what fundamentally drove him was a yearning to understand Boruto's world, the
things that shaped him, all of which were linked to Sasuke's own past, of the paths untaken and the
ideals he himself could have embraced when he was still a young teenager ready to take on the entire
world.

The more he learnt about Boruto's world, the more he felt his own heart sink. It wasn't meant to be
like this, he internally argued, screeched – he was the one fate had ultimately chosen over Naruto.
His ideas were meant to be superior, his world superior, and his peace superior. Emptiness returned. He did not know what to think about anymore, how to make sense of the jaded philosophy that drove him all through his life. A trip down that boy's memory lane was all it took.

(All around him, his world was crumbling. His logic was the futile repairman, rushing frantically to and fro to fix the cracks – though only superficially.)

He tried to harden his mind, strengthen his will. He wasn't sure whether it worked or not. He continued to interact in a fairly amicable manner with his prisoner – no, his guest. And when Boruto proclaims that he really wasn't so bad, his heart almost jumps out of him. It had been years since anyone had sincerely complimented him; the obsequious sycophants that never ceased to conjure grandiose titles and epithets didn't count, for they irritated him to the extreme and only his need for their service prevent him from incinerating them on the spot.

Momoshiki and Kinshiki were unexpected and extraneous disrupters, even more so than Boruto, Sarada and Mitsuki. With their arrival, Sasuke could not help but wonder whether the world where Naruto emerged as the Nanadaime Hokage would have been better prepared for their onslaught. They were certainly defeated; he was not so sure whether his world would win.

Fighting Kinshiki had been a drain. He ultimately gained the upper hand but not without a cost. He could feel his chakra being slowly depleted as he matched the ogre's powerful attacks one by one. Then, the even more eerie Momoshiki bizarrely snatched his victory away from him by turning Kinshiki into a chakra pill.

As he rushed from fight to fight, towards Boruto's defiant yet pathetically unequipped figure, there was an unmistakable protectiveness that welled up inside him. As he came face to face with Naruto's reanimated figure, uncontrolled this time and possessing its own independent free will, he did not know what to think or act. Avoidance was the best remedy. As he caught a glimpse of Sarada, the girl who could have been his daughter, he wanted nothing but to fight Momoshiki alone. He hoped Sakura would never show up, for seeing Kakashi and fighting alongside the man again was already bad enough.

Making temporary alliances was part of being shinobi; nonetheless, the current crop of shinobi and kunoichi around him were the last people in the world he wanted to be with. He suspected that most of them reciprocated his feelings.

But when Boruto had smiled and told him that the one that mattered was what he did now, he wanted to believe in the boy so badly. That old headband of his – technically Boruto's headband and the headband of his counterpart in that strange alternate dimension – reminded him of all the old times he spent fighting alongside Team 7. Repressed feelings of nostalgia aside, it was something that no longer suited him. It now had a new master, a better owner. If it used to represent the paths diverged, he hoped that it would now represent whatever Boruto, whatever Naruto believed – and wherever his world and the other world converged.

Momoshiki was, to his horror, gradually gaining the upper hand as the deity wielded a strange, fluid substance that ate straight into Naruto and Sasuke's defences. It eradicated the very essence of existence; it embodied destruction.

Sarada pummeled her fists into the ground, fists that were also coated with electrical chakra, and below them, the earth splintered, causing shockwaves to emanate through the entirety of the neighbourhood. Boruto gaped at just how awesome his friend's display of power was; he would not wish to anger her in the future. It caused even Momoshiki to momentarily falter and miss an attack on Naruto and Sasuke.
Together, Boruto and Sarada rushed to the scene. Boruto threw an explosive kunai towards Momoshiki, which barely made a scratch but drew his attention away from bombarding Naruto with blasts of Dust Release, who was recovering from a temporarily disintegrated hand.

The fight was going nowhere. Firstly, Boruto theorized, they needed to extinguish Momoshiki's Rinnegan, or at least render it incapacitated, which would widen the possibilities of options used in the fight. Then, they would have to find a way to quite literally annihilate Momoshiki from existence – last time, it had been done with a gigantic Rasengan, but Boruto wasn't sure whether the exact replica would work.

[Careful, Boruto. You nearly just got hit by that weird gooey substance.]

"Hey, asshole," Boruto yelled. "Why don't you come after me!?!"

Momoshiki turned around, irked. "If you're really so keen on dying…"

"Get away from him!" Naruto shouted and threw himself in front of Momoshiki's way, quickly creating an army of shadow clones that immediately began attacking the enemy.

"Thanks Da-Naruto!"

"Hey, kid, you can call me dad! Man, the idea of me as a father seems so weird. I mean, here I am, kind of not alive but stuck in the age of seventeen. But here you are, as that weird kid from the other world-"

"Hey! I'm not weird!"

"That's not what I meant!"

"I'm not weird," Boruto repeated flatly.

"Of course, you are technically my son!"

"You're technically only four years older!"

"Yeah, but we're talking hypothetically here!"

"Fine, fine – but I'm not calling you dad."

"But I will always be your dad!" Naruto declared triumphantly with a wide grin that most certainly did not add to his paternal qualities.

"Heh. Okay, in spirit, if not in actuality."

"Man, all of this made me wish that we had gotten to know each other more. Was I totally awesome as a dad in the other world? And the best Hokage ever?"

"You were a great Hokage, and – and the best dad in the world," Boruto finished with a strange lump in his throat, remembering the days he used to spend cursing his father for neglecting his family in favour of his job. It wasn't until that day with the disastrous chunin exam tournament, the day when he was disgraced in public by his own dad, the day when the stadium burned, wailing voices of terrified spectators and crying voices of young child emanating through the place as mighty columns crumbled and smoke and fire permeated the air, the day when, for a brief moment, his world went up in flames as his very own father had sacrificed his life to save the village, to save Boruto.

"Wow," Naruto merely replied, his look suddenly pensive. He was shortly jolted out of his reverie
by another one of Momoshiki's nefarious black orbs.

Momoshiki was finishing off the remnants of the shadow clones, dispatching them one by one as if they were nothing but petty toy soldiers. "I guess I'll just have to dispose of you then. After all, container of the Kyuubi, you were what I came after. The rest of them – a mere afterthought."

"You were what I came after."

Momoshiki's words struck a chord within Sarada.

[The Kyuubi.]

If Naruto's reanimation had been undone, there would be no Kyuubi for Momoshiki to extract and then everything would be sort of fine, even if it meant that they would still have to deal with an angry deity. Suddenly, it clicked.

"Mitsuki!" Sarada called to the person in the closest proximity to her. "I get it! I think I've figured it out!"

"Sarada! What's the matter?" Mitsuki answered as he narrowly pulled Kakashi out of harm's way, barely missing a deadly hit himself.

"The Kyuubi," Sarada said under panted breath. "Momoshiki is after the Kyuubi, which is sealed within Naruto-sama and whose reanimation could technically be undone. I've read it somewhere – in some scroll about experimentations with jinchurikis in the Mist back when it was called the Bloody Mist, not that I approve of any-"

"Sarada," Kakashi urged, "Get to the point."

"Okay," Sarada repeated, "So basically when jinchuriki dies, the person that is supposed to host a tailed beast and anchor it into the world of the living, the tailed beast temporarily… vanishes too. We need to undo Naruto-sama's reanimation. It's the only way we can at least buy some time-"

"If only it were that easy."

"Okay," Sarada repeated, "So basically when jinchuriki dies, the person that is supposed to host a tailed beast and anchor it into the world of the living, the tailed beast temporarily… vanishes too. We need to undo Naruto-sama's reanimation. It's the only way we can at least buy some time-"

"If only it were that easy." Sasuke's voice. All throughout the fight, Sarada had avoided direct interaction with the cold man that could have been her father. He seemed so different, so estranged, so different from the man she knew. It was positively disconcerting. More than that, it did not seem like he wanted to talk to her either – though he had taken a strange liking for Boruto. It was all so confusing to her. "It was Orochimaru who executed the process of reanimation. Though I believe I do possess the ability to exercise control over his current being. It can be done, but-"

If his voice didn't sound so detached and steady, Sarada would have vouched that he was in the process of a mild mental breakdown.

"I can try," Mitsuki volunteered. "I – long story but I've known Orochimaru in my world for a long time and he's taught me a few sealing tricks. Plus, I might have nicked a few interesting masks in addition to all the books I took for Boruto and I looked through their inner workings and -"

"Stick to the topic." Sarada rolled her eyes.

"Point is," Mitsuki continued. "I might know what to do."

"So," Kakashi said, "We get Naruto and Mitsuki out of the fight, all while we try to distract Momoshiki's attention. Naruto and the Kyuubi would have to…" - Kakashi paused, mildly painful of contemplating a second goodbye with his beloved student – "… excuse me, depart the living world.
Then we at least guarantee that the Kyuubi won't be instantly made into chakra pills."

"Basically," Sarada concurred.

"This better work," Sasuke muttered. "I'll switch places with Naruto. Be quick." The man shut his eyes and when he opened them, his figure vanished, being replaced by a slightly baffled Naruto.

"Hey! I was just having some quality father and son time with Boruto. Well, maybe more like brotherly time, considering we're basically only four years apart," Naruto protested exasperatedly, though Sarada could tell he was not entirely serious.

"We're sorry Naruto," Kakashi apologized before going on to explain things. "But you see, the situation here is dire. Momoshiki is after Kurama in you and we need to, first things first, stop him from extracting Kurama and making it into a powerful chakra pill. To do so requires your departure from this world. Mitsuki claims to have figured out a way."

Naruto nodded understandingly, not interrupting, not budging the slightest. "I know… the dead ultimately should stay dead, that much I know. I – thank you, for allowing me to see my loved ones again in my own free and conscious mind. And thanks for, well, material for imagination. Heh. I wonder how everyone in the realm of the dead would have reacted to the possibility of me being Hokage. Well, goodbye Kakashi, goodbye Sarada. Mitsuki, let's go!"

Mitsuki gave him an inclination and the two sped out of the battlefield, hoping to do their part in protecting the world.

"What just happened?" Boruto asked Sasuke as the man instantly switched places with Naruto.

"I'll explain later," Sasuke replied. "In the meantime, let's take him down."

"Shannaroo!" Sarada yelled as she punched the ground again, causing flecks of debris to fly towards Momoshiki.

Kakashi entered the fray too, tossing a giant shuriken in Momoshiki's direction.

"The Rinnegan," Boruto whispered to Sasuke. "We need to get rid of it to get rid of him."

"Or alternatively," Sasuke suggested, "We could skip through that and simply get rid of him."

"Our options would have been limited," Boruto argued, "Without his Rinnegan he is vulnerable to ninjutsu attacks."

"Very well." Sasuke frowned. "And you're thinking of doing it."

"Yes," Boruto said. "Just watch me."
"Lord Hokage," Mitsuki addressed Naruto before him, trying to keep calm. They had rapidly shunshinned away from the scene of battle and he was short of breath. A persistent feeling of stress nagged him from the back of his mind; it was all up to him now to buy some time for his friends. He needed to succeed in his endeavor.

He had willingly followed his friends Boruto and Sarada into this world, his teammates, people he would consider his family. Orochimaru, his father, had been a complicated man; at times, Mitsuki wondered just what was the purpose of his existence. Why had Orochimaru created him and deemed him a son? This, his parent had provided no concrete answer – he needed to search for the meaning himself.

Sometimes, Mitsuki felt that his entire life had been centered on his search for meaning, his quest to carve out his own place in the world. Boruto had been his first sign of light, the sun whose brightness his moon would reflect, his first true friend and someone Mitsuki decided he would follow to the end of time. Sarada was a close companion too, especially after being placed into the same genin team as him. She always trusted him to confide her feelings to and he had been a shoulder for her to cry on, like a brother.

Sometimes, Mitsuki saw himself as the lubricant of the Team, someone who made things easier for his two other friends, who often clashed, as evidenced by their adventure in this parallel world. Each one of them had perfectly valid opinions, yet those opinions contradicted each other and Mitsuki was left alone in the middle. There were instances when he felt rather helpless (when Sarada ran away crying as Boruto was whisked back to their world and when his team disintegrated right before his eyes), but he knew it was his job to carry on.

Loyalty. Orochimaru had remarked with amusement during one of Mitsuki's excursion's to his parent's lair that Mitsuki's defining trait had been loyalty and dependability. Perhaps that really was the case.

"There's no need to call me Lord Hokage – heh," Naruto replied with a grin, snapping Mitsuki back to reality.

"Right," Mitsuki explained, "So I'm going to try and undo Edo Tensei. It's a signature jutsu of my parent so I might have some affiliation with it – I've picked up a thing or two. Plus, you were resurrected by the hand of my parent and since I'm his son I-

"Man Orochimaru is your dad?!!" Naruto looked aghast. His eyes were bulging in surprise, his mouth wide open.

"Yes, yes. Long story short, he created me from a test tube," Mitsuki replied.

"But, why?" Naruto frowned, puzzled at the idea of Orochimaru – out of all people – becoming a parent.

"He… I think he created me to see if he was able to feel love, to see whether he was really as far gone as he thought he was," Mitsuki sighed. "Anyways, enough of this. I'm going to try and do the reverse hand signs while" – he reached for a scroll his father had insistently packed – "this scroll diminishes your ties to the temporal world. Weave the hand signs it instructs."

"Got you," Naruto said. "You know, kid, you make me think miracles can happen. Look after
Boruto, will you?"

Mitsuki smiled at him with a nod and began. Naruto followed suit.

A shard of light pierced through the clouds.

"Mitsuki did it," Sarada whispered. "He undid the resurrection." Her mouth widened as she watched a ghostly figure, coated in a golden aura ascend the sky, smiling down on the earth below.

Nearby, Kakashi flashed a sign of relief, too brief and too terse to be called hope.

"Yes! Yes! Mitsuki did it!" Boruto shouted in excitement.

Good luck, Naruto seemed to say, finally at peace.

"Man, I always knew he-"

"Pay attention!" Sasuke chided as he threw Boruto out of harm's way again, his voice quivering. Sarada was surprised by the sound of it. Had he been any ordinary person, she would have deemed it a sign of severe emotional distress. "This is no child's play – your friend may have won us a moment of reprieve, but we are nowhere close to victory."

"For once, foolish human, you are right," Momoshiki snarled, trembling in rage, evidently indignant at the unfolding of recent events. He whipped out a fluid rope, made of a dark and ominous substance, and aimed it at the four: Sasuke, Boruto, Sarada and Kakashi. "I will just have to kill you all first. In time, the Kyuubi will re-appear and it will be mine. There will be no more pestilent, low-bred creatures to stop me then!"

"Careful! This is a variant of Dust Release that is more flexible than the original; it extinguishes everything in its path!" Kakashi cautioned as he jumped out of the way.

The substance was taking a tentacular form, closing in on Sarada and Boruto as they ran frantically to escape its clutches. Sarada felt the suffocating presence surrounding her and Boruto in all directions until there was simply nowhere to go.

"Fire Style: Fireball Jutsu!" She shot a ball of flames in hopes of blocking its encroachment. Her attack was vaporized in an instant.

The end was nearing.

Death.

Was it her time now? Boruto's time?

How awful must it be for Mitsuki, to send one person into the afterlife and then to come back and see his friends all gone?

And then she was swept up – Boruto too – by a purple, ethereal figure, being enveloped by its entirety. At its centre was Sasuke Uchiha, maintaining a stoic mask. But this time, it was cracking, crumbling and collapsing.

"Both of you! You could have died!" He appeared angry with both of them, though his attention was mostly directed at Boruto, which puzzled Sarada. This was the first time he had deliberately acknowledged her existence. She did not know what to make of that. He was not her father and she was not his daughter.
"And why would you care?" Boruto seemed to speak her mind.

"We need to… look, fact remains that neither of you are from this world and – and it's only fair if both of you are left unscathed by this fight."

Hardly a coherent or – in Sarada's view – honest explanation. But she did not follow up for answers and elaborations.

"Sasuke, let me do it. My plan will work," Boruto argued as he stood by Sasuke within the man's Susanoo, as it clashed fervently with Momoshiki, now armored by a lava-coated stone golem. It gave Boruto shivers; it reminded the boy of his last fight with the deity, in his own world. Only here, it was clear that Momoshiki had the upper hand, for he faced Sasuke alone and not the combined might of the famed shinobi duo, the Nanadaime Hokage and his faithful shadow.

"It's too dangerous," Sasuke rebutted bluntly.

Sarada shot a puzzled look again and then plunged into deep scrutiny.

"Didn't you say something about ninjas needing to take risks?"

"I don't ever recall saying anything of that sort to you."

"Well, your Susanoo looks like it won't last very long. If we keep going like this, we're probably going to lose."

And it was true. The edges of the purple giant were blurred, melting under the string of attacks by Momoshiki, which were of a caliber of intensity akin to Kaguya, who had dispelled Sasuke's Susanoo with ease before. Soon, they would be overwhelmed. Soon –

Its head shattered.

"Well, screw this. This is our last chance."

Sasuke took a deep sigh and finally relented. "If you really are so willing…"

Beside him, Sarada frowned. Boruto wished he could tell her what he meant to do, but she would likely disagree with his actions and try to stop him. There were times when the stakes were simply insurmountable, times when they demanded secrecy. Instead, he took her hand, squeezing it tight as her sweaty palms touched his own – and then dropped his grip resolutely, before she could make sense of his decision.

"I'm ready."

Sasuke watched gravely as Boruto seemingly propelled himself forward into doom's arms, as the boy threw a giant shuriken into Momoshiki and it was evaded with an ease that almost spoke of mockery. Yet in its shadow hid another shuriken, which struck Momoshiki and bruised him, although he seemed more irked than hurt.

In retaliation, Momoshiki viciously thrust the black, ominous substance – the same kind Obito Uchiha once used to fight him and the Shinobi Alliance all these years ago – into Boruto's heart, attempting to liquidate the boy's existence once and for all. Though the boy had revealed his plans to Sasuke beforehand, seeing Boruto's figure disappear in a puff of smoke brought a comforting sense of relief.
In a split second, the shuriken that Momoshiki originally dodged transformed into Boruto – the boy really took it after his father – and slammed into the god. Boruto took out a kunai and stabbed the Rinnegan embedded in Momoshiki's hand with all his might.

(Now, it was his turn.)

Momoshiki screamed and screeched in anger and agony, casting Boruto aside in an attack infused with malicious, destructive chakra.

Sasuke hurled a concentrated spear of lightning at Momoshiki.

(The boy collided with the ground and Sasuke winced as he heard a cracking sound. The bleeding, the broken bones, the suppressed groans – Boruto was hurting.)

Sasuke continued his assault, this time unmitigated by the inability to use ninjutsu, striking Momoshiki's gut with a sword coated with the black flames of Amaterasu.

(Boruto struggles to get back on his two feet.)

"Is this the best you can do?" A sneer, a glint of amusement in Momoshiki's eyes. "For all the things that you've done, all the distance that you've come, all the power you've acquired, you're just a human being, a mere dirty mortal."

Sasuke felt a sensation of pain pulsate through his body and looking down in horror, he realized he had been pierced through his torso by a long rod made out of bone. He cursed internally out of frustration. Momoshiki was an Otsusuki, just like Kaguya and he should have anticipated this move. Warm blood seeped through his attire, saturating it and dripping down bit by bit. [Is this how life bleeds away?]

"I… I think I'm okay with that," Sasuke replied with a smirk, fighting away feelings of fear and resignation.

Suddenly, a bright, blinding light assaults his vision and Sasuke turns around to see Boruto charging forwards, leaping into the air with a swirling blue orb, still growing in size. The Giant Rasengan.

[Why, of course. Like father, like son.] Sasuke thought he could see a faint trace of Naruto's ghostly arm, helping Boruto mold the jutsu and guiding the attack.

Sasuke switched places with a stray kunai lodged on the ground as the Giant Rasengan collided with Momoshiki. Momoshiki stood ground, conjuring a dark swirling ball of his own. Boruto's face squirmed in pain as he held out tenaciously. Nonetheless, Sasuke could see that the boy was being pushed back second after second. It was a good thing that Momoshiki was sizably wounded by his own attacks before this, with it reducing the god's abilities and raw strength. Otherwise, Boruto would have been easily overwhelmed.

Out of the blue, Sarada jumped into the scene and infused her chakra with Boruto's Giant Rasengan, coating it with electricity.

"We'll do this together, Boruto," she said, determined.

Sasuke felt himself smile as he witnessed the two – no, three, for he was sure that Naruto stood beside them, lending them strength - of them struggle against Momoshiki, their movements progressing in perfect sync. With Sarada's aid, they were edging out ever so slightly, forcing Momoshiki back until, finally, he could no longer withstand their collective might.

Then they struck Momoshiki, dissolving the god's essence, sending him flying higher and higher into
the sky until whatever that was left of Momoshiki's figure reached the end of Earth's atmosphere and disintegrated utterly.

Panting and bleeding, stuck in a situation even worse than Sasuke's, Boruto collapsed onto the ground. Sarada rushed forward to help him and, hands coated in green chakra, tried to heal him.

Biting his lip, Sasuke dragged him to the boy's place. He could tell that Boruto's life was fading in spite of Sarada's best efforts. The boy's breathing was growing shallower by the moment. It would not be long before –

"He's dying," Sarada croaked. "If only I had known more about medical ninjutsu – if only –"

"What's the matter?" A familiar voice, a woman's voice, rang through the debris.

Sasuke turned around to see Sakura running towards them at full speed.

"Momoshiki's gone. Defeated," Sasuke found himself answering hoarsely as he averted eye contact with the woman.

Sakura froze and surveyed him. He didn't know what to say to her anymore, after all this time.

"You're hurt," she said tersely, frowning.

"I'll be fine," Sasuke replied brusquely, resisting an impulse to stumble. "It's the boy you need to worry about."

Sakura nodded and turned away from him, directing her attention towards Boruto's wounds.

"Even now?" Sasuke heard his old sensei chuckle with wry amusement.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he retorted. "There are clear priorities here."

"That looks like a bad injury," Kakashi remarked pointedly.

"Well, the boy is dying, if you're astute observations could tell," Sasuke snapped. He couldn't fully fathom his source of irritation. Combined with the sharp ache digging into his torso, it made him feel at lost. Indeed, his own wounds were recovering at an abysmally slow pace, yet he was not in a situation as fatal as that of Boruto's.

"You're still as stubborn as the day when I first met you," Kakashi said.

"I'm actually not so sure about that." Sasuke sighed. "Sometime… too often, I – never mind. It doesn't – it – you know what I mean." He gazed into the eyes of Kakashi with an almost pleading look. The man did not seek further elaboration, much to Sasuke's relief.

And then his heart fell with a thud.

Boruto's chakra had vanished.

Sarada's internals screeched till breaking point. Petrified, she could not process what was happening in front of her.

Boruto had stopped breathing.

Boruto's heart had stopped beating.
Even Sakura Haruno - the most famed and skilled medical ninja this world and hers - had not been able to prevent this.

"Sarada, I'm so, so, so sorry, but…"

"He's not dead is he?" Sarada interjected Sakura. "There's still some hope, right? There has to be!"

"CPR. I haven't tried CPR yet," Sakura acknowledged. "I can use it to manually preserve intact brain functions. There's no guarantee that it will be successful."

"Please… please try to save him." Tears were welling in her eyes. She took a deep breath and tried to steady her emotions. "Please…"

At first, he saw nothing.

He stretched his hand out and was greeted by darkness. It engulfed his surroundings.

Then a road emerged in front of him. Following it seemed to be the only option. Boruto shrugged and began walking.

Was this how dying felt like? It was strangely anti-climactic. Life did not end with a swell of explosions; it simply petered out. He had done what he was meant to do when, with Sarada's help, he vanquished Momoshiki. [Sarada.] Now, what greeted him was oblivion. It came slowly. Boruto remembered the precise moment when his eyelids finally gave up their struggle and crashed down. His last sight was Sakura hovering above him in concern and Sarada congealed in a silent scream.

And then what?

His thoughts turned to Sarada. Without her, he would not have succeeded. Funnily enough, had he listened to her at the very beginning, when he had so impulsively opened the forbidden scroll, he would not have been here. He would be at home, in his world, with his family, happily complaining about his father to the amused and exasperated old man himself, all while his mother chuckled and his sister bounced around, eager to share her stories about the Academy, to which he would roll his eyes and say something along the lines of 'been there, done that.'

But he was here, wandering along a seemingly aimless road to nowhere. The mélange of turbulent emotions, of loss, made him numb.

A fireplace. A man with a mane of long, white hair seated around it with sticks of toasted marshmallows. He had red marks on his face. He hummed good-naturedly to some throwback tune Boruto recalled from his father's godawful CD collections.

"Excuse me?" Boruto prodded gently as he approached the man. "Do you know… where we are?"

The man looked at him and grinned. "I'm sure you already know where we are."

"I'm dead. I know. And so are you. But is this really the afterlife? I mean, you're the only person I've seen around here and it's kind of weird, I don't mean to offend anymore. Also, who are you?" Boruto blurted out a string of thoughts.

"Well, this is only the beginning of afterlife for you. I've seen the other places, but… something seemed to beckon me here," the man explained. "And the name's Jiraiya, pleased to meet you."

"You're Ero-Sannin?!"
"Not you too!" Jiraiya sighed exasperatedly.

"Hey! It's an affectionate nickname. My dad talks about you a lot! Sorry, I forgot to introduce myself: I'm Boruto, Boruto Uzumaki," Boruto said frantically, excitement pumping through his veins (if veins were still a thing in afterlife.) He reached out his hand for Jiraiya to shake it. "Also, I don't think I'm really from this world. You see, what happened was that I'm an idiot and I opened this scroll that took me to an alternate dimension and then shit happened and I died – which, by the way, was the right thing to do at that specific moment considering-" Boruto paused, realizing that he was being a little too loquacious "- I'm sorry I don't usually talk this much."

Jiraiya guffawed. "You're just like your father." The man looked at Boruto wistfully. There seemed to be a trace of melancholy in that look. Then, Boruto remembered the fate that befell Naruto Uzumaki in this world.

"If I could get one stick of dango every time someone said that, I'd be as fat as Chocho in no time," Boruto said with a cheeky glint. "Oh sorry, you've probably never met her. She's cool."

"I've met more people than you think I have; I've just met her father not too long ago."

"Right. Okay. And may I ask, why are you here?"

"To put things in uncomplicated terms, I wanted to speak to you," Jiraiya explained enigmatically as his eyes glimmered.

"Uh huh. About what?"

"The prophecy, Boruto. The one where you feature." Jiraiya's expressions turned more serious, though his demeanor remained jovial. "It... it is simply fact that sometimes, prophecies don't always go as we anticipate them. Yes, you may have heard about the Children of the Prophecy from your father. Yes, your father and Nagato, another student of mine, played seminal roles in bringing forth a revolution in the shinobi world. But it did not stop there, as you may have seen."

Boruto nodded.

"And then, another prophecy manifested itself. It was no longer about salvation or destruction. Saving or dooming. The lexical disparities, though seemingly minimal, meant something completely different. Perpetual darkness was the apocalyptic outcome, what would have happened if you had failed. And you didn't."

Suddenly, it all made sense. Everything clicked in Boruto's mind.

"Boruto, the perpetual darkness alluded to by the prophecy, it didn't mean Sasuke's tyrannical rule over the continent. It literally meant the end of the world, or this world at least, the absorption of all life, energy, chakra and the slightest signs of vitality by Momoshiki. The reason why this prophecy was given after Naruto's death was that with him gone, the odds of this world surviving the Otsusuki's were diminished. It beckoned a dramatic intervention of fate."

"And the price I paid was my life," Boruto finished the old man off. "Well... I suppose there are less glorious ways to die." He sighed.

"Now, onto something less gloomy. How are my Icha Icha Series perceived in your world after all these years?" Jiraiya's tone changed into one of childish excitement.

"They have ... aged remarkably well?" Boruto suggested. "I know that Shikadai, my friend, secretly reads them. Kakashi is, as always, a devoted fan."
"Good old Kakashi."

"Indeed, he's even started a continuation series after his retirement."

"I've always liked him. Marshmallow?" Jiraiya offered Boruto toasted smores.

"Mmmmm… delicious," Boruto said, munching his way through. "Honestly, not bad for afterlife."

"Stay with me here for a while, Boruto, I'd like to know more about Kakashi's new series."

"Sure thing, Ero-Sannin."

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"I'm sorry Sarada, at this point, nothing could be done," Sakura apologized, morose and remorseful.

It wasn't as if Sarada's heart suddenly sank, for it had been at rock bottom for the past two hours: ever since Boruto teetered on the edge of death and subsequently lost his life. More than anything, she was simply dead and empty on the inside. She did not blame the woman next to her for failing to save Boruto; she saw what was coming a while ago, yet refused to accept this new harsh and cruel reality.

"It's okay, you did your best. I just… he's really gone."

"I know how you feel," Sakura noted understandingly. "I've experienced this far too many times."

"It must have been hard for you."

"It will get better for you. But, by all means, mourn now, mourn for all you can and then remember him for the good friend he is."

"Boruto, Sarada!"

Mitsuki returned.

"Mitsuki!" Sarada ran into his arms and hugged him. "Thank goodness you're okay. I don't know how I'd feel if I had lost two of my closest friends."

"Wait – Boruto, he's-"

"He's gone, Mitsuki. He's gone. There's nothing we can do about it." Sarada gulped.

Tears should have come flowing down, but they didn't. Tears now seemed an inadequate expression of her grief, almost inappropriate.

"There's still something that hasn't been tried," Sasuke's heavy voice interrupted Sarada's thoughts. She ceased her embrace of Mitsuki and faced the man who could have been her father. Calmly, he gave her a sad smile.
The soothing chakra infusion by Sakura's healing slugs eased up Chocho's fatigue. She was surrounded by dirt and rubble as in the distance, beams of energy flashed and a ray of white like shone through the sky. Then, she saw a figure being blasted upwards at top speed, disintegrating into the atmosphere. Nearby, Konohamaru's brows furrowed and then, finally, he breathed a sigh of relief.

"I think they did it," he whispered.

The last few days had been hectic: losing her father, seeing the very fate of the world hang in balance, witnessing the destruction of thousands of homes and the plight of thousands of civilians. Still, what was happening around her gave her a strange feeling of hope, which managed to reinvigorate her.

"Shall we tell the civilians it's safe out here?" Chocho suggested.

"Yes, get them out of their hiding places," Konohamaru answered.

In the midst of the rubble, Chocho could sense the beginning of a new dawn.

Rinne Tensei no Jutsu– it was the only way, his only chance. He had to do it.

This time, he looked at both Sarada and Sakura straight in the eye. "I believe I can resurrect Boruto. I'll do it."

Sakura steadied her gaze at him and asked, "But why?"

Sasuke took a deep breath. For the first time in years, emotions that he deemed long dead coursed through him, those figments of tenderness and concern he felt for a certain pink-haired ninja, buried deep within his consciousness, swamped by his zeal for vengeance and revolution - now all of that was resurfacing.

Apologies were pointless; he had done her too much damage, destroyed her life and everything she believed in and, in the process, destroyed her love for him as well.

He wasn't sure if he had ever loved her. Back when they were teammates, he certainly cared for her and saw the potential seeds of something more. Yet with his defection, he threw it all away and never looked back. Even when he tentatively sided with his old village against Obito and Madara and felt something for her, something he could not fully explain, he suppressed it all with ease. He never thought his life needed romance.

"Sakura," he began saying. "Since meeting Boruto, I have felt things I thought I would never feel again. You probably won't understand this. He made me see things, different possibilities and different ways. A different world. Anyways, you are completely justified in your hatred and disgust of me – that I know and there's no longer anything I can do. I have wronged you, Kakashi, Naruto and everyone else in Konoha too much in this life. And Sarada," he said as he turned to face the girl. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry you have to see me like this, see someone who looks so similar to your father commit such heinous crimes. You and Boruto, I wish both of you the best in the future. Sakura, I only ask that you let me save this boy."

"Sasuke..."
"Please."

"I won't interrupt you."

"Thank you, Sakura. Look…"

He weaved the ram hand sign.

"… whatever happens, you will do well. You deserve to."

And then the snake hand sign.

A blinding green light enveloped his presence.

"And so Aiko's boyfriend turns out to be gay, which breaks her heart – but, but she then falls in love with her brother and undertakes the historic mission of finding a suitable boyfriend for her ex. He ends up with the man selling dangos on the street," Boruto recounted triumphantly, not realizing that the fact that he remembered so many details within Icha Icha Boy Love could give Jiraiya the wrong impression. "But there's a whole tedious story behind it. Aiko comes up with this massive, elaborate plan that involves her dressing up as a fake bandit and attacking her ex next to the dango stand. Then there's the trouble with her ex – sorry his name is Taki, yes Taki – Taki's family."

All throughout the process, Jiraiya nodded, intrigued. "And the… action?"

"Oh don't ask me about the action! You know I don't read about this kind of stuff!" Boruto yelled defensively. "By the way, the one book of yours that I liked was about how Suzuki, the poor civilian boy, wins the Daimyo's daughter's heart. That one was good. I mean, I skipped all the parts about how nice her… assets were – but the rest was great. Yeah."

"Oh, really?" Jiraya eyed him skeptically. It was almost accusatory.

"Totally! What kind of person do you think I am?!!"

"A young, fledgling boy on the cusp of puberty," Jiraiya remarked with a twinkle in his eye.

Boruto scoffed.

And then he sensed something seismic, a path being forged in front of him, leading him somewhere – somewhere out of here? "Jiraya," he turned around to the elderly shinobi, puzzled, "What is the meaning of this?"

"Looks like you're not dying after all." Jiraiya winked. "It's been nice meeting you, Boruto Uzumaki."

"Do I… just step on the path?"

"Yes, Boruto – that's precisely what you do."

"Okay. Okay. I think I got this."

He was floating – or at least that was the impression he got whilst treading on the road back to life. It was like an invisible hand was lifting him up, guiding him back to earth. Step by step, Boruto felt closer and closer to the temporal world, more solid on the inside, more alive.

"Hey, kid! Remember, tell Kakashi that moist is a terrible adjective to describe Junichiro's tongue –"
moist is a bad word. Period. Also, Yumiko should not be with Torifu. He's a total jackass!' Jiraiya called after Boruto, which made the boy grin. Even in death, Ero-Sannin was still dedicated to his legacy of erotic literature. "Also, live the best of lives boy – and go after Sarada! Don't worry about her dad!"

Boruto smirked.

Still shaking from chakra exhaustion and his worsening wounds, Sasuke felt life return to the boy as Boruto started to breathe again, chest heaving up and down. His pulse had returned too.

Silently, Sasuke looked up, facing Sarada. "He's back."

Sarada rushed forward and hugged Boruto, being relieved beyond description. Her tense demeanor immediately relaxed. "Boruto… I'm so glad you're okay now. It's all okay now. You'll be fine. We'll all be fine."

"Sarada?" Boruto opened his eyes – those brilliant blue eyes he inherited from his father – and looked around. "I'm alive, right?"

She nodded. "Actually… Sasuke was the one who brought you back."

Boruto tried standing up, leaning on Sarada and using her help. "… Thank you."

Sasuke smiled. "It was the least I could do."

"You're, like, in really bad shape." Boruto scrutinized his appearance and the gush of red that continued to stain his clothes. "Man, Momoshiki stabbed you pretty hard. Are you okay-"

"My chakra is running low – I spent most of it battling the two and on the Rinne Tensei no Jutsu," Sasuke admitted in a manner so tranquil it surprised himself. "I… I don't think I have much time to live. But that's fine."

"Wait, what?!" Boruto, Sarada, Sakura, Kakashi, and Mitsuki blurted out simultaneously.

And then Boruto: "You're joking, right? I mean, that stuff is healable. Sure, it looks like shit but healing it isn't impossible. I mean-"

"Boruto," Sasuke interjected, "There's no need for all that concern from you. I don't deserve it. Maybe this is all fated, for someone like me to die like this, bleeding out to death slowly and tortuously after years of killing others. I've resigned myself to this."

"But-"

"I know your opinion of me is slightly less unfavorable than all the others around here," Sasuke remarked wryly with a chuckle. "But please, it would be wrong for me to remain here and return to Konoha and the Hokage's office, ruling like nothing has happened, like nothing has changed. This is all for the best. I can't imagine the rest-"

"No," Boruto rejected his words flatly. "This is just – this is just stupid. Despite everything, you're really just an idiot."

"You're not going to die," Boruto rebutted. He turned around to Sakura. "Sakura, you're the best medical ninja there is, right? I know you sort of hate this guy's gut but hear me out, okay? Right
now, he's the Hokage of Konoha, which in this world, means he's basically in charge of everything on this continent. He's in the perfect position to put an end to his own regime – without bloodshed. There's been enough suffering, enough killing already. And believe me, if you guys try to start a revolution or upheaval, there will be a civil war across the continent."

The boy paused for a short moment, fixing his gaze into Sakura, who emanated a sort of emotionless emotion in the sense there was far too much thinking going on within her head for Sasuke to discern any clear, lucid strand of thought. He could tell she was conflicted.

"Look, please hear me out, guys. Every single system that has survived for as long as this one survived because enough people benefit from it, enough people feel okay about it – all the bureaucratic officials, petty artisans, ordinary people who are not doing too badly. I've met people, many people who would not take an abrupt regime change kindly – I – I don't like what Sasuke's tyrannical rule was about. Sorry, dude, but you know it. Still, some people are miraculously fine with it. Reconciliation and reform, over bloodshed and revolution – maybe this is the correct way," Boruto finished off.

Sasuke was stunned. He could not believe what he had just heard. What the boy said was controversial, too controversial. He felt his body grow weaker by the moment, his mind fading rapidly. He would not expect Kakashi or Sakura to sympathize at all.

"The boy has a point," Kakashi said with a sigh. "I… I don't exactly like what he says but he does have a point. Hi no Ishi is seen as a terrorist organisation by many civilians, even if some others do view us as freedom fighters, I know this much from years of reconnaissance. Sasuke can be of help if he stays alive."

His vision was blurring. Out of the corner of his eye, Sakura was shaking indefinitely.

"It's okay, Sakura, you don't have to li-"

He felt warm chakra course through his body. He let out a hoarse reply: "Why?"

"Death was the easy path," Sakura muttered under clenched teeth. "Death was too lenient a sentence for a man like you."

Solemnly, he nodded, sensing that strength was returning to him. "What would you have me do then?"

Silence. The bleeding in his torso was ceasing as his breath returned to its normal rate.

"You will step down as Hokage of Konoha – but not before helping us dismantle and reform your administrative bureaucracy. You will tell everyone that you were wrong, that the happiness and liberty you denied the people were all for nothing, that you had finally seen fault in your ways. You will correct all the lies you have said about us. You will free the political prisoners," Sakura instructed imperiously. "And after all this is done… you will leave this world. Momoshiki and Kinshiki may not be the only threats facing us. There is a chance that beings like them still exist outside of this realm. You will keep a look out for them."

"So, self-imposed exile, am I right?" Sasuke chuckled. "That sounds about right. What makes you think I… what makes you think I won't-"

"I know you won't." Sakura brushed off his comments. "And we'll make sure you won't."

Boruto watched incredulously before him as Sasuke conceded with a sigh: "Alright, I will step
down. I will leave this world and condemn myself to a traveler, a vagabond. And to ensure I will never return unless summoned by you people, I will undergo the required sealing rituals."

Perpetual loneliness, perpetual wandering – to Boruto, that sounded like a fate worse than death. Yet perhaps it was only fitting for a man like Sasuke. It was the only way for him to atone for his sins. Still, a nagging sense of pity gnawed within Boruto. In spite of all that had happened, he had come to care for the man in front of him, to a certain extent. Maybe this was why justice can be so brutal.

Sakura was still trembling as she, along with Kakashi, began placing chakra seals around Sasuke as a means of ensuring his temporary captivity. He willingly let them do so.

"Hey Boruto, are you okay?" Sarada whispered into his ear.

"It's all lot to take in. This, all of this," Boruto said.

"I understand," she agreed. She pulled him into a hug and he found himself grinning uncontrollably.

"It will all be fine. Soon, we'll be able to go home."

"I still think you two would make a good couple," Mitsuki interrupted, putting himself in between them in amusement.

"Hey, Mitsuki! Don't be like this!" Both Boruto and Sarada yelled in indignation.

Five days after the battle with Momoshiki and Kinshiki, members of Hi no Ishi and its sympathizers, recently released political dissidents and moderate reformers of the current regime all convened in a momentous convention, which Boruto, Sarada and Mitsuki found themselves participating too. While acknowledging the sheer importance and excitement of it all, there were times when the speeches could get a little long and technical and times when Boruto accidentally dozed. Sarada was not always pleased and Mitsuki always seemed to be rather amused.

One of the convention's first decisions was to declare the continent a federal republic, where the various nations, previously united into one bureaucratic and centralized state, would be given greater autonomy.

Instead of one single Hokage, the republic would be led by five representative leaders each regularly chosen from the five different states: Earth, Wind, Lightning, Fire and Water. (As part of simplifying his rule, Sasuke had made the effort to ensure that smaller nations were absorbed into larger ones.) They would voice concerns for their separate nations. In addition, there would be two co-leaders – which were decided to be Sakura and Kakashi – that would preside over collective agenda of all five nations.

Asides from that, there would be another council filled with representatives all across the continent, who would, together, possess the ability to draft certain laws.

The continental secret police would be disbanded, while the continental army would be replaced by a smaller standing army. During dire times of need, all shinobi and kunoichi would legible to be drafted.

Sakura, along with Konohamaru, had insisted the drafting of a charter of rights.

In the midst of it all, Sasuke Uchiha was nowhere to be seen. With the necessary sealing procedures complete and after his immediate continental decree in stepping down, he had consigned himself to a cell, gazing wistfully out of the window until it was finally time for him to depart.
When the convention had finished, Boruto decided to pay the man one final visit.

"The new system's not perfect," Sasuke remarked after Boruto had recounted the details. "Someday, this republic may find itself paralyzed by all the bickering and debate. At times, people may feel nostalgic for a strong leader. I'm not sure it could effectively mobilize if any outside threats were to attack it."

"No system is perfect," Boruto replied. "And this one sure sounds like a better one to live in – no offense."

"You don't have to keep apologizing for offending me. I'm never offended," Sasuke stated bluntly, albeit with a glint of amusement. "Still, I suppose you have a point. No system is ever perfect. Mine sure wasn't. Something new like this sounds good. I wonder what Naruto himself would think of it all. Maybe the will of firer is destined to live on."

Boruto shrugged.

"I wanted to give you this, Sasuke," Boruto said as he reached out into his pockets for Sasuke's old headband and handed it to the man. "Wear it as a reminder of your ties here. I know your memories aren't always pleasant, but I can tell that this means a whole lot to you. I want you to have it."

Surprisingly, Sasuke did not object. "Very well, I know how stubborn you can be."

"Says you," Boruto snorted.

"Well… looks like your stubbornness was the one that won in the end," Sasuke conceded with a laugh.

"A good thing too." Boruto, pleased, folded his arms with a wide smile.

"Go back to your world, Boruto. Have a great life there. I… I will miss you. There, I said it."

"Well, goodbye old man!"

"Farewell Boruto."

Then, peculiarly, Boruto started hugging the man in front of him. Though hesitant at first, Sasuke eventually started returning it.
"Sakura," Sasuke uttered the name grimly, almost tinged with a sense of wistfulness. He was still bound up with chains and chakra seals, though Sakura knew that they only exercised limited restraints on his power and had he wanted to escape, he would have done so already. Perhaps he was truly remorseful for everything.

"You want to leave now? Do you confirm that?" Sakura asked, minimizing words. She did not want to sound poignant, in spite of the fact that seeing her last teammate leave – even if he became a reprehensible man who committed reprehensible deeds – most definitely made her rather melancholic.

"Yes. I confirm."

"Very well then, Sasuke. I will begin undoing these chains right now and you will transport yourself out of this world."

"Thank you, Sakura."

"You..." Sakura was hesitant to utter the words after. "You do realize that you may never return."

"That is something I took into full consideration. Though it's not as if I had much of a choice," he chuckled in reply.

Something inside her broke. Wild scenarios in her head started dancing around, flooding her consciousness. Endless possibilities, endless different paths.

"Don't dwell too much on what might have been, Sakura." Sasuke seemed to read her thoughts, though she realized she wasn't being very subtle about her expressions in the very first place. She had let her mask down. "You still have a future ahead of you, many things you could do."

"You're such an idiot," Sakura shot back. "Why? Why did everything have to be like this?" She was shaking uncontrollably; she knew it was the wrong moment for this kind of outburst and tried to rein her emotions in.

"Because I ... I lacked faith."

"I can't believe you."

"There's no point in trying too. Look, what matters now is what you do with this... republic you have helped create. Everything is in your hands now. Don't mind me – yes, you can loath me, hate me or miss me, but that's not the point – for I am already history."

"Yes, but there are times when I couldn't help but think about us – what we were –"

"Yet I never deserved you. And you knew it."

Silence reigned between them as Sakura finished stripping away the last set of chains that bound Sasuke's hands.

"Goodbye Sasuke."

"Goodbye Sakura and good luck, good luck with everything."
"Take care."

"I will."

"So," Boruto said as he took a deep breath. "It's time. It's time for us to go back."

His two companions nodded in agreement.

Surrounding them were Sakura, Kakashi, Konohamaru, Chocho, Inojin, Shikadai, Sayuri and many other members of the former Hi no Ishi resistance. Sasuke had already departed for his exile a day ago.

Chocho, Inojin and Shikadai were feeling especially emotional – and relieved, relieved that the weight of liberating the continent was finally being lifted off their shoulders, even if the task of rebuilding had only just begun. Though Boruto had not interacted much with them, Sarada and Mitsuki have formed a considerable friendship with the three, undertaking certain missions and engaging in heart-to-heart talks. No doubt separation would inflict feelings of loss on both sides.

"Thank you, Boruto, Sarada and Mitsuki." Sakura was the first one to speak up, extending her arms and offering an embrace of the three genin from another world. "Without your help, this world would have plunged into the apocalypse and this continent may never have been liberated. We will forever be indebted."

"We've actually decided to build a statue for you three. In front of the new parliament," Konohamaru added. "We've yet to decide a name."

"The super awesome mega-cool dimension traveler trio!" Boruto declared.

"That's lame," Sarada said rolling her eyes.

"Hey!" Boruto protested.

"Truth sucks," Sarada puffed with mischief.

"Well, thanks guys. For not killing us-"

"Boruto…" Sarada rolled her eyes.

"Okay, okay. First, Sayuri," Boruto said, turning his attention towards the bookstore owner, "Thanks for not totally freaking out about us and telling us just what the hell is going on."

"And for leading Sarada and I to Mount Myoboku numerous times," Mitsuki added with a smile, "I know we can be a bit overbearing at times." Then he winked at her; Boruto thought he saw her blush in return. "And Konohamaru, I supposed I really shouldn't have called you sensei, but in reality, you'll always be a sensei to me. It was a pleasure working with you."

"Chocho – thanks for, well, being yourself," Sarada told the plump kunoichi. "You're just as great a person as you are on the other side. Thanks for helping me emotionally along the way. Inojin and Shikadai, you guys too. Thank you for all your hospitality back in Mount Myoboku – and for playing poker with Mitsuki and I. I won't forget what we've all been through." She grinned, before finally saying, "Sakura, you may not be my mother in this world, but now after everything, after all that I can see, you are an amazing woman. Even though I cannot call you my mama, I hope I can call you my friend."
"It's my pleasure," Sakura replied. "Now, I believe that Mitsuki has the scroll you guys need."

"I do," Mitsuki said. "Guys, this is it. We're never coming back."

"Wow," Boruto uttered processing the adventure that took place in the past few weeks, trying to comprehend its magnitude. "Take care guys!

"You too," Sakura spoke for all of them, as a blinding light began to envelop the trio of Boruto (who had begun waving enthusiastically), Sarada and Mitsuki.

"Now," Kakashi instructed as the three vanished from their sight, quite possibly forever, "Shikadai, please tell your parents to attend the council's first meeting in the Sand Pavilion in the Wind Prefecture. The top thing on our agenda is fixing food crisis gripping Sunagakure. As much as I'd like to retire and begin writing a sequel to the Icha Icha Series, there's not a second to waste in running the country. Our work begins now."

It's dusk in the Uzumaki household and Hinata was finishing her final touches on tonight's dinner. She glanced at the four chairs occupying the table wistfully, realizing – not for the first time in weeks – that at least one would remain empty, if not two, for Naruto's job as Hokage was undeniably time-consuming.

Her son was still in that alternative dimension and not a second goes by when her heart does not ache for him. She was, without a doubt, worried to death. Yet her reaction was incomparable to that of her beloved husband's, for Naruto was constantly agitated and feeling helpless, and, many times, she played the role of the comforting wife, reassuring him that everything will be alright in the end - and she did believe that. For some inexplicable reason, Hinata harbored full faith that Boruto and his friends will succeed and return.

And so life continued. Himawari had cried a couple of times, pining for her big brother. There were moments when Hinata and Naruto both descended into despair – yet they would remind themselves what their son was doing on the other side: what Naruto Uzumaki himself would have done back in his younger days. And so they kept on hoping, waiting for Boruto to come home.

A knock on the door.

Then a familiar voice: "Mum, dad, Himawari – I'm home!"

Footsteps, lithe and light footsteps of a little girl, rushed towards the door.

"Big brother!"

Himawari plunged into Boruto's arms.

Hinata's world started spinning properly for the first time in weeks; she would be sure to immediately break the good news to her husband, who was still lodged in his office.

Her son was finally home.

There's nothing like the taste of home.

The first thing that greeted her was the scent of her mother's cooking.

Her mother. Her real mother.
It was all too much for her. "Mama!" Sarada shouted, running towards Sakura, who was still clothed in an apron. Tears were flowing from her eyes.

Finally, after spending weeks away from her world, from all that she knew, from the people she loved, Sarada Uchiha was finally back and in the arms of the woman who raised her. "I missed you so much," Sarada said, choking.

"Oh, Sarada!"

"I'm sorry mama, for causing you any worry. I'm sorry."

"It's all good, Sarada, so long as you are safe and good, I'm happy."

"It's just – I'm so sorry for leaving you in the dark. I can't imagine – I – I'm just glad to see you again."

"It's okay Sarada, everything's all okay now."

"We're just glad you've made it back alive," her father assured her as he appeared from the kitchen. It appears that he had been making dinner alongside her mother tonight, a rarity, considering how he spent most of his time traveling. "Dad!" Sarada gasped. She rushed into his arms, beyond grateful to finally meet her father again – a happy man with a family he loved, contented with what he had in life - after all the trauma and drama in the other world.

"Now," Sasuke said, smiling, "Your mother and I have made tomato soup for dinner tonight. We've made an extra portion just in case you've returned. While we eat, why don't you tell us about all the adventures you've been through with Boruto and Mitsuki?"

Since the trio’s return from the alternate world, the forbidden scroll that prompted the original journey had completely vanished. There were no more reports of its sightings and after being on the lookout for a while, Sasuke Uchiha had confirmed this to the Hokage's office.

The man had speculated that the scroll had already fulfilled its purpose in the world and, as a result, consigned itself to oblivion.

Naruto mostly bought this explanation, except he also harbored the belief that perhaps one day, when the necessity arises, the scroll would once again reappear and play an important role in shaping the course of the worlds.

Three months after they departed from that strange otherworld, nothing much has changed in Boruto's life. He was still a genin because his team had yet to take and pass the chunin exams (the last one had ended without promotion.) He still lived with his family, still went on missions, still hated ramen (or vociferously claimed he hated ramen in front of a very disappointed father) and he was, by all measurements, still single.

Although Boruto would often argue in his defense that, at his age – that is, 14, which he had just turned two weeks ago – singlehood was the common way of living.
Although Boruto did (low-key) attempt to ask his friend Sarada out. He really did try, only to chicken out before the words 'will you go out with me' left his lips. Instead, he merely asked her: "Would you like to have barbeque with me and Mitsuki – Mitsuki will be with both of us, right buddy?" Mitsuki had suppressed the urge to explode internally and had agreed to come along with them.

He was still young, Boruto reasoned. Therefore, there was still plenty of time for him to muster the courage to ask Sarada out. Things could wait. Most definitely. Probably.

Anyways, this was how Boruto ended up at a barbeque restaurant with two of his teammates, recounting for what was the millionth time, his adventures in that alternate dimension.

"We know Boruto, we were there," Mitsuki remarked dryly.

"Not the part where I smashed that Giant Rasengan into Momoshiki. I mean, did you see his face-" "I was there Boruto, remember? I sort of helped you?" Sarada interjected in a tongue-in-cheek manner.

"Yes, yes, yes. But I was super cool, right?"

"Yeah, you were." Sarada was still folding her arms and raising her eyebrows.

"Oh come one! Drop that sarcastic tone? Where's the adulation from you?!"

"Amazing," Mitsuki commented, "This boy manages to defeat a deity – granted, with the help of others – and still, he is afraid of asking out the girl he fancies."

"Gah! Mitsuki! I don't know what you're talking about!" Boruto shouted indignantly, his face turning red.

Sarada put her hand over her mouth as she chuckled a little.

"I'm not hinting at anything…" Mitsuki said, shrugging. "Unless I actually touched a nerve?"

"Nonsense. Absolutely nonsense," Boruto huffed, beating his chest. "I'm perfectly fine."

"Sure you are," Mitsuki suggested wryly. "Sure you are."

"I sure am and please stop making ridiculous insinuations."

"You're so amusing, Boruto," Sarada added, aggravating his feeling of being under assault. "But that's why I like you so much." She burst out laughing. Her face was red too, though Boruto didn't know whether that was from laughing or blushing or a bit of both.

They were almost finished with the meal and he was reaching into his pockets for his wallet, as he had promised him he would pay for everything. Only this time, he had forgotten his wallet, which was probably lying somewhere in his room.

"Shit!" He shouted and stood up abruptly.

"… What's the matter?" Sarada said slowly, frowning.

"I did not bring my wallet! Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry-" "Uh…"
He felt apologetic – and embarrassed, humiliated even.

"I'm so sorry Sarada, Mitsuki! Please forgive me for this heinous act of neglect-

"Hey, kid," a familiar voice sprung from the table behind them. "Need some help?"

A man stood up and approached the trio.

"I'll pay for your meal," he offered.

His face seemed rather familiar; Boruto thought they must have encountered each other, albeit he was unsure where and when. The memory was sifting through his mind, still undetected.

"Um… thanks? Have we met somewhere?" Boruto asked, rather puzzled at the man's magnanimity.

"Oh sorry, I forgot to introduce myself. My name's Takashi and you're Boruto Uzumaki, right? The Hokage's son? I'm a joinin of Konohagakure and, well, I guess I was feeling pretty generous today because, well, I just got engaged to the lady over there." He lowered his voice. "Her name's Ayame and she works at the Konoha hospital. And those two old people there – no offense to old people but they are old – they're my parents. Yup, my ma and pa," Takashi finished off goofily.

Then it hit Boruto. He had met Takashi before and Ayama, for the matter, in that other world. Only here, they seemed more relaxed and carefree – and they were about to get married too. Finally remembering Takashi's recount of the fate of his political dissident parents, Boruto smiled warmly. The two elderly couple were talking, laughing and getting readily acquainted with their future daughter-in-law.

All of a sudden, Boruto felt gratitude sweep through him.

"Thanks, Takashi." He reached out, shook the man's hand and gave a thumbs up, smile widening.

"Also," Takashi said with a wink, "Be bold and ask the girl out," pointing Sarada in a not-so-subtle manner.

"I have ears and I'm not blind," Sarada said, mildly peeved.

"Here's the cash," Takashi whispered as he handed over a stack of notes to Boruto and walked back to his table. "Break a leg."

"Gee. Thanks. Uh… Sarada? After this, you want to come play in the Games Arcade with me?" Boruto asked sheepishly, his voice trailing off.

"I better get going," Mitsuki announced, standing up and heading for the door. "I have important matters to attend to."


"Fantastic," Boruto proclaimed victoriously, smashing his fists into the air.

"Lead the way idiot."
Chapter 30

A/N: And here comes the epilogue! It basically offers some perspective into the future and can be read ambiguously in some ways. You'll see :) 

Konohamaru stepped into his new office as the recently inaugurated co-president of the Republic, stretching his legs as he lodged himself on the chair before his desk. After Kakashi's six-year term had expired, the man had resolved to not seek for re-election and retire permanently, contenting himself with writing sequels to Jiraiya's Icha Icha Series, a long-awaited life goal of his. As a result, Konohamaru ran for election alongside Sakura, who had decided to serve another term. Both were elected with large margins.

It had been six years after the mysterious trio departed for their own world, six years after the continent was finally freed from the yoke of dictatorship.

A lot has changed since then.

Sasuke Uchiha or simply 'The Hokage,' as many citizens still referred to in fear, received blistering critiques for his brutality, unnecessarily repressive methods and cynical ideology from all strata of society, old and young, rich and poor, male and female, shinobi and civilian – and yet, paradoxically, he was not entirely reviled. Many had acknowledged the work he had done to unite the continent into one single entity and though many despised the way he achieved it (there still exists some apologists for the former dictator), most believed the Continental Republic, the successor state of Sasuke's dictatorship, should remain in place and not dissolve into various separated former states. In some ways, his legacy persisted.

Out of all the stakeholders of the old regime, the Hyuuga protested the most regarding the change in power. In fact, the potential for them creating conflict was so great that, initially, it was Sasuke who had to deal with them, convincing them that they had not lost much in this new configuration. Yet ultimately, their traditions and special place in society cannot be maintained. A wedge was driven amidst the clan, with one faction preferring to accept the new realities and integrate itself into the essence of the republic, and another favouring open rebellion. With much political maneuvering, Sakura and Kakashi managed to help the former faction gain an upper.

Konohamaru gazed out of the window, overlooking the vast array of construction projects undergoing within Konohagakure, the capital of the Continental Republic. Its fourth skyscraper – and tallest so far – was in the process of being built, so were three new hospitals and three hundred new public homes. Something called a Games Arcade, the first of its kind, was also under work and predicted to generate a pretty decent amount of revenue.

Moreover, in the past few years, there had been an economic boom fuelled by the construction and expansion of railways, which connected disparate parts of the Republic, made trade within it easier and drew people closer and closer together. While before it would take days to commute between Sunagakure and Konohagakure, now it took hours. Recalling his first time riding a train two years ago, Konohamaru grinned. It was truly a marvelous invention.

Tens of thousands of political prisoners had been released, finally getting the chance to live with their families in peace. Food and water shortages in Sunagakure were no longer a regular phenomenon due the elimination of corrupt officials who squandered everything for themselves and patronized on their own subjects – and also because the railways made food transportation much easier. Books were no longer burned and Naruto Uzumaki was finally given a place in history, with
his name, his deeds, and his ideas being taught in classrooms across all of the five autonomous states. Mostly, people seemed happier, no longer afraid and being released from a state of perpetual caution and self-censorship.

Sakura Haruno, once a divisive figure viewed by half of the population as a freedom fighter and half as the commander of the continent's most dangerous terrorist organisation, had become one of the Republic's most revered figures, as many came to admire the way she endlessly and tirelessly dedicated herself to working on the problems it faced, as well as the fact that she was presiding over a period of unprecedented prosperity. Though there had been a few attempts by some men to propose to her, she remained unmarried, preferring the status of singlehood. There was speculation as to whether she kept a secret lover and regarding the identities of the said secret lover, yet no concrete evidence had been produced regarding this matter and this question was soon relegated to the fringes of popular gossip.

Chocho Akimichi had, much to Konohamaru's surprise, married Shikadai Nara. They are now expecting their first baby. Then again, he supposed that opposites do attract – and Shikadai's lackadaisical attitude did provide some balance to Chocho's bombastic demeanour. Inojin was getting engaged to a civilian girl. Konohamaru was feeling old; it felt strange to see the young ones all grown up and married.

He started wondering whether Boruto, Sarada and Mitsuki – those three strange travellers – had settled down on life yet. They seemed to be of age.

~X~

Four years after retiring from his shinobi and political career, Kakashi was enjoying his newfound status as the Continental Republic's most popular author of sappy, romantic novels. He had had enough of politics, politely declining the vast majority of his interviews and, when his refusals weren't enough to deter pesky little journalists, indulged in all sorts of antics like being late and claiming he was "lost on the road of life" or using these interviews as opportunities to promote his new books ("so… will Aina get together with Denki? Tune in for the sequel!")

His sales were skyrocketing, with Out of the Darkness - a grim love story set in a totalitarian dictatorship that featured the turbulent and passionate relationship between young revolutionary seeking to overthrow the regime and an ambitious young woman working her way up the government – topping the charts across the continent. His new series, Icha Icha Makeout, was gaining followers on an exponential level as fan mail flooded his inbox and as his most recent book-signing event saw hundreds and thousands of enthusiasts line up before his eyes. There was even talk about making it into a movie.

Sipping on some tea, the man sighed in content as he watched a few birds fly by his window.

All was going well.

~X~

Less than three years after returning to his own world, Boruto – aged sixteen – finally found the courage to ask Sarada out, properly this time and not under the pretense of wanting to game with her just 'like any one of the bros.' They had both been promoted to joinins recently and were celebrating at a seafood restaurant. She happily agreed and gave him a peck in the cheek, remarking that she would have agreed three years ago and would still have agreed three years later. It would be the start of a long-lasting relationship.

Six years after, Boruto and Sarada made the momentous decision to move in with each other – and
away from their parents. They rented an apartment downtown of Konoha (and fairly far away from their old homes) together. Their parents were feeling emotional, though both Naruto and Sasuke gave their whole-hearted approval. Mitsuki was ecstatic when the news broke to him; he had claimed credit for Boruto and Sarada's ever-burgeoning relationship. Chocho started insisting on being the new godmother of Sarada's children, much to the chagrin of the young woman. Himawari simply squealed in delight and gave her brother a mischievous wink.

Eight years after, Boruto proposed and Sarada immediately accepted. They were married in Konoha in a wedding attended by their families and closest friends. When Sasuke escorted Sarada down the altar, Boruto saw tears in the man's eyes tears of happiness. He promised he would make her happy to the best of his abilities. He thought Sarada looked stunning in her white wedding gown, the most amazing woman in the world, who was not only beautiful but also smart and capable, someone with the potential to become Hokage one day. They kissed and from then on, their lives were bounded together.

Nine years after, Sarada gave birth to their first child, a son they named Itachi, as a way of honoring the uncle Sarada never got to know. As Boruto held little Itachi, cradling the baby - his baby, in his arms, he thought himself the luckiest man in the world.

Eleven years after, they had their second and third children, the twin girls Asami and Eriko, who were identical in looks but different in disposition, with the former being reserved and bookish and the latter being outspoken, boisterous and a little… troublesome in the academy as the years went by, landing in playground brawls and terrorizing boys and girls alike. Thirteen years after came Keisuke, their second son, who resembled his maternal grandfather in looks and his paternal grandfather in his love of pranks.

All the while, Sarada Uchiha continued to rise through the ranks, balancing career and family, becoming a special jonin, a special advisor to the Hokage and a member of the Konoha Council, tirelessly working for the village. Boruto rose with her too, yet opted to join the ANBU for a few years instead of dipping into the more political side of things. He became a distinguished agent, protecting Konoha from the shadows, occasionally guided by his now father-in-law Sasuke Uchiha.

When Sarada ultimately became Konoha's Hachidaiime Hokage twenty years after, Boruto stood alongside her on the balcony of the Hokage tower with their children as the crowds cheered. Itachi, the most composed one out of the four and a recently made genin, maintained a calm disposition, trying his best to look professional, while Eriko initially bounced up and down in excitement before yawning in boredom when Sarada's speech began. Asami, a little shy, blushed at the sight of so many people. Keisuke smiled sweetly (all while plotting how to prank a clueless Konohamaru, who was still running around the plaza looking for his coat.)

Boruto looked down and grinned. Then, he found his thoughts wandering far and wide. For some reason, he started thinking about that strange alternate dimension they stumbled upon all those years ago and the starkly different situation this world was in. Neither he nor Sarada would have been born there, much less their wonderful (and at times, vexing) children Itachi, Asami, Eriko and Keisuke. They would most certainly not be standing here before an excited crowd, surrounded by euphoria. Naruto and Sasuke would not be below, looking up at their children with all the pride in the world.

So many divergences, so many paths not taken, so many lives unlived.

~X~

It has been a decade since Sasuke willingly stepped down as dictator and departed this world.

Sakura Haruno had been a busy woman, overseeing the largest economic expansion across the
continent in recorded history. On a macro-level, lives were clearly improving, people were getting richer – and yet, that didn't mean there weren't any problems. She could sense that inequality had become more pronounced, that illegal activity (especially gambling and prostitution) was rising, that people being wealthier did not necessarily mean that they were happier. While in the long run, she believed the current developments were definitely for the better, she wasn't prepared to accept the status quo as an inevitable side-effect.

Finishing the final bit of paperwork for the day, she shut her eyes and took a deep breath, stretching her arms and yawning.

It was then that she received her first message from Sasuke, written on a special scroll that was able to travel through dimensions, carried by a hawk belonging to the man. She opened it:

To Sakura,

I'll keep this brief.

I just managed to resolve a civil dispute between the Ootsusukis living on the moon. A faction of them planned to attack Earth; the opposing faction that preferred peaceful existence ultimately won out.

I suppose I should explain a little more about them. They're a clan of roughly three hundred members, all descended from Hamura Ootsusuki, brother of the Sage of Six Paths. Ever since Kaguya's defeat, they have been living on the moon, keeping watch. I encountered them during my travels.

From them – and from my wanderings in general – an organisation named Kara has caught my attention. Their activities across different worlds appears to be extensive and insidious, though their motives are yet unknown. I'll keep on my investigation of them; please inform me anything you've heard about them from your world.

All the best,

Sasuke

Taking a long, hard moment to read the message, Sakura finally took out her pen and began responding. She may never forgive the man for all his crimes and all the damage he'd done to her, but at least they can strike up some form of co-operative correspondence, in pursuit of some common goal of security.

She could deal with that.

~X~

This world was one of his favourites.

It was a pocket of untainted space, filled with pristine lakes and streams, fresh foliage and flowers, with strange birds chirping melodically in the distance. An Eden still untouched by signs of intelligent life, without a trace of civilisation.

Exhausted from hours of dimension hopping, Sasuke sat down and then lay on the grass, gazing at the purple sky.

For fifteen years, he had wandered in exile. For fifteen years, he had traversed worlds, unable to return home.
He encountered many things, seen places far and wide. Deserted planets previously ravaged by Momoshiki and Kinshiki, declining centers of life plagued by conflict and disease, infant dimensions where life was still yet to form, thriving cosmopolitan worlds where different peoples and species mixed, isolated planets like his own with their peculiar cultures.

It was really a fitting fate for someone like him, to roam the worlds forever alone.

But was he ever alone?

Still facing the sky, his thoughts turned to his now deceased family, his mother and father, his brother Itachi, who had sacrificed so much in life. They were still with him, they remained lodged in his heart, whether he liked it or not. There was Naruto too, who could never ever leave him, no matter how hard he tried. That persistent, stubborn, frustrating friend, that archnemesis, that one person that was the closest thing he could call a best friend. Nothing could help detach him from Naruto; Sasuke had resigned himself to the fact.

He took out his old headband, something he had often worn in the past few years as an odd symbol of allegiance, a twisted reminder of home. He twirled it in his hands, contemplating. Technically speaking, it wasn't even his old headband, it was the old headband of his counterpart in that strange alternate dimension he never thought would exist, that strange place where Naruto had triumphed in the Valley of the End and he ended up with a family, a true home to return to. It was given, gifted, to him by that boy Boruto, who reminded him so much of Naruto, the father.

He wondered how Boruto was doing now. The boy was now a man of age, probably married and with his own family. Remembering, in the brief, fleeting period when the two worlds intersected, how close Boruto was with Sarada – who would have been his daughter – and how the two intimately co-operated to defeat Momoshiki, Sasuke wondered whether his other self was now the grandfather to Boruto's children.

It was all too funny, too funny indeed, how things turned out for him.

Then, out of the blue, his special communications scroll manifested by his side. It was a note from Sakura, most likely. Reading it, Sasuke was overtaken by incredulity. The woman, now in her third and (as per her words) last term as co-president of the Republic, was summoning him back.

He was going home.

A/N: And this is it! Man, I think I've fallen in love with writing this story so much that I might contemplate on continuing this universe via a few one-shots, though as for what the contents would constitute, I have yet to form something concrete. The only thing I can think of is Boruto meeting alt-Sasuke via a dream lol. Feel free to pitch in some suggestions!

Nowww... onto some Q&As?

1) Is the ending between alt-Sasuke and alt-Sakura something of a nod towards SasuSaku?

A: Nope. For their world, the potential for a loving relationship has long sailed. Too much has happened for them to put the past behind. Right now, they're sort of still corresponding on semi-cordial terms - but that is all.

2) What was the most difficult character to write?

A: Sasuke, without a doubt. I mean, for basically the first 25 chapters, his perspective was a
bit of a mystery. I didn't write about it because I didn't want to reveal too much about his motivations and thoughts - but also because his line of thinking, his code of conduct was just too damn difficult to get right. He sort of adheres to his own set of beliefs on what is right and wrong and in many ways, he did a lot of very awful things - but he wasn't blindly evil. It was all very calculated and planned. Then finally, after chapter 26, a lot of things were written from his point of view because in many ways, this story was about his transformation too, about his realisation of his wrongs and ability to finally see past his own cynicism. Hence his perspective was needed to get some form of resolution - still doesn't make him any less difficult to write!

3) What was the easiest character to write?

A: Boruto. Like, duh. Granted, as I've mentioned before, when I first started this story, I basically treated his character as a blank slate because most of the manga and anime wasn't out yet, which gave me a lot of room for development and explanation. Still, regrettably, I concede that he faints just a little too damn much, gets injured a tad too often and even dies once :D

4) What was my favourite moment to write?

A: I have three actually and personally can't decide between them. The first one has got to be the interview scene between Boruto and (a disguised) Sasuke in Chapter 5. It was just really fun to build the suspense and incorporate the twist of the secretary being the one who's really in charge. The second one is Boruto's meeting with Jiraiya in the afterlife haha. I just loved vacillating between seriousness and silliness (in case none of you noticed) and that scene was just a perfect mixture of both for me, as the two talked about death, fate, the true meaning of the prophecy as well as porn - sorry, the Icha Icha Series - girls and 'fun stuff.' ;) Lastly, I'd say I actually really enjoyed writing about Boruto and Sarada's heated confrontation in Chapter 11 because of the clash of ideas and all that (and all the tension flaring in the air.)

5) Why did I not kill Sasuke?

A: My personal line of reasoning was sort of like Sakura's: death was the easy punishment and he's also the perfect candidate to travel between worlds and look out for sources of danger. Then there's also the fact that him dying was simply too predictable. I guess after all the years of ruling the continent with an iron fist, he ultimately turned out just like his other counterpart sans Sarada and Sakura as family members.

6) Why did I end up pairing Boruto and Sarada together?

A: Because I can :D

7) Why did I not allow Naruto to come to the alternate dimension?

A: It actually took me a long time to think this through. Initially, I thought it would be a pretty good idea for Naruto to come over, chide alt-Sasuke for being a dick basically and work together with the man to defeat Momoshiki OR help overthrow the guy (as back then, I still haven't fully decided which path I would take.) Except, somehow, this seemed like the easy option - like a magical solution to all the problems in the other world. I didn't want that. I wanted the protagonists to actually struggle and deal with things on their own. Mostly, I
wanted to place the focus on Boruto. I wanted him to be the one who eventually convinces Sasuke and plays the crucial role in halting Momoshiki given that he (and Sarada and Mitsuki) were the children of the prophecy. So that's why.

8) What are some of my biggest regrets about this story?

A: Mitsuki Mitsuki Mitsuki. When compared to Boruto and Sarada, I felt that he was really underused. This actually made me feel kind of bad. He's actually, in my view, one of the more interesting characters of the next generation. Initially, I planned on giving him some sort of romance with Sayuri, the bookstore owner - that was eventually scrapped because it seemed so unnecessary. I still had them flirt a little though haha. If you blink close enough you'll see it. If I could redo anything in this story, it would be to write Mitsuki better.

Another source of regret was my limited world-building. I mean, I explained in the last chapter about how I deliberately prioritized advancing the plot over it, but still. I kind of wish I did some more exploration about other places in the continent and the lives of other members of Hi no Ishi, for example. Hmmm... I might explore some of that in potential future one-shots. We'll see.

9) Who was my favourite character?

A: Alt-Sakura, actually. Strangely enough.

10) Why did I bring in Momoshiki and Kinshiki?

A: Two reasons mainly. I wanted to forcefully bring together Sakura & Co. and Sasuke and Boruto with a common foe, compelling them to come to terms with each other and work together to save the world. Secondly, the two were a sort of symbol of just how unprepared the world is for an invasion from aliens, a sign of how Sasuke was so consumed by maintaining his rule and enforcing his rigid sense of peace that he didn't take the threat seriously until it was too late.

11) Is this story some sort of real-world political allegory?

A: Nah. Not really. Sometimes a story is just a story. I actually consider myself a pretty politically moderate person; mostly, I'm just interested in getting to know different ideologies and evaluating them. I prefer discussions as opposed to debates and ahem I'll say no more given how toxic politics can be (from many sides). Any resemblances to the real world are purely coincidental :P

12) Does Kakashi actually end up writing porn for the rest of his life?

A: Oh no. He does so much more than that :D In my head, he's basically become a bestselling author and a respected elderly statesman and someone who is viewed as a bit eccentric. Besides, his books also include er... his personal autobiography which is not really... graphic.

13) What does alt-Sasuke's travels include?

A: Use your own imagination! :)

14) Do I mind if someone ends up using alt-Universe, alt-Sasuke or alt-Sakura as a source of
inspiration for their own stories and one-shots?

A: Not at all. Seriously. It'll be my absolute pleasure, not that I think this would end up happening anyway :D

15) Am I going to end up as a writer? (Question posed by a very kind reading via a PM)

A: Nah. Writing full time just isn't my thing. I prefer writing as a hobby - like on fanfiction. Nonetheless, I'm very very flattered.

16) What does alt-Sasuke end up doing when he returns to his own world?

A: Again, use your imagination :P It's meant to be something that's open-ended. It is whatever you want it to be.

Yup, and that's all! This story is now a 203 paged word document on my laptop. 0.0
A/N: Summer is here! I've got a few weeks before my summer job is due to start so I may linger around a bit longer.

Here's a sort of semi-continued epilogue that I posted in my other semi-continued story/drabble and oneshot collection, the Woes of a House Husband starring Boruto as the stay-at-home husband of Sarada Uchiha.

I just thought I would post it here because it is ... a sort of encounter between Boruto and alt-Sasuke that I promised before!

Boruto, in general, was an individual who was firmly grounded in the present, never dwelling on the past for too long. Granted, this probably stemmed from the fact that child-rearing and homemaking required one's constant attention, providing very little respite for prolonged contemplation. Anyhow, there were not very many things that Boruto needed to linger upon. So far in life, he had not had any major regrets. In fact, if he had been given the choice to relive his life to its current point, he would probably do things the exact same way. All in all, at the age of 37, Boruto considered himself a happy man with a wonderful wife and a wonderful family.

There were fleeting moments, however, when his mind returned to the strange days, weeks and months that his team spent in that alternate universe. It was certainly an odd experience. Everything was so different, so absurd and yet not impossible when one plunged into further reflection. The thoughts it provoked can be a little disconcerting at times. Imagining his father-in-law as a iron-fisted dictator ruling over the entire continent was weird, given Sasuke's contented grandfatherly attitude (except when Keisuke tries to dye his hair) and more measured optimism and wisdom, which contrasted with his counterpart's turbulent internal world and bleak cynicism. Boruto remembered how the man was plagued with power and the agony that came with it, plagued with the decisions and sacrifices he made, plagued with a certain calculated madness. Instability. Nevertheless, in spite of all Sasuke's flaws, Boruto cared about that man - and, gradually, that man came to care about him as well. They developed a bond, a profound relationship of recognition and understanding that made the world a better place.

He wondered how that Sasuke was doing now.

Their last encounter was shortly before the man embarked on a solitary exile from the terrestrial world. He had been condemned to wander amongst various planets and patches of existence, tasked by Sakura with searching, scouting and eradicated threats like Momoshiki and Kinshiki. It seemed like an awful fate, one that Boruto prayed no one else would ever be subjected to.

Boruto never really told his children about that particular episode of his life, not even when little Keisuke begged for more stories and he realised the depleted state of his creative juices. Neither did he share much detail with his other friends Shikadai, Denki, Iwabe, Inojin etc. He could never really put a finger on what was holding him back. Having Sarada and Mitsuki as well as his family (sans most of the Hyuuga clan, for obvious reasons of not wishing to traumatise aunt Hanabi and grandpa with the knowledge) for confiding was more than enough anyway.

It seemed so long ago and yet most details remained vividly lodged in his head.

He had dreams about it, dreams of all sorts of shapes and sizes. He dreamt that he was a member of
Hi no Ishi, struggling through smoke and ash. He dreamt that he was Sasuke Uchiha, the Hokage, looking down at his dominion. He dreamt that he was Sakura, now a co-president of the newly established Republic, submerging himself in policy details. He dreamt that he was a random civilian, toasting to the Hokage's health. He dreamt that he was an industrialist building trains. He dreamt that he was a political prisoner. He dreamt that he was an orphan, whose parents had been taken away by the authorities. He dreamt.

And then one night he had a dream that he knew was special, unprecedented, far too real to be just a dream.

~X~

Stairs. A thousand steps downwards.

He rushed past an older vendor selling some big blue fruit. He broke up, rather apologetically, a kissing couple.

He was a little boy again, running through the streets at night. The buildings around him were decorated with colourful lanterns and posters of casinos, harlots and intriguing substances.

Sekai no Hashi.

A stopping site, a suspended city between worlds. Cosmopolitan, vibrant, exciting and infested with what some may deem as decadence. (Boruto had a far more nonchalant attitude towards it all.) The sky was purple, green firecrackers sizzling through one's vision.

He was holding a scroll. It was very important - the old man had told him so. The dying old man - bleeding from all his knife wounds and burnt from his neck down - who had begged him to take it to the Wanderer.

("It could destroy millions of lives, even eradicate entire populations or species. Our melting pot of harmony is at risk of being disrupted and destroyed." The words were accompanied by an abundance of coughing. "It contains the final instructions to a recipe of a weapon. The Ravagers are after me, they tricked me into concocting this. Told me... never mind. Give this to the Wanderer. Only he can save us all, if his reputation is really as many claim. You'll find him in the Festival of Light, in a stall that serves a strange cuisine called ramen. Here, I'll give you the remains of my fortunes. Go! There is no time!")

They were closing up. If they did, he could kiss goodbye to ever returning to his mother and baby brother.

[Wait, what baby brother? Just how- ]

His feet were laced with chakra, though the experience was draining. It was as if he had just figured out how to do this and his chakra supplies were woefully inadequate to support his abilities.

Kakko. His name was Kakko.

No.

It had to be something else. A flicker of doubt briefly flashed through his mind.

He looks to the left; he looks to the right.

He gazed into a puddle. His purple skin matched the skyline. His tuft of red hair fluttered in the
wind.

His eyes were still as blue as ever.

[Just what was going on?]

[No matter, there was a job to do. Just do it.]

He had reached the ramen stall. He coughed, took a deep breath and belted out the words, "One bowl of Tonkotsu Ramen please!"

While the kindly creature - it appeared to be male, though its skin was green and it had three eyes and was considerably more petite that what the average human - made his ramen, his eyes surveyed the place, keeping a lookout for someone known as the Wanderer.

The Wanderer. He had heard stories about that mysterious man. His feats were legendary, or so Makko, ever the exaggerator and storyteller, said. He was able to single-handedly summon giant rocks from space and flatten mountains. He was able to revive the dead. He was able to conjure deadly black fire. He defeated the dragon that devoured children, who had previously lived below the plane of Sekai no Hashi. He rarely stayed at the same place for more than a moon, though Sekai no Hashi was an exception. He had been to places far and wide, possessing the ability to create portals. He used to be the Sovereign of a plane of existence, or so some insist. Most thought he was more myth than man.

There was a hooded individual who quietly ate on his own. Boruto elected to sit next to him.

"Sir," Boruto asked the kindly stall owner who had just handed him his food, "I was wondering, have you ever heard of someone called the Wanderer?"

There was a tense movement beside him. A slight shift.

"Well, they say he is here. But personally, in my opinion, he sounded more like a figure from an old wive's tale. Too... strange to be true. Perhaps he existed, perhaps he did not. I've certainly never met him," the owner mused on and on, "That's not to say I wouldn't want to."

"Consider that done then," the hooded figure said as he showed his face, giving both of them a small smile. "I'm afraid I don't look very impressive."

Purple eyes with concentric circles. A solemn expression. Some things never change.

Sasuke.

They had met before. Many years ago and many worlds away.

Boruto Uzumaki. He was Boruto Uzumaki when they met. Not little Kakko.

Who was Boruto?

[It is I.]

He was no boy, not literally at least. He belonged to Konoha. Husband to the Hokage, loving father of four, distinguished retired jonin.

"Sasuke," he whispered.

The man turned towards him, sending him a look of perplexity. Then the eyes narrowed. Suspicion,
caution, a calculation of threats, an assessment of actions. His hair was greying, wrinkles were forming in his skin, but he looked as sharp as ever.

"Have we met?" Sasuke gazed at him rather... pensively. Perhaps it had been ages since someone addressed him by his name.

Boruto - no Kakko ignored the question.

[The scroll. Give him the scroll. Don't forget.]

"This is for you," Boruto remarked while handing it over, "An old man wanted you to have this. Something about the Ravagers I guess. It sounded bad."

"I see," Sasuke replied in understanding. Then his expression quieted, as if plunging into deep thought. "It's about sowing seeds for a racial war isn't it? They're racial supremacists of a kind, I imagine. They want to displace the Sovereign's rule. Sorry, I'm not an expert on the affairs of Sekai no Hashi. I've been here about ... eleven times - none of them particularly lengthy stays."

"Man I'm no expert either. Politics makes my head hurt," Boruto said, instinctively scratching his head. He always hated it when Sarada discussed political intricacies at home. Something something the daimyo of the Land of Earth. Blah blah blah.

"Well, kid, I thought that cracks in Sekai no Hashi's racial harmony was pretty apparent, given the recent riots. No?" Sasuke asked, curious.

"What riots?"

"They happened two... three years ago?"

"I was younger then."

"Yes, it would be unfair of me to expect remembrance from you."

Silence.

"So... how are you doing?" Boruto found himself asking.

An enigmatic smile.

"Not too bad, not too good either."

"You like ramen?" Boruto tried to look for conversation.

"Not particularly, but it is so rare for me to find food that reminds me of home."

"Where are you from?"

"Earth. More specifically, this village, no city, called Konoha." Sasuke pointed to his old headband, the one with a scratch in the middle, the one that Boruto had given him years ago. "We're quite isolated from the rest of the worlds. Then again, so are the vast majority of the worlds. This place seems to be the exception, not the rule."

"I see."

"By the way, how did you come to know my name?"
"My apologies," Sasuke quipped as he stood up and held the scroll, "I have a task to attend to at first. Don't worry about what you see."

He activated his Mangekyo Sharingan and set the scroll ablaze with black inferno. It was consumed within seconds.

"The flames of Amaterasu..." Boruto noted.

Sasuke raised his eyebrows.

"That's not common knowledge here. You an avid reader?"

"Oh heck no. It's just... we have met before. We may have met before. I think."

"Very well."

"There's also people chasing me by the way. I managed to lose them for a bit but I don't know how far back they are."

A kunai flew near him. Boruto ducked.

"Your reflexes are not bad," Sasuke mused. "Sorry I just wanted to confirm something, a gut instinct perhaps."

"Boruto Uzumaki," Boruto said. "I... don't know why that name came up. Sorry, I'm being weird."

Sasuke smirked. "How many levels are there in Dinner Dash?"

"99," Boruto replied from memory. "It's dumb I know. No clue why they didn't make a level 100."

"Interesting."

"I think I'm dreaming. I'm not Kakko but I'm also Kakko. I'm Boruto but I'm also not Boruto."

"I... have no remedy for that I'm afraid. Then again, you have survived alternate dimensions, planes of existence, haven't you?"

"Heh. Yeah. Glad to see that you're not completely alone out here."

"I manage."

Angry voices.

"They're here," Sasuke said dully. "Excuse me."

"I can help," Boruto offered.

"No. You're chakra levels are already very low from excessive usage - when one takes into account your current state, that is. Boruto, I thought that after all these years you'd be a little more careful with yourself. I'll be back in a minute." He rushed out of the stall.


"Well that was quick," Boruto huffed as Sasuke returned.
The man shrugged. "They're not dead by the way, just incapacitated by a genjutsu. Law enforcement would arrive soon."

"Your task, this whole thing with the Ravagers, it isn't over is it?"

"Evidently not." Sasuke sighed as if he was used to similar conundrums.

"Everything's going well back home. I married Sarada, who is the current Hokage of Konoha. We have four kids so I'm basically a stay-at-home dad slash community organiser slash retired jonin at the moment. Just... wanted to give you some updates I suppose," Boruto explained in a slight divergence from their previous topic of conversation. He did not know whether this was the last time something like this could happen. "Also their names are Itachi, Eriko, Asami and Keisuke. They-"

"Itachi..." Sasuke said the name with a wisp of sadness.

"Yeah. Sarada named it after the uncle she never got to meet."

"And the rest of the kids, how are they?"

"Well, Itachi's the most well-behaved one. He's also a jonin now. Graduated top of his class. Eriko's a loud troublemaker, kinda like my dad I guess. She defaced the Hokage monument fifteen times. Asami's a bit quiet and shy, kind like my mum when she was little, according to dad. Keisuke is Keisuke. He can be quiet deceptively obedient. He replaced dad's ramen noodles with worms once."

Sasuke burst out laughing. "Now that sounds like an experience." Boruto wondered whether he was playing out imaginary scenarios of being the grandfather to these kids, brats or whatever one should call them.

"Yeah." Boruto grinned. "I plan on going back to work after though. Being too domestic has apparently made me an excellent nagger and control-freak, or so my sister says."

Sasuke's lips quivered with amusement. "That must be something to witness."

"Yeah," Boruto answered before saying, "This is really really weird. Am I like possessing a kid's body or what?"

Sasuke shrugged. "You tell me. There are some mysteries of the world that I will never know."

Sirens blazed outside as footsteps came closer and closer.

"The police are here, Boruto. I'm going to tell them what happened. You, meanwhile, are going to head back home with that cash. Best not traumatize the boy's mother."

"But I have no idea how to."

"I'm sure you'll find a way." A smile. This time, unlike their past encounters, it was not laced with pain or anger or fear or guilt. It was genuine and content too. Strange that the words content should be associated with the man in front of him. "Farewell."

"Bye." He got up from his seat and made his way through the streets.

When he reached the next corner, his world went black.

~X~

"Daddy! Daddy! Daddy! You promised me you'd take me to watch a movie!" 8-year-old Keisuke
was jumping all over his bed.

"Dad! You promised us!" Eriko lunged onto the bed as well and crashed into him.

Asami smiled rather apologetically at the door.

Boruto got up and stretched himself. "Very well then, a movie it is."

A/N: Hope you guys liked this!

Did Boruto and Sasuke really meet? Or was it only in Boruto's dream?

I honestly don't know what exactly inspired this chapter. There are touches of fantasy and ambiguity here and there I suppose. I've always wanted to explore the implications of dreams and how they interact with reality.

What really happened? What did you guys think of this?

Would you like to see more of this - a sequel perhaps? Let me know!

Please leave your thoughts and comments in the review! It would mean the world to me!
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

Here's Part I of the mini-sequel! It can be interpreted as sequel or simply an alternate take on what happens after What Might Have Been. Your choice!

It was two years since that strange dream and, in all honesty, Boruto had not given it much thought. After all, sometimes dreams were just dreams and there was no real point in pondering on them for too long. Moreover, he had maintained the opinion, after hours of impassioned debate with Wasabi and Namida, that psychoanalytic dream interpreters were trashy frauds hell-bent on exploiting irrational fears and insecurities of bored middle-aged housewives (or house-husbands) for money. A slightly out of the ordinary encounter, possibly sliced out of a particularly potent past memory, was nothing worth worrying about. And so, pushing all doubts to the back of his head, convincing himself that all the kerfuffle about Sekai no Hashi (the inspiration probably came from riding trains with Sarada to the Gokage summit in the Land of Iron, yes it had to be) was nothing but nonsense. It had all been a dream, a meaningless trance.

It worked, more or less. Even if his doubts weren't completely wiped out, looking after his kids took up enough time to banish any prolonged contemplations.

Asami and Eriko were recently made genin. The former was placed on a team with Kagami (that awful boy) and Teuchi (someone must have loved ramen more than his father) and Sumire (whose children were, by that time, old enough to allow her to return to work) as their sensei, whilst the latter was placed with her best friend Kizumi and a party boy named Sake (people were most definitely getting creative with names) and under a sensei by the name of Kichirou (who was reportedly an amateur poet with an avid devotion to rivers and lakes and the sea.) Eriko had already completed a C-ranked mission and Asami was about to embark on her first in a day.

Itachi, in the meantime, 17 years of age, was already promoted to a jonin after a string of successful missions and ardent recommendations. During an unfortunate ambush as a chunin, he witnessed the death of a very dear friend and awakened his Mangekyo Sharingan. It was not a pleasant affair, for it was always heart-wrenching to see your loved ones die. After mustering the will to complete the mission - and being one of the three people to survive in a unit that was originally a dozen strong - Itachi immediately ran to his parents and, for the first time in ages, bawled like a helpless child.

Boruto and Sarada, who had her share of the experience of loss back when Boruto 'died' in that other world and in the numerous times when she lost shinobi and kunoichi she cared about in various missions, made sure that they were there for him. He was always the most independent one out of the kids, never needing much attention, always on top of everything and even moving out of their house with 5 other friends a year ago - granted, he was also the oldest - but there were exceptional circumstances for everyone and Boruto understood that. Sarada even allowed Itachi to take a month's break to recuperate. His friends, bless them, also did their job in supporting him. Ultimately, the worst ended and Itachi resumed his usual composed, reservedly cheerful self. Word said that he had gotten himself a girlfriend.

Keisuke was now 10 years old, in the waning years of the Academy and still as mischievous and rambunctious as ever. He had, probably, if Boruto's suspicions were correct, defaced the Hokage monument, painting on the faces of his grandpa, great-grandpa and mother, drawing buck-teeth on
Kakashi's mask, making Hashirama and Tobirama Senju look like drag queens and writing 'big tits' on Tsunade's forehead, which the old woman did not appreciate. And no punishment was sufficient enough to deter the kid to re-offend again. Granted, Keisuke was particularly good at not getting caught (the blame for Tsunade's statue was pinned on a fellow classmate, for example) maintaining a goody-two-shoes facade, only showing his true troublesome nature to his family and close friends. Shino-sensei reported to Boruto, during parents evening, that the kid was nothing like his sister Eriko. He topped the class, cleaned the room at the end of the day (more like using it as an opportunity to set up booby traps) and always spoke politely to the teachers. A load of horse-shit. Apparently, the boy was also quite good-looking, in the eyes of his female classmates, much like his maternal grandfather back in the day. Unlike Sasuke Uchiha, Keisuke Uchiha-Uzumaki had no qualms with their affections, often leveraging it to find extra prank mates because why not.

As frustrating as they were at times, his children made him swell with pride. They were his children, not anyone else's - and they've already come so far and they will go even further in life. The next generation always surpasses the current generation. Mostly, their morals were largely in the right place, barring flashes of mischief and delinquency here and there. Even Keisuke knew how to stand up to bullies, once coming to the rescue of a rather nerdy and skinny friend of his (Denki's kid) and telling three kids who were older and bigger and stronger to go away. When the boy walked home with a gigantic black eye, albeit also a wide smile on his face after managing to eventually dangle the three from a tree with a pranking string, Boruto gave him a fist bump and a hug.

~X~

"Dad! Asami is leaving soon!" Keisuke woke Boruto up, shaking his bed 5 in the morning.

The man got up, cursed, and briefly wondered just how the boy had managed to get up when the sky was still dark, but as soon as reality hit, he rushed downstairs to send his daughter away.

"Dad, I'll be fine, don't worry," Asami said, giggling. Perhaps she was amused at just how concerned he looked. "It's only a C-ranked mission and Eriko completed one already. I'll be fine."

"I don't like that boy in your time," Boruto groaned, shaking his head. "I'm not sure how I feel about you being away for five days."

"He's fine... Kagami and I get along well these days. And besides, Sumire is a really good sensei and she'll make sure nothing goes wrong," Asami explained calmly.

"How well?"

Asami sighed. Out of all the things, Boruto had to focus on Kagami.

"Pretty well."

"Oh no-"

"It's not like that, dad. Really, is that what you're most concerned about?"

"Just kidding!" Boruto gave her a wide, forced smile and a hug. He made a mental note to interrogate her when she comes back. "Good luck!"

Shutting the door, Boruto decided to go back to bed, where his wife was still sleeping soundly, owing to the fact that she had worked until 2. He needed some rest, most definitely. Keisuke was unlikely to go to bed immediately, given his hyperactive state, but Boruto trusted the boy to stay quiet enough to avoid disturbing him and Sarada.
It was strange that out of all his children, Keisuke was now the only one in the house. Eriko was at a sleepover with Jun, Itachi had already moved out and now Asami was on her first overnight mission. All of a sudden, Boruto wondered just how it would be when all of his kids were grown up and no longer needed his incessant care, when they no longer needed his homework help, when they no longer needed him to make them (healthy) lunch, when they all moved into their own homes and lived more independent lives, when he could finally return to work and resume his official shinobi career. It would be a massive emotional adjustment, needless to say. Just the thought of it made Boruto feel a little sad and, as to why, he could not come up with a cogent explanation.

~X~

Keisuke was sitting alone in the common room. It was still dark outside and both his parents were sound asleep. He was feeling, in all honesty, rather bored and lonely, which he rarely ever felt.

It was weird being up so early; Keisuke would very much like to go back to sleep. Yet he could not do it. Recently, Keisuke had found it much harder to fall asleep - it was as if he had contracted insomnia, but not really. It was mainly the fact that he would get glimpses of weird visions whenever his eyes shut.


It was always the same strange visions and Keisuke was sick of them. It had been a week since they started. He wished they would go away, but they just won't. Keisuke wouldn't say that he was afraid, just incredibly frustrated.

Okay, maybe he was a little apprehensive. Having the same dream for seven consecutive nights was definitely not normal. Still, what could he do? Whenever Keisuke tried to bring it up to his parents, he fell short of words, became struck by an inexplicable mental block. It was as if some supernatural force was deliberately preventing him from saying what needed to be said.

His siblings were gone from the house too. Granted, Eriko would be back tomorrow and Itachi did not live too far away with his buddies, but still. As of now, the present, there was no one for him to talk to.

Stretching his feet across the sofa, Keisuke sighed and yawned. He wasn't not tired, no, not at all. He had plenty of time to kill, plenty of time to wander around the house and plan his next prank for the day! Oh yes, that would take quite the time. That would be very nice.

Then, tomorrow, he would speak to Eriko when she returned. Out of all his siblings, she was the one he was closest to. Itachi was ever the responsible brother, but he was seven years older. Asami had her moments of fun, yet she was quite tame most of the time. Personality-wise, Eriko and Keisuke were most similar and compatible. She was always willing to join him in his pranks - like finally dying grandpa Naruto's hair blue when he dozed off in the afternoon - albeit not always the most subtle person. Both of them had a mischievous streak, yet Eriko was all out in the open, while Keisuke preferred to be a little more sneaky. Dealing with angry adults was far too troublesome. Anyhow, she would definitely see his sleep-deprived state and conclude that something was wrong.

He was feeling rather tired. Maybe he would just curl up on the sofa and forgo all the pranking planning after all.

~X~
"Boruto..." Sarada murmured when it was 7 in the morning.

"Sarada, it's 7 in the morning..." Boruto responded, turning towards her.

"Have you checked on Keisuke...?"

"Go back to sleep, it's still 7..." Boruto moaned.

"Mmmm..."

She was barely awake and Boruto, too, was fighting against his eyelids from crashing down.

That she looked absolutely gorgeous when sleeping was the first thing that occurred to Boruto's mind. The second thing was that he should probably check on Keisuke sometime next hour. The third thing was that he really wanted to go back to sleep. The fourth thing was that he really, really wanted to have some fun with Sarada once she was properly awake. Preferably if Keisuke falls sound asleep, but otherwise, Boruto was sure Mitsuki would be happy to take care of the boy for a while.

It wasn't every day when it was just them.

~X~

Keisuke awoke to the smell of bacon and the sound of pans frying. It was a Sunday noon - the only day of the week when mother took a break from work - and both of his parents were cooking brunch. It was rather nice, filling him with a sense of warmth as he continued to snuggle on the coach.

"I'm home!" Eriko bellowed as she ran towards them, crashing onto Keisuke.

"Eriko! Your brother is still sleeping!" Sarada chided.

"It's okay," Keisuke said groggily as he shook his head and pushed his sister away, "I'm awake anyway."

"Your mother and I have made you guys bacon and egg sandwiches!" Boruto announced.

"Yum yum yum! I love those!" Eriko grinned and jumped into her father's arms.

"We also made some chocolate cake for later in the day," Sarada said, smiling. "I also brought back some prawn crisps from a work trip. I'm sure you guys will like it!"

His mother looked radiant, Keisuke thought, like a little bit of rest had completely refreshed her. She was usually rather stressed.

"I love chocolate!" Eriko declared. "Oh and, mum and dad, can I take Keisuke to Itachi's place later in the day? They're making hotpot in their place and Itachi's already asked us if we wanted to come."

Boruto and Sarada looked at each other, then back at Eriko and Keisuke, then back at each other again. Boruto hid a barely concealed smirk and said, "Why, of course! Your mother and I will have a lot of fun tonight, just the two of us."

Sarada gave her husband a slight dig. None of the two kids really understood what it meant.

Sunday family brunches were always Keisuke's favorite. As the family laughed together and as Eriko recounted stories from last night, Keisuke's woes faded into the background.
Itachi Uchiha-Uzumaki scrubbed the tables for the seventh time this week as Kenji yawned and apologized for the umpteenth time. His friend was still positively inebriated from an ill-conceived 4 am escapade with his girlfriend.

" 'Tachi... I'm so, so, so sorry! I'll help next time... Man 'Tachi... I love you so much!" The guy then walked up to Itachi and enveloped Itachi in a bone-crushing hug. "You are the most amazing flatmate ever. Seriously, I would totally date you if I was into men!"

Mildly embarrassed, Itachi gave Kenji a polite nod and continued cleaning up their place. Kenji, though worlds apart with him in terms of personality, had been his best friend ever since the Academy. Itachi would do anything (okay maybe not anything) for him; this was no large matter.

Out of the five - formerly six - inhabitants of their flat, Itachi was definitely one of the more responsible ones. Hana, the only girl of the group, was fairly good at tidying up after herself but lacked the patience to deal with Kenji and Riku's filthy party-goer antics. Sora had recently quit being a shinobi, embarking on a musical career as a professional saxophonist after deciding that missions bored him (something Itachi could never understand) and was rarely ever back home, often spending the night out at some jazz club, even though he did assist Itachi whenever he could. Yuuto was... gone. It was a painful experience to lose him, the mourning was difficult, but Itachi had finally come to terms with it. According to his father, the dead did not simply disappear but left for another plane of existence. Boruto Uzumaki, backed by his mother, insisted that he had died and come back to life and seen it all. Perhaps Yuuto was there too, having a good time.

His siblings were coming over tonight for hotpot and Itachi was feeling pretty excited. Ever since moving out, Itachi hadn't spent as much time with them as before. He missed them. Eriko, much like Kenji actually, always lit up the room she was in with her loud mouth. Keisuke can be quite funny too, albeit rather naughty. Riku and Hana insisted that Itachi was just being overly suspicious and that his younger brother was a perfectly behaved, cute, adorable little child.

"Rise and shine Riku!" Hana bellowed as she dragged Riku into the common room. "The sun is high in the sky and you are as high as a kite!"

"Riku, whatever you are smoking, just don't do it here... please?" Itachi asked politely. "My siblings are coming over tonight and, you know, maybe they shouldn't get exposed to-"

"No worries Itachi! I do it in my room alone! Don't worry Itachi! Heck, I won't even do it tonight!" Riku responded enthusiastically. "I'll also make matcha tiramisu for them! Matcha tiramisu!"

Riku had always liked Itachi's siblings. Being an only child himself, Itachi suspected he was also rather envious. Either way, he loved doting on Asami, Eriko and Keisuke. Once, he took them to a games arcade with Itachi and paid for all of them as if it were nothing.

"I hear Sora's not doing anything tonight too! His jazz gig got moved to next Friday and we might even get him to play for us," Hana said as she grinned. "Yoko and I are watching him play next Friday. You should take Suzumi with you. It'll be a nice double-date."

"Sure thing. I mean, I don't really have anything to do on Friday." Itachi shrugged as he dusted off the curtains. He was almost done with the chores

"Yo Itachi! The mail is here and there's one for you!" Keisuke spun around and delivered a letter to Itachi.
It was marked with a sign of the Hokage's office, though Itachi suspected that the letter itself was written and commissioned by more lower-level officials. His mother, in all likelihood, probably never saw it. Excitement pumped through him as he speculated about its contents.

"I got promoted!" He gasped. "I'm going to be made a special jonin!"

"YESSSSSS!" Kenji, still drunk as hell, embraced Itachi tightly. Riku and Hana then piled onto both of them.

"I always know you'd make it, Itachi," Riku said. "You're definitely as good as some of the special jonins out there. Oh man, when are you going to have your own little genins running around?"

"A while later... I suspect..." Itachi coughed, trying to break free.

"Now we're definitely going on that double date with our girlfriends," Hana remarked, ecstatic. "And I'll tell Sora to play some extra celebratory music tonight when he comes back."

"I'm coming!" Kenji declared.

"Me too! Leaving without us... hmphh!" Riku concurred.

Itachi laughed as Hana shook her head in disapproval.

~X~

Shrieks penetrated the air. A woman calling, calling a name she could not recognize.

She dodged green firecrackers (green firecrackers?) and scuttled all the way to the nearest tavern.

"What's the matter, little boy?" A wizened old man (was he a man?) grinned at her through crooked teeth.

I'm not a boy, she was just about to say, but frowned. Maybe she was a boy now. Something wasn't right.

"Well?" The old man asked.

"I- I'm sorry for disturbing you..." She started stuttering. It was nerve wrecking, talking to strangers. She wasn't her sister, nor her brothers. She never felt completely comfortable talking to someone unless she really got to know them.

"Little kids shouldn't be around this area. It's where all the bad stuff happens," he whispered menacingly.

"Kakko? Where are you? Kakko?! KAKKO!" A woman rushed in. Purple skin, sandy red hair tied into a bun. She picked him up and apologized to the old man.

"That your boy?"

"Yes. Kakko has been a bit of a naughty kid. Say sorry Kakko."

"Sorry."

Darkness hit.

An ancient, characterless, dull, dead voice whispering.
The time has come. When Sekai no Hashi is breached and destroyed, the fabric of this reality will be torn and worlds will collapse onto themselves. This dimension cannot handle it alone. It must poach its heroes from elsewhere.

"What?" She murmured in a weak voice. She had absolutely no idea what was going on. She was, after all, only Asami Uchiha-Uzumaki.

Oh no, it won't be you, child. You are merely the seer, the messenger.

"ASAMI!" Kagami's voice jostled her awake.

It was the middle of the day. A day after she first embarked on her C-rank mission. They were assigned to the Land of Grass as escorts for a daughter of a minor aristocrat. There were no serious, life-threatening threats by the look so far. Nonetheless, Sumire-sensei had reminded everyone to remain vigilant.

Asami had no idea what just happened.

"You fainted," Kagami explained. "It might be the heat, who knows? You looked pretty bad. Here, have some water." He gave her his water bottle.

"Strange," Asami said. "I saw things."

"What, like psychedelic visions?" Kagami frowned.

"Yeah." Asami nodded. "Something something Sekai no Hashi? And something really weird about the fabric of reality and dimensions. I don't know."

Kagami laughed. "You're such an interesting girl. I mean, if it really bothers you, talk to Sumire-sensei about it? She might know a thing or two."

Asami sighed. "Maybe it's nothing after all."

"Better stay on the safe side of things," said Kagami. "You know what, I'll accompany you to her. Teuchi and her are escorting the client, who's currently going on a bit of a shopping spree at a mall nearby."

"Oh," Asami remarked. "And you?"

"Someone had to stay behind to see that you were fine. And for a while, I thought you were fine. Then your eyes were open and blank, there were strange veins fusing with your sharingan, and you were shaking a lot. So I woke you up," Kagami recounted. "Your welcome." He winked.

"Let's go find Sumire-sensei then," Asami said as she got up. "The mission must go on. And thank you, Kagami. You really didn't... it was very kind of you."

"My pleasure."

~X~

Mitsuki is your regular cool, still single, godfather that gradually evolved into the go-to babysitter for your parents. Kakashi would be the other one.

Mitsuki lived in a pretty awesome place, Keisuke thought. There were heaps and heaps of video games. Also, Mitsuki didn't mind buying junk food, chips and fries abound. Coming from the Uchiha-Uzumaki household, where friend stuff was banned, Keisuke really appreciated them.
At the moment, they were playing Jump!, a game that involved two rabbits that needed to hop around an obstacle course whilst collecting points. It was a narrow scoreboard, with Keisuke possessing the slight edge.

"You're beating me," Mitsuki remarked with a chuckle, "You'd be giving your dad a run for his money."

"I beat him last time. Him, Eriko and Itachi," Keisuke mentioned with slight pride. Sure, it was just video games, a virtual example of success and something not translated into concrete material reality, but still. It felt nice to win.

Sometimes, Keisuke would experience bouts of insecurity. After all, all his siblings were talented people, especially Itachi, who was just doing ridiculously well, being a new special jonin and all. All of them, in Keisuke's opinion, had tried hard and overcame personal flaws or external obstacles. They achieved things. Their existence was purposeful, with Itachi as the responsible one, Asami as the caring and considerate one and Eriko was the fun and hyperactive one. Next to them, Keisuke felt a bit redundant - like his parents had him as an afterthought. (He winced and chided himself for that view. His parents loved him so much and gave him so much in life.) Still, he would ask himself from time to time, just what was his purpose?

Sure, he was good at being sneaky at times, pulling pranks and not getting caught. He even put up a facade of being a (relatively) good student. Still, being able to lie and deceive and being a troublesome kid really wasn't something to brag about. Keisuke knew that much. He wasn't really bad at anything, per se. Yet, too often, he felt like a jack of all trades and master of none.

It was weird that he should feel all of this. By all aspects, he should be more than content with a comfortable life as the youngest son of the current Hokage. He knew his feelings were petty and stupid - that's why he never said anything.

"Keisuke!" Mitsuki interrupted his stream of thoughts. "I'm going out to buy lunch for us. What are your preferences?"

"Hmm... fried chicken," Keisuke finally decided. "With red chilly pepper. And a strawberry milkshake."

"Looking to make the best you can with me?" Mitsuki laughed.

Keisuke grinned and gave a thumbs up.

When Mitsuki had left, Keisuke stretched himself and got up. He always liked wandering around Mitsuki's place. It was a nice, minimalist, flat. Plain colours were abound. It had a great library too, which contained shelves and shelves of books - a lot of them confidential and, erm, unsavoury too - that he somehow forgot to hide from plain sight, something Sarada would never permit.

Sliding open the doors, Keisuke entered the place and gazed at the shelves with wonder. It sounded weird, something he would never admit to anyone, but he loved the smell of books. They elicited a certain excitement from him, especially the old ones.

There were wooden ladders that one would use to access the higher shelves. They made creaking sounds when one stepped on them - Keisuke had tried that before.

He loved climbing these shelves. It was easier now that he was older and taller. Mitsuki never minded it whenever he did it, always appearing rather amused. Some of his best memories (when he was three or four) were made traversing through the top shelves, dusting off old surfaces and peeking
into large tomes that he could not yet understand.

An unrecognisable sound resonated through his ears as he reached the top shelf and scoured through its contents. Keisuke would even describe it as eerie, a bit sad even. It was like the cry of an otherworldly creature. Most definitely, it did not belong here in uncle Mitsuki's library.

Was it someone? Was it wise of him to reveal himself?

Keisuke elected to stay silent and wait it out.

Scratch that: it was getting creepy and he was getting out of the room. And then he would rush to uncle Mitsuki and tell the man everything.

Black spots appeared before his eyes. Keisuke felt a little faint. Screams echoed through the place, even though Keisuke was pretty sure this house was situated in a very safe neighbourhood. Explosions - no, he had to be hallucinating. This was getting really weird.

Then, out of the blue, Keisuke felt himself getting dragged somewhere against his will. He tried to hold tightly onto the shelf, yet the gravity was irresistible. He was paralyzed from head to toe. Dread rose through him. This had to be a very strong opponent, one that he probably couldn't fight against, so this meant trouble.

He fell.

Fully expecting to crash into the ground and break his skull, end up in the hospital and resign himself to hours and hours of criticism by his parents, Keisuke, instead, saw himself being enveloped by a vortex. Blinding green light took away his sight temporarily and, unable to control his emotions, he began screaming wildly.

~X~

It had been 26 years since Sasuke Uchiha abdicated as the Hokage of the Continent, 26 years since the establishment of the Continental Republic, 26 years since his self-imposed exile.

He had seen so much, been through so much. He had witnessed civilizations collapse, burning themselves out with their own restlessness and aggression; he had seen life taking form and watched lives coalesce into settlements, villages, towns, metropolises; he had traversed solitary wastelands for months and months on foot; he had descended into dens of sin and debauchery; he had been in wretched warzones, where the blade was the only reliable currency.

In the midst of all of this, Sasuke Uchiha was not sure whether he felt any wiser, any less lost. The pain of it all, his past life in his own world, it had all been blurred, numbed - but it was not completely gone. It never will lave. Somewhere deep down, the hurt will always remain.

He was an old man now, being slightly over sixty. His hair was a mix of black and silver. There were wrinkles on his once alabaster-like face. His cheeks were hollowed, his bone structure more pronounced. He had not aged too badly, but he was no longer a young (or even middle-aged) shinobi who could not see an end to his own mortality. Someday, he would pass away on a piece of foreign land. Alone, surrounded by strangers.

Out of all the places he had set foot in, Sekai no Hashi was by far the most interesting. Only a quarter of the size of the moon, a juncture between worlds, a cosmopolitan commercial hub, a hotbed of unrest, crime and inequality, a place that knows no night and day, a vortex of endless possibilities. One would certainly never get bored being in Sekai no Hashi. Plus, they did serve cuisine from Konoha, even though its authenticity was dubitable.
Taking one look at his old headband - in all the years of wandering, Sasuke had never parted with it and perhaps it was all due to sentimentality - he teleported to the bridge between worlds, the juncture of a million lands, where the skyline was purple and the people were from everywhere.

~X~

Moaning, Keisuke got up and rubbed his head. He had passed out near the corner of a dark and dingy alleyway. Thankfully, no one was around to take advantage of him or laugh at him. (Or sell him into slavery, bless his luck. Father loved to warn him about dangerous human traffickers, much to his mother's exasperation that Boruto was merely being paranoid.)

The skyline was purple. Weird. There were red lanterns floating in the sky everywhere.

Perplexed, Keisuke started running, rushing down the main street.

Where was he?

"Watch where you're going kid!" A tall, bulky creature grunted. It was most definitely not human. Being bulky, its eyes were a terrifying, sickening yellow. Keisuke almost fell onto the ground upon the impact but managed to steady himself.

Collecting his calm, Keisuke approached what appeared to be an old convenient store. It was dank and musty from all the sweat of its perspiring customers, which was, quite frankly, a bit disgusting. Still, the shopkeeper, an old lady with so many wrinkles Keisuke thought her skin would fall off, seemed friendly enough for conversation.

"Hello," Keisuke addressed her as he ventured towards the counter.

"Well hi little boy," she answered with raspy, weather-beaten voice.

"I'm a bit lost," Keisuke said as he cut straight to the point. "I was wondering, could you give me some directions?"

"Oh... a young boy from Terra. We don't see many people from Terra here. You're all quite a reclusive bunch," the old woman chuckled. "I'm guessing you're looking for the hotel where your family is staying? Well, most of them are clustered near the Grand Avenue. It's quite densely packed over there, but it's prime location. You're in the Shinju neighbourhood. We're a bit far from the central metropolis, but you'll get there by going down the Million Step Street and then taking the fast tram."

Keisuke could not fathom a single coherent thought from her string of words. Just what in the name of Hashirama Senju's polka-dotted undies is she talking about?

"One warning though, on your way there, through Million Step Street, you might encounter some dangerous areas. The Middlings are quite crime-ridden. Be sure to stay vigilant."

Keisuke still had no idea what she was speaking of. Still, he nodded politely, thanked her and wished her well as he left the shop.

~X~

Everything was burning, consumed by a merciless, blazing inferno.

Kakko could feel the heat crawling towards his skin. Then he imagined it ripping his skin off and then searing his flesh until it was cooked. The thought made him shudder as he rushed towards the
window. It was two-stories above ground level. If he jumped, there was still a small chance he would serve, albeit perhaps with a broken leg. The dilemma made him pause briefly.

Everything he knew was gone. The small flat he lived in since he was an infant, his possessions and his dearest mother, who was shot in the head by the people who attacked them. His brother, merely a happy and carefree toddler, was not spared from the brutality of the deplorable savages. Wincing at the sight of his splattered head, smashed against the wall, Kakko had kept quiet, concealed himself and secretly made his way towards the window as they set his place aflame. They did not know he was loss made him so numb; he had not had time to process it. The hurt had not yet hit him, still falling in the realm of the intangible.

He had to live. He had to survive. His mother's desperate gaze was carved into his mind, imprinting itself on his very soul. He would not forget it. Run, she seemed to say, please, Kakko, please make it out alive. It was his fault that she was dead, for the Ravagers had traced him down for stealing their bioweapon two years ago, but he would not disappoint her last wish. He would not.

He. Would. Not.

Three, two, one.

And then he jumped.

What happened next was all so quick. Kakko was about to crash into the ground, break his legs and consign himself to paralysis for the rest of his life (and maybe eventually get caught and killed by the attackers) when a hooded figure swept him up.

The last thing he remembered before fainting was a pair of purple eyes with concentric rings.

~X~

"Where is he?!" Boruto suppressed the urge to scream at his best friend, deciding to shake Mitsuki furiously instead. He knew it wasn't entirely Mitsuki's fault. Nonetheless, it was dusk and the boy still hadn't returned. He had every right to feel worried and panicked when Mitsuki, flushed and gripped with consternation, informed him that Keisuke had simply disappeared.

He felt Sarada wrap her arms around him from behind, gently urging him to stay calm. Though he could tell she was shaking, quivering on the inside. He knew her too well. Still, years of being the Hachidaime Hokage had taught her how to maintain a mask of tranquility. Crisis management 101.

"Mitsuki," Sarada inquired, "When was the last time you saw Keisuke."

"Before lunch." Mitsuki's head hung low. The guy felt awful and, under normal circumstances, Boruto would feel bad for his previous behavior and end up apologising. "We were playing games, we were feeling hungry, so I decided to go out and get some food for us. When I came back, he was gone. I tried looking for him. I searched all around the house and then all around the village. I activated my Sage Mode. All was to no avail. His chakra had simply... vanished."

"Vanished..." Sarada repeated his words with a murmur. She furrowed her brows, folded her arms and closed her eyes. "Boruto, Mitsuki, do you guys remember the time when we... vanished?"

"That one time when we ended up at that alternate dimension? Of course I do," Mitsuki replied.

"Do you guys think something similar could have happened to our Keisuke?"

The words our Keisuke made Boruto's heart wince. He was their boy, their mischievous little son.

"Right, there's no time to grieve or feel at loss. Mitsuki, please don't blame yourself for anything. You've done what you could. Boruto," Sarada said as he gazed at her husband and he could tell that she was holding back tears and wanted to simply hold her tight, "I'll ask Karin to look out for Keisuke's chakra signature. I'll ask dad to use his Rinnegan. I'll ask Nanadaime if the Kyuubi could sense anything."

"My library," Mitsuki blurted out suddenly as if he had just remembered something important. "Keisuke loves it there. I mean, he would go there clandestinely when he thought I didn't know and traverse through the shelves looking for interesting books. I didn't mind him doing it anyway. My guess is that after I went out to buy friend chicken - we'll talk about this later - he probably went inside again. Sarada, you should go there and use your Mangekyo to see."

Sarada nodded and made her way towards the library, with Boruto and Mitsuki following her.

Boruto knew that his wife had awakened the Mangekyo Sharingan precisely the day he had died in that alternate dimension, yet she did not fully realise it until they were on a mission when they were 15. They were asked to solve the murder of the Tsubaki Conglomerate's young heir. When arriving at the crime scene, Sarada immediately felt her eyes hurt and saw exactly what had happened. It had been his servant, jealous of his affections towards and relationship with a young maid. Being able to look into the past of a specific location, it turns out, was one of Sarada's abilities, with the others being her lilac Susanoo and Amaterasu.

Sarada shut her eyes and then activated her Mangekyo Sharingan.

And then she was in a trance. This normally happened when she gazed into the past. Boruto was used to it (even though he was a little freaked out at first.)

"I was right!" Sarada gasped, clasping her mouth. "Boruto, Mitsuki, he got... he got sucked into a vortex while climbing shelves. I don't know where he went, but he's still alive, somewhere."

Boruto was silent, deep in contemplation. He recalled the dream he had two years ago, buried in the depths of his consciousness. Could it be telling him something? He was not sure. He would have to give it some more thought before he said anything important. "Let's go Sarada," Boruto whispered into his wife's ear. "Goodbye Mitsuki."

"Mitsuki, take care," Sarada said. "We'll let you know about any new developments." She walked towards Mitsuki and gave him a hug, nudging Boruto to do the same.

~X~

Boruto was still short of words when they got back and, from years of experience of dealing with her husband, Sarada knew something was wrong. It was as if he was suffocating from secrets.

When they entered the living room, now empty as Eriko was at Jun's house for dinner, they felt a positively oppressive silence reign over them. Sighing, Sarada sat down and opened her bag of paperwork left over from the day, beginning the night's labour, all while hoping that Boruto would confess to her just what was bugging him.

Her husband appeared very hesitant to initiate conversation, fidgeting and restlessly walking up and down the space. Unable to stand his attitude any longer, Sarada questioned, "Is something bothering you? Is there something you'd like to be telling me but are not 100% sure whether to do so?"

Boruto mumbled a few indecipherable grunts. Usually, this indicated that he was struggling with
"Boruto," Sarada emphasized her husband's name, loudly and clearly. The sound reverberated through the entire room.

"Sekai no Hashi," Boruto finally said. "Two years ago, I had the weirdest dream ever."

Sarada paused writing and got up, facing her husband with confusion.

"There is the slight possibility that we're not the only world with sentient and intelligent species, though we're one of the few where knowledge and usage of chakra were well developed," Boruto speculated from memory. "Sekai no Hashi is a special place, reported a juncture between worlds. But there's more to the dream. I was... not myself there."

"What do you mean?" Sarada pressed him.

"Well, first things first, I was in the body of a boy - well not a human boy - named Kakko. Secondly, it's not from this dimension. It's set in the alternate dimension we were in all these years ago, to be precise. I know because I saw your dad in there - well, not your dad, but you know... Yeah, so basically I was in that body and carried a scroll to him and then I fainted and woke up. It was really strange. But I've been thinking, maybe that dream was a way of foretelling Keisuke's disappearance? I'm not too sure how that would work, but -"

"Sumire's Nue!" Sarada exclaimed as the creature flew into their room, interjecting Boruto's stream of thought. "Sorry for the interrupt, continue speaking..."

"No, no," Boruto said, "This must be something important too." He retrieved a scroll from the creature and began reading it. "Asami has fainted earlier the day and received strange visions of a place with purple sky, explosions and - no. No way, Asami is having visions of Sekai no Hashi."

"What's the matter?" Sarada was really worried this time. It appeared that Keisuke was not the only child of hers who was affected. "Is Asami okay? Is their mission going fine?"

"Yes. It's an escort mission so she doesn't get off until the end of this week. That being said, according to Sumire, it's not a very dangerous one so Asami would most likely be safe," Boruto said, trying to reassure himself.

"Oh my - I'm calling Itachi and Eriko to see if they're fine," Sarada declared as she rushed towards the home phone. "I'll be back in a moment."

Boruto sunked into himself as his wife departed the room. He felt so helpless. Was this how his own father felt all these years ago when he, too, was stuck in the other world? Was there nothing he could do?

No. Technically no. There was still a sliver of possibility that he could travel to the other place. He did it once, didn't he? Sure, the mysterious scroll had reportedly vanished, but there had to be other methods, right?

Right?

~X~

He stretched his fingertips and then kicked his legs. The first thing he noticed was that he was not paralysed or injured anywhere.
His eyes fluttered open and he was in a dark place. There was no source of natural light, only the artificial shine of an odd lamp that Kakko only saw in some quaint exhibition of foreign goods. His bed was rather plain and he realised that there was a desk in the corner of the room, where a figure, still obscured, was furiously scribbling down something.

"Excuse me?" Kakko got up and immediately felt a little reticent. The events of before were slowly hitting him and he did not know what to do, being on the verge of collapsing onto himself. Tears were beginning to well up in his eyes; they burned.

The man on the far corner seemed to notice his movement and made his way towards Kakko.

"You've awakened, Kakko." The light was still not directly shining on his face.

"Have we met." Kakko backed away defensively.

"In a way, yes," was the ambivalent response.

Kakko did not know whether to scream or sigh in relief.

"You can call me Sasuke." The figure reached out a gloved hand as a friendly gesture. However, his voice, in its graveness, intimidated Kakko. It did not belong to an ordinary man. "Though I hear that some here call me the Wanderer."

Power. Sadness. Sorrow. Remorse. Kakko could taste it, even though it was displayed in the far distance. He craved it as a hungry urchin craves scraps of bacon, sensing it, feeling it, hoping to bask in it when circumstances become fortuitous. The Wanderer exuded all these things too.

The Wanderer. That name was indeed familiar. It was who the old scientist begged him to take the scroll to all these years ago after all. Somehow, Kakko could not remember actually meeting the Wanderer. Yet he had a premonition that the mission in stopping the Ravagers would end in victory. Now, Kakko wished none of that happened. Guilt gnawing on his insides, dissolving his intestines in asinine acid, he scorned fate for placing that old man in his way. If only he had minded his own business, stayed out of it all. Whatever deity that crafted this distasteful world, he didn't care, he cursed its name regardless. Whatever racial war, insurgency that would have started had that scroll fell into the wrong hands, he would rather it did. If only, if only his mother and brother - oh, Juni, sweet, unknowing, innocent Juni who never ended up suffering because of the swiftness in which his breath was taken away... - if only they were still alive and breathing and laughing around the dinner table.

If only.

Which brings things to the Wanderer again. Like all children who had grown up in the dingey, hopeless, dour outskirts of the Metropolis, Kakko had heard tales of the Wanderer. Human, from Terra, supposedly, but, at the same time, also a deity. He had defeated the dragon, previously thought as invincible, below Sekai no Hashi's plane of existence, a creature that many had believed would end up destroying their state of existence too. He had tamed wildfires with a far fiercer inferno of his own. The fires of hell, reportedly, black as night. He had revived the dead, apparently, in a faraway land when the only heir to a precarious kingdom on the verge of civil war was brutally assassinated in a calculated plot to instigate conflict. Some said that he was once a sovereign of some sorts - much like the Sovereign that reigned over Sekai no Hashi - only much more competent, much more terrifying. Less of a bumbling bubblehead and more of a somber overlord. Less of a desperate seeker for acceptance and love, and more of an iron-fisted king who had no qualms about being loathed.

The Wanderer, was, in some ways, the key to everything.
"Mister." Kakko breathed before he spoke again. "Mister, would you please revive my mother?"

The Wanderer paused. He did not answer Kakko's request. Perhaps luck was not in Kakko's favour.

"Mister," Kakko repeated again. "They... they say you can bring back the dead. It's not fair, mister... Wanderer-"

"Call me Sasuke," the Wanderer said with a grimace. "That epithet is so very alienating."

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