A philosophical generation

by Thermodossa

Summary

In a slightly more realistic Naruto world team seven tries desperately to fix its issues and work together. On the road to teamwork there are ups and downs. Exams gone right and missions gone wrong. A new generation of ninja are rising in Konoha and they just might change the world.

Canon divergence starts at the chunin exam.

genre: growing up, fix-it, adventure, angst, world-building.

Notes

Hello, I finally decided to start to post this story. Basically I rewatched the beginning of Naruto (chunin exam and Wave-mission, you know what I'm talking about) and thought that I wanted to relive that beautiful atmosphere and the team dynamics but then see them grow and not fall apart.

That's how this was born. My goals were:

1. Write that beautiful friendship and see the kids evolve in interesting and individual ways and don't become copies of their mentors/fathers/brothers...
2. Make the Naruto world slightly more realistic, which includes not sugarcoating the darker parts but also trying to conserve the quirky and fascinating aspects of it.

3. Really include Kakashi into the team and work on his character too.

I will often add extra background info at the end of the chapters. You don't need to read to understand the plot it's just that I'm really into world-building!

So I'll stop now. I have over forty chapters that are ready. They will be divided into four parts (one for each season) and I'll try to update twice a week.
Part 1: Late summer haze

Prologue: Of tales of the past

"Sakura-sama. You are the last one alive from the legendary Team 7, do you think you could tell us a little bit about your adventures?"

A timid little girl with curly brown hair was looking at her from underneath her bushy mane. Her question brought forth a large clamor of enthusiasm.

Sakura had come to visit the academy to talk about the importance of learning first-aid and how it could help them on the field. Truthfully she had only covered the subject as far as she dared with 9-year-olds. That and in her old age she was overcome by ridiculous bouts of nostalgia and that young girl with her unusual looks, obvious lack of self-confidence and intelligent blue eyes was bringing forth old memories.

"What do you want to know?", she asked with a kind smile.

"Euh, everything."

"Mh, everything."

She got up from her stool and felt all the aches her very advanced age, quite unusual for an elite kunoichi as herself, inflicted upon her. She walked to the window and looked out at the village, so familiar but ever-changing at the same time. The warm sun of September was making the red-tiled roofs of the village glow. The distant sound of voices, children playing, dogs barking. The sweet melody of home.

"I often wondered how I managed to become so old. God knows there were enough times, where I thought I wouldn't make it out alive. From the day I graduated from the academy, as I was put on a team with these two knuckleheads, my life was thrown into chaos. My two teammates..."

"...the sixth Hokage and the legendary descendant of the Uchiha."

"Yes, these two. Well at that time we weren't legendary anything. And these two idiots were very far from being the shinobis you know of. I suppose that in some ways they never really changed either, I swear, these boys. Crazy, these two and very idiotic too. Wouldn't have known common sense, if it had punched them in the face."

Thirty young faces were looking up at her with awe and confusion.

"It's surprising really that they managed to become as old as they did. Imbeciles the both of them."

"But they were really great ninjas!", a fiery brown haired kid, one of Kiba's many grandchildren maybe, judging by the red markings and sharp teeth.

"Certainly.", She acknowledged gravely. "They were the bravest and greatest shinobi I ever knew. They were my most important people. Let me gather my thoughts for a second. Well, how did it begin? With our sensei obviously. The day of our graduation."
"Kakashi of the Sharingan!"

"Yes, albeit at that time he was more known as the Copy-nin. But that is a discussion for another time. I was a little genin, certainly good at school but very unsure of myself."

She looked straight at the brown haired girl while saying that.

"Sensei was already well-known, a recognized jonin, an experienced shinobi. He was quite young still, but we didn't understand that back then. Honestly, he was probably more stressed than us, about having a genin-team. I first thought he was an idiot."

Sakura thought back to that very first day, the discussion on the roof, how terribly strange she had found her sensei. She began her tale. She was honest about her superficial goals, about her weaknesses and insecurities, hoping that some would be able to relate and learn. She told them about the training and numerous D-ranks and then about her first C-rank mission in Wave and how terribly scared she had been. The mention of the battle excited the class and she relived it with them. Her voice painted all the details of the battle. Vivid images seemed to fill the room. She felt the moist mist, the ice. Heard the rumble of Zabuza's voice.

She described the end of the battle, the aftermath.

"I wasn't really a shinobi back then. You are young still, but in a few years, you will receive your forehead protectors. The leaf that is etched in it represents your vows to protect Konoha. However, it doesn’t make ninjas out of you. Experience will teach you, you will grow to become shinobi. That’s how it is."

A young Hyuga girl frowned and lifted her hand.

"Yes?"

"When did you become a shinobi. A real shinobi."

"Difficult question."

Sakura looked down at her slightly wrinkled hands. She had never perfected the jutsu, that allowed Tsunade to appear so young, to quite the same extent. It let her avoid most of the signs of the passing time, but at the advanced age of 85 she could no longer hold it all back. It only let a smile appear on her lips. She was old, yes, but no less a shinobi than the young and strong kunoichis that she saw strutting down the streets. When had it truly begun, when had she been able to call herself a shinobi for the first time, knowing truly what it enticed?

"I suppose that it was during our first Chunin-exam, that for the first time I thought of myself as a real ninja, a valuable teammate and not just someone who was in the way. Let me tell you about it. I learned a lot during that exam. Do we have the time teacher-san?"

The young blond man, who was so different and so similar to Iruka, nodded respectfully and the classroom erupted in excited shouts of gratitude. They all went still when Sakura started her tale.

“We were very excited to compete in the exam. We had only been shinobis for less than a year, but it was not unheard of, to take part in the exam that early. We were waiting impatiently for some news...”
September I

Chapter Notes

One thing before you start reading, I'm not a native speaker and there will be mistakes or awkward sentences. Tell me and I'll fix them as quick as I can :).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

September I

73 years before...

"So who do you think is the hottest?"

"What?"

Sakura and Ino were sitting just outside one of the side buildings of the Hokage tower where all the jonin senseis had been called to half an hour ago. Kakashi-sensei, true to his habits, had entered the building last, almost twenty minutes late, but now they could hear the Sandaimes deep and calm voice somewhere inside the building.

Supposedly the meeting was about the upcoming chunin exam. The rumor had already reached all the genin and a restless atmosphere had taken hold of the youngest ninjas of konoha. Sasuke and Naruto had run off to the training grounds insulting each other, ready to hone their skills for the exam. Their loud arguing could still be heard, long after they couldn’t be seen anymore.

Sakura had to admit that even her beloved and perfect Sasuke could be terribly irritating if he was left too long in the presence of an excited Naruto. Honestly these two could never stop fighting. She had decided to wait for the end of the debriefing to know as quickly as possible what the news were.

Ino, on the other hand, was still waiting for the rest of her team, who should have met her there. Ino was left muttering and swearing under her breath about stupid lazy-asses and their loyal potato-crisps eating friends next to her friend and rival in love.

After a few minutes of complaining about their respective teammates, the subject had shifted to the various jounin who had now all disappeared in the building.

Then Ino had asked that strange question.

"Well? Who do you think is the most attractive out of them?"

Sakuras face scrunched up and she huffed.

"I don't know! I never really thought about them that way. I mean they are old! And I thought that Sasuke was the most beautiful guy of Konoha."

"Of course he is! He is the most beautiful and flawless and utterly perfect guy of the village. But he is a boy. There is something really special about grown, manly men. And they aren't that old. I mean
Asuma-sensei is only twenty-eight!"

Sakura seemed to think about it, swinging her feet back and forth.

"Mm. You're right. They aren't that old and actually Asuma-sensei isn't that bad looking."

"That's what I think too, he has that kind of rugged good look."

"And Kurenai-sensei is really beautiful."

"True. If one day Asuma-sensei has enough courage to ask her out they could be such a perfect couple."

Sakura turned to her friend.

"Really? Asuma-sensei is into Kurenai-sensei?"

"Completely taken away! 100 % pure love."

Again the pink haired girl contemplated that fact.

"So what do you think of your sensei?"

"Kakashi-sensei? Urgh no idea Ino, this discussion is creeping me out!"

"Why? I mean we are teenage girls. Hormones are literally screaming at us to look at all these fit, good looking guys.", was the sly answer from Sakuras best friend.

"Still it's strange. Just think about Gai-sensei, you know the weird one who's running around the village every morning and who's got students from the year above us. I mean, I don't want to think about him and love and attractiveness and all.", shuddered Sakura.

A shiver ran down Inos back.

"You're right, no talking about that one. But what about Kakashi-sensei?"

"It's hard to have an opinion, I don't know if you noticed but he's always wearing that mask of his.", was the peeved reaction of the pink haired shinobi.

"I know smart ass, but don't you think it adds to his mysterious aura?"

Again her friend was silent for a moment.

"Ne Ino, how old do you think is Kakashi-sensei?"

Ino leaned back and let out a contemplative "mm" sound.

"It's difficult to say. I think Gai-sensei or Asuma-sensei are the oldest and Kurenai-sensei seems to be a year or two younger. Also my dad fought with her dad and even if my dad is old, he isn't that old. So I'd say she's 25 or so. Kakashi-sensei must be somewhere between the two."

Sakura smiled and leaned towards Ino.

"Do you think one day we will be like them, that we will be great jounin and have our own students?"

Ino hears the question that her uncertain friend wasn't asking: ‘Will I be a good kunoichi? Even
though I'm not from a clan, even though I don't have a kekkei genkai like you, even though I have less chakra, have been trained less early, will I be able to be a great kunoichi anyway?"

Sometimes Ino wants to fight with Sakura. Their rivalry is real when it comes to Sasuke and she really does feel like it's unfair that she got to be in his team, but she also really likes Sakura, trusts her and knows her completely. And she knows that Sakura has the potential to surpass every kunoichi in their graduation class, with her endless determination and focus.

"Yes, we will be some of the best kunoichi the village has ever seen. At least as strong as Tsunade, the great Sannin. Of course I will still be stronger and sexier than you but you won't be half bad."

And Sakura is giving her her little smirk and the moment of self-doubt has passed. Her determination is back. Exactly the same determination that explains why she's one of only five civilian girls who have passed the academy exam in their class and why on top of that she got the best marks in ninjutsu basics.

"Maybe Ino, but I will be the one that will be protected by my great husband Sasuke."

"Like hell!"

And the two girls, just like the boys half an hour ago, left the place to go to the training ground to "settle it like kunoichis do".

Kakashi had been the last to enter the room and made sure he was the first to leave to. The Hokage had barely finished his sentence when he perched himself on the window still and let himself fall back, rolled and landed on the street below with a sigh. He could hear Gais loud booming voice shouting about "cool and hip" and other such things. Slowly he went to the training fields near the eastern village wall, that his students seem to favor. When he arrived instead of immediately showing himself, he masked his chakra and jumped into a nearby tree, as he liked to do, to get a feeling what mood his cute little genins were in today.

Sasuke and Naruto were fighting. Naruto still hadn't shaken the habit of repeatedly materializing a few dozens bunshins as his main strategy. Sasuke in his eyes didn't act any less immaturity. Instead of taking a step back and observing the flow of the attack he settled for blindly attacking the unrelenting waves of blond Uzumakis and became more and more infuriated when his efforts didn't bear fruit.

Sakura on the other hand was rolling around in the dirt with Ino and there was more hair tugging going on than real fighting and the pink haired girl kept getting distracted by swooning over the raven haired Uchiha.

He sighed, had it really been a good idea to enter this bunch of children for the chunin exam. Granted, at their age he was working up to his jonin promotion, but times were different. These children actually had the time to be children, and would still have hopefully.

Still, this display of half-assed fighting was sad and made all the more frustrating by the fact that he could see their potential, the almost breathtaking possibilities their individual abilities and strength offered. And they were so completely different. They couldn’t see what a potent mix they would be, if one day they were able to work together. But then again, they more than any of the other teams, had personalities that clashed constantly and their ambitions were pushing them to fight against each other, instead with each other.
"Sensei, I pray for your divine help in this matter.", he silently prayed. Surely there must be a way to make them understand, that instead of fighting against each other, they had to fight with each other, for each other. Konoha was a military force with highly complex administrative structures, dozens of specialized corps but in a lot of ways it relied upon the base on which it was constructed. The base of Konohas military power was the three-man cell.

As long as they couldn't focus on the same goal: protect Konoha and protect each other, they wouldn't succeed.

Sighting Kakashi jumped onto the field and made no effort to hide his presence. Ino and Sakura stopped immediately and looked at him, slightly abashed at being caught rolling around in the dirt. He had to wait almost a minute before loud pops indicated, either that Naruto had dissolved his bunshins or that Sasuke finally managed to pop them all. They trotted over to their sensei.

The three expectant sets of his cute little genin eyes, plus Ino were looking at him and he took his sweet time before talking.

"So there was a meeting about the chunin exam."

"Yes, yes we know.", Naruto interrupted him.

As a punishment he waited another ten seconds before talking again.

"I entered you for the exam."

After a beat of silence Naruto's loud excited yell boomed throughout the training field.

On his way back to the apartment he was interrupted by the feeling of slightly aggressive chakra approaching him quickly. It felt somewhat familiar but Kakashi has been a ninja to long to not tense slightly, move one feet in a discreet fighting stance and hide his sharpened gaze behind a book.

A chunin landed next to him. It was the academy teacher, Iruka-sensei, which explained the angry flare of chakra. Honestly Kakashi hadn't specially wanted to antagonize the man but the silent criticism in the teachers voice, when Kakashi had entered his genin for the exam had irked him. He new that Naruto talked to him often, probably recounted most of their trainings and he could guess what the chunin thought of his teachings. It made him irrationally angry. Hell, he was aware he wasn't the best teacher and that he struggled with his three monsters. It wasn't surprising really. Four month ago he was still an anbu and teamwork mainly consisted of hand signs and quiet injunctions and not this babysitting.

Still the teacher approached him respectfully.

"Jonin-san, the Hokage is requesting your presence in his office in 20 minutes."

A meeting? Again. That was twice in a day. The Hokage was becoming quite overzealous.

"Hmmm. Ok, you can go now."

"He told me to escort you to the tower.", came the prompt answer.

An important meeting then if the Hokage wanted to be sure he was there on time.

He nodded and opened his book again before taking off leisurely in the direction of the tower, Iruka
trailing after him a step or two behind him. He didn't know if the academy teacher was doing it on purpose but he was walking on his right side, exactly in his blind spot. Well, he could uncover his sharingan but that seemed like overkill. The chunin was angry at him, but not enough to kill him. Probably. Still, deeply ingrained instincts told him to move. Step to the right, take out a kunai, throw it at the teacher's head, crouch down, spin, take out another kunai, get up behind him, eliminate the threat. He could practically feel himself going through the motions needed, to take out the threat.

Kakashi let out his breath and forced his tensing muscles to relax, he should be careful with these urges, one day he would decapitate a civilian because he had inadvertently brushed against him.

"So sensei. Is there something that bothers you?", he asked instead, feeling a little petty.

"No Kakashi-san. Nothing that would be of interest to you."

"Mmm. Ok, then how are your new academy students? Anyone caught your attention? If my genin pass the exam I wouldn't be surprised if the Hokage saddled me with another batch of students as soon as next year.", said Kakashi while thinking. ‘Instead of sending him back to ANBU where he belonged.’

"Yes, because clearly you do enjoy teaching.", came the sarcastic response.

Actually, and to his biggest surprise, that was wrong. He had discovered that in a strange way he actually liked it, or well, he liked teaching them. It made him feel weird and inadequate but it wasn't as unappealing, as he had thought.

"Ma, I do prefer trained shinobis in my team, they don't give me quite as much headaches."

They also didn't bring him the same warm sense of fulfillment, that he got when his pupils got something right and proved to him, that they weren't quite as terrible as he first thought.

The chunin jaw clenched. It seemed that his dislike was mutual. Finally the chunin stopped. Kakashi turned to him, concentrating to look just as disinterested than he usually did.

"Do you really think, that they are prepared enough? I know my students even if you want to insinuate the contrary. Sasuke may be it, but Naruto and Sakura aren't ready."

Kakashi wanted to sigh and walk away just to avoid this conversation. What use was there to repeat what he'd just said in the Hokage tower, the man sure was stubborn.

"I know all of that."

The man was throwing him an angry and exasperated look.

"I think”, Kakashi said calmly, “that none of the three will pass the exam."

This time Iruka was surprised.

"Then why do it, what do you want to achieve."

"Mmm, let's see, respectively I hope it will teach them humility, confidence and level headedness depending on which one of the three you're talking about."

The man still looked at him as if he thought that the jonin was pretty stupid but he didn't really look angry anymore. Iruka sighed.

"I understand that sometimes hard lessons can only be understood, when they are experienced in a
real fight, but I hope that it won't come at a price to heavy for them.”

‘Yes.’, Kakashi thought, ‘that's exactly why I want them to learn it during the exam and not during a mission that turned bloody.’

The academy teacher threw him one last long look before turning away.

"I trust you will find your way to the tower shinobi-san."

Kakashi hummed and looked back into his book.

Chapter End Notes

First real chapter. So I really started writing this after I listened to my little sister debate about which one of her teachers was the most attractive. I think that's the kind of things each one of us has done at least once.

I wanted to really keep the characters natural, yes they are shinobi but they are also young teenagers! Here they are twelve or thirteen and they do have interests outside of beeing a shinobi ( except Sasuke but that's actually the issue with him!).

Also Kakashi and Iruka will become friendlier but later, slowly. As far as the manga shows they barely talked with each other so they won't magically become friends.
The atmosphere in the Hokage office was definitively colder than the tense excitement at the meeting this morning. The Jonin senseis and this time all the Jonin senseis not only the ones from the rookies were assembled, a few additional shinobi were lingering in the back. The big surprise was leaning against the back wall, an easy smile on his lips. It had been at least a few years since he had last seen Jiraya.

"Yo." He said and sent a sweeping gaze around the room.

"Good, now that you're all here we will talk" the Hokage began. "We have to address some issues concerning the Chunin exam, that's why I assembled you here. Inuzuka Gaku, Kanden Tenkuno, Nara Naoya, Tenshin Kikyo, Hatake Kakashi, Yuuhi Kurenai, Maito Gai, Sarutobi Asuma, Aburame Hatzune, Hyuga Hoheto, Senju Kana, Kamachi Ton, Akimichi Doto. You have entered your Genin for the Chunin exam."

So that made thirteen of the seventeen actual Genin-teams that would take part in the exam. Good odds. Some years all the Genin took part. He knew most of the senseis, especially the younger ones who were of his generation and not that of Shikaku's and Inoishi's or even older. A few would have produced interesting students. He really didn't like that Senju-woman, had always found her to be placid but she was known to have produced several recognized shinobies. He had only seen the Nara-guy once or twice but well, a Nara. The Aburame woman was young (almost as young as him) but strong and that woman with coppery hair had been in Anbu when he had begun there.

"Some information has recently been brought to my attention that could change your mind."

Which meant: Jiraya has suddenly appeared after years of absence bringing bad news. Some Jonins must have reached the same conclusion because some subtle or not so subtle glances were thrown Jiraya's way. The man just shrugged and approached.

"I've spent a good deal of time hanging around Sound country and while they do have their own Daymo and Hokage and all, most of the administration and higher brass are controlled by Orochimaru. To say that he is the master of that country is only a slight exaggeration. Maybe you have noticed but for the first time Sound asked to take part in the exam and sent a team of Genin."

"Who might as well be Orochimaru's representatives, isn't it?" Asuma finished grimly.

"Yes, and in addition there has been intense exchanges between Sound and Grass these last few
"We already suspected that Orochimaru had ties in Grass but they might be even stronger than we assumed." The Hokage added.

"So some of their genins may also work for him." An Akimishi guy, whom Kakashi remembered from the third shinobi war stated.

"One thing becomes increasingly clear." Jiraya sighed. "Orochimaru has taken an interest in this exam."

More exactly, Kakashi added in his mind, to someone in the exam. Like a young Ushiha for exemple or, and he looked at Gai wondering if the other was thinking similar thoughts, or to the most talented Hyuga of this generation, or even to a young jinchuriki of the nine-tail, who knew. Damned snake!

"If that was the only cause of worry, we would have carried on with the exam and just raised security but their is something more worrisome."

Jiraya spoke again:

"There were also way to many information exchanged between Sound and Suna."

That prompted a few sharp intakes of breath and Kakashi felt his heart quicken. A few skirmishes with Sound were nothing. Konoha had the resources to crush them. But a break of the peace treaty with Suna, with one of the five great countries. That would mean...war.

The word hang unsaid in the room.

"Our first priority is to protect our young genin. Suna's intentions aren't clear, it could only be a misinterpretation or it could be the beginning of another conflict but right now we cannot act on our suspicions without going against the treaty. We have to allow the Suna genins to come to Konoha while still keeping an eye on them while also defending against Orochimaru's plans. To this end the different exam parts will be changed somewhat."

The Hokage turned to the three jonin at the left of his desk.

"This should have been confidential and is not to be discussed with your team. Ibiki Morino, Anko Mitarashi, Hayate Gekkô are the exterminators for the three tasks."

Crap, Kakashi thought, even without the whole Orochimaru-Suna shebang Anko and Ibiki were not a good combination.

"Is there a way to make safer exams for the students where an attack from Orochimaru or Suna would be difficult without it appearing suspicious?"

Ibiki started talking after a long pause (Kakashi recognized the usual interrogator dramatics).

"I had planned to sent them in the labyrinth of caves under the lake on the western side of the hokage mountain. I could find an alternative that can be held in a classroom."

The Hokage nodded and turned to Anko.

The young kunoichi seemed furious but wasn't making half as much noise as usual, which meant that she was worried. Understandable knowing her history.

"Tchh, those brats don't deserve that much care. I suppose that holding the exam in the Forest of Death isn't deemed safe enough!?!"
The Hokage nodded. Everyone knew that once upon a time, when Orochimaru had still been loyal to Konoha it had been his favorite training spot.

"Pff! Are the Hattori clan ruins still deserted?"

Again the Hokage nodded.

"Well, we will do it there. It's inside the outer village walls so it will be more difficult for outsiders to intrude. Also I have heard that its anbu playground so they should know it well enough."

Well, that was technically confidential but she was right.

"I will ask the Hyuga to stand guard. Also maybe the Aburame could infiltrate bugs onto the whole perimeter." The Hokage said.

For a second he closed his eyes, he seemed strangely old in the evening sun. The light on his face made the wrinkles stand out on his tanned and scared face. He sighed and stood up.

"The exam will still take place in a week. It would look suspicious if a lot less Konoha genins took part in the exam this year but I will still give you the choice: do you want to withdraw your students from the exam?"

Kakashi looked around the room, several senseis seemed deep in thought. He closed his eyes. It was dangerous but still, he felt he had to risk it. It was to important for the development of his students and the frustration that would result from denying them the chance to test themselves would have negative consequences. Especially on Sasuke. The older Akimichi stepped forward.

"Terrible things have been done to the children Orochimaru got his hands on. I cannot risk it for my kids."

For a second everyone in the room waited to see if another would step forwards but no one did.

"Very well, the Hokage finished, you can leave."

Instead of doing as he was told Kakashi waited outside the room, leaning against the wall. A masked Anbu guard threw him a suspicious glance but let him be. One of the few perks that came from having been part of the anbu corps was a relative cooperation of its current members. That and in this case the anbu must know that there was no way his presence escaped the notice of the two powerhouses on the other side of the door. If they let him overhear the conversation than they hadn’t wanted to hide it from him.

"It's good to see you again Jiraya."

"It's good to be back. Haven't seen the village in ages."

"It hasn't changed to much I assume"
"No. Only the people." Jiraya chuckled lightly. "You wouldn't have heard of Tsunade, old man."

"Sadly no."
Jirya laughed softly.

"We are terrible students aren't we? Never hanging around to see our sensei."

"In Orochimaru's case I would prefer if he didn't chose to come "visit me"."

A few seconds no one seemed to talk.

"Sensei. It's strange really. For all these years I've kept an eye on him. I accept now that he won't come back but to a certain point I could still see him in what he did. I could still see the shadow of the man I knew. But all of this? It just doesn't resemble him."

"I don't know why you think that Jiraya. Don't delude yourself about what kind of man he has always been. He was always amoral and cruel, we were just blind to his faults because we loved him."

"He hasn't always been like this."

"You're wrong."

"I don't think so. How could a man without morals inspire such loyalty in his followers?"

"Jiraya. Is there a point to this discussion? I know that you never came to term with Orochimaru's betrayal. It has left us all shaken and nothing we can say today can change how deeply his choice wounded us back then and I know that you in particular had never been able to accept what happened. You resent me because you think that what he became is partly my fault, and I don't deny my responsibility in his fate but you've always been to much of an idealist. Not everybody can be saved."

"Maybe sensei, but sometimes I come to think that you've become to much of a fatalist. There are people we are not allowed to give up on."

"Jiraya, this is neither the time nor the place for this discussion. Go, there's someone waiting for you."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. He can be the one waiting for once."

Kakashi huffed, a second later the door opened and Jiraya stuck his head out of the door and grinned at him.

"You agree to go eat somewhere?"

"Why not."

"You're not quite as scrawny as last time I saw you but still a few pounds more wouldn't hurt you."

Kakashi tsked, sure compared to Jiraya he would probably always look scrawny.

They walked in a comfortable silence to one of the bars in the northern district of Konoha.

"Did you know I only saw Orochimaru up near twice."

"Really?"
"The first time I was still a little kid, just before I graduated the academy. My father was in hospital and I went to visit him. In one of the corridors I bumped into Orochimaru and I couldn't help stopping and observing him. He stopped to and just smiled at me. I think it was the time where most shinobi began to think he was at the very least really creepy."

Jiraya snorted.

"And, how did you react?"

"Well... When I finally arrived to my father's room I told him that I had met a very, very pretty woman. He was intrigued and asked me what she looked like. You know how he...was. I told him that she had beautiful inky black hair, pale skin and violet markings around the eyes and that she looked like the high priestesses of the legends he told me about. That last bit about the markings must have given Orochimaru away because my father was suddenly panicked."

Jiraya was laughing and Kakashi felt happy to have gotten such a reaction out of the man with his silly story.

"I can only imagine the white fang's reaction at hearing that his five-year old son had a crush on Orochimaru."

Kakashi smiled. They had arrived at the bar and sat down at a table in the back.

"The second time was years later when I was in anbu and when we were sent to apprehend him."

Jiraya's expression turned sour. He looked at the people around them but his gaze seemed to be fixed on something far away. Then he talked and the usual warm mirth had left his voice.

"Once I had a discussion with him about you, well not you in particular but the kids of your generation. It was one of the last we had before he left the village and just after one of the worst fights he had with sensei. He was pissed, and that didn't happen often. He is a pretty even-tempered person, well, he was at least. Sensei had told him that the experiments he was doing were horrible, that he was doing it for his own well-being and that sacrificing people for such endeavors could only be the act of a monster. At that time Orochimaru had been trying to create a way to regrow limbs. I don’t know how much of it you remember but at the beginning of the third war we had many casualties and soldiers who were permanently injured because of the explosives Iwa had developed. The test subjects were volunteers but still, in the first few experiments all of the people died. We asked him to stop but he thought it was a necessary sacrifice for winning the war. He never managed to find a way to regrow the limbs but he was the one who discovered the limp protection jutsu that we all used for the rest of the war. When we talked after the fight he told me that he thought sensei was a hypocrite. Yes his experiments had killed people but it would protect others. It was a necessary sacrifice. And how was that different to sending children under ten to the front. How was that more moral than sacrificing people for experiments."

Kakashi looked down, these children had been him, and Rin, and Obito and all the others.

"Nee, Jiraya are you trying to convince me of Orochimaru's innocence."

"Certainly not of his innocence but you're clever enough to have your own opinion."

"I think it's no use to talk about morality as a shinobi..."

Jiraya looked up from his drink.

"...I think, there is an inherent immorality to the shinobi world. As you said, I fought in the war
before I was ten, I killed for the first time when I was eight, I became an anbu at fourteen. I certainly know that I have done terrible things. I know there are some people who are able to remain true to their beliefs. People like you or Minato-sensei but I never managed in quite the same way. At this point I can only fight to protect the people I care about and the village to which I belong. I acknowledge that the people I'm fighting are doing the same thing but that doesn't stop me from defeating them."

A heavy silence settled between them. Then Jiraya smiled.

"And still I believe that things one day will be different."

Kakashi did not say anything.

They ate and exchanged smalltalk but the mood wasn't as light as it had been. Finally they left and wished each other goodnight.

Chapter End Notes

Changes from canon:
1. Jiraya comes back to the village earlier: Jiraya is supposed to have the best spynetwork in the whole shinobi world, he is supposed to keep an eye on his old teammate turned missing-nin and he didn't realize that Orochimaru was planning an attack with Suna. I mean Sunna was preparing an army!!! Also I really like Jiraya and I wanted him to be there earlier :).

2. More Jounin senseis and more teams: its just not possible to produce an army as big as the one we see if there are so few genin. also I will add a few older Konoha team who advance to the second part. It's just unrealistic that almost all Konoha genin who advance to the second task are rookies. So there will be a few minor OCs in the next chapters.

If you are interested I have a whole folder on my computer on worldbuilding and a big part about how Konoha's shinobi system has to work. Maybe I'll add more info in the end notes if it interests anyone.

3. Orochimaru accusing Sarutobi of beeing a hypocryte. Remember a few things that happened during the third's reign: a man who had saved his teammates was ostracized by the village and he did nothing about it. A founding clan was ostracized and he did nothing about it. Children were sent to war...
Of course, he often was forced to take those decisions but still I think its interesting to discuss this. Also villains are way more interesting if they aren't purely evil (and I find Orochimaru especially interesting).
September III

Chapter Notes

So... first test of the chunin exam!

I followed the canon closely on this one. I subtly (I hope) added a few allusions to other genin who without being important to the plot will be more than completely generic background characters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

September III

Over the next few days foreign genins and jonins began to fill the village. Brown flat jackets could be spotted among the green ones, the long white and gray tunics, typical of grass country, stood out among the see of green, blue and black typical for Konoha. A nervous energy filled the village. On the one hand chunin exams were always the occasion to hold festivities, on the other hand the wars weren't that far away from everyones memory. Most adults, even civilians, were keeping an eye open, never really relaxing in the presence of foreigners.

Kakashi had had his hands full in the last few days. Even the jonin senseis were asked to participate in the updated surveillance roster. His cute little genins also held some of his attention. While Naruto and Sasuke were buzzing with excitement Sakura was unusually subdued.

Ah the mysteries of teenage self-doubts. Certainly the exam was frightening and most chunin were doing their best to spread rumors of terrible trials and bloody casualties, but the girl was clever and blessedly pragmatic (except when it came to her damned crush). Then again, it was her choice. It seemed that she got over her fear, because she did show up on the day of the exam.

He met them in front of the room that led to the first exam. A few last words, a smile, they would have to do the rest now.

He heard from Gai later on, that Sasuke managed to get himself in trouble with the green beasts pupil. The boy couldn't resist the challenge and they ended up fighting each other, where all the other could see their skill and figure out their secrets. Not just that, apparently they took it to far and Gai himself had to intervene.

Kakashi sighted at that. He was quite certain, that when they were kids, Gai and him never were that careless, despite their rivalry. If only the young Uchiha would learn to be less impulsive. Contrary to popular beliefs Sasuke had just as much talent as Naruto when it came to provoking trouble.
Ibiki had come into the classroom with a very clear task in mind: create an atmosphere suitable to weed out those among the students, who did not have the mental strength to survive the hurdles of a chunin life. Of course the change in locations would make that slightly more difficult. The caves under the lake near Konoha that shinobis had used as a prison during the last war would have brought a certain special ‘touch’ to his performance, but he could do without. He appeared inside the room by shunshin with most of the members of his interrogation brigade. The large classroom was full. 153 applicants this year. 72 from Konoha, that was a little less than last year. 30 from Suna, that was a lot and could be problematic, if Jiraiya suspicions were founded. Then there were the three sound ninjas, that were already looking for trouble, pitting themselves against a group of Konoha genin, Gais and some of the rookies if he wasn't mistaken. A gangly Konoha-genin with glasses was leaning against a wall, victim of some skirmish between applicants. So the fights had already broken out. Interesting but annoying. This exam wasn't about mere hitting and picking.

"Thanks for waiting, I'm Morino Ibiki, the examiner for the chunin selection exam's first test."

And then he pointed at the little bellicose group at the back.

"Why are you fighting already? Do you want to fail?"

One of them, covered in bandaged and with a large fur draped onto his back spoke up lazily:

"I apologize, this is our first time. We got a bit carried away."

Ibiki sighed and went on explaining the rules. Already he could see the ones who listened closely, looking for tricks and hints. The more experienced genin had an advantage there, they knew that most parts of the exam were anything but straightforward. Despite his order to remain silent a pink haired girl interrupted him. He brushed her off, coldly, but he could see the bright spark of intelligence in her striking green eyes. That one would probably pass. Quickly most of the students concentrated on their paper or, for those who had figured it out, started cheating more or less successfully.

Honestly these genins attempt at cheating may escape the chunin notice he had posted in the room but very little could hope to hide from him. Just in the first few minutes, he saw the silent interaction between a pretty unnoticeable girl and Gais clone. The girl was manipulating a mirror that she had hidden god-knows-how in the ceiling. A bold move, pretty impressive. Who was he kidding. Of course Gai was producing crazy students. One of the Suna teams seemed to have developed a clever code, based on surprisingly subtle gestures, which allowed them to share their knowledge.

A lot of kids from clans, especially those from Konoha, were using their kekkai genkais to hunt for answers. Right of the bat, he could see the way a young Inuzuka used his dog to survey the room and tell him the answer, the Aburame boy was using some of their bugs, both Hyugas had activated their byakugan and so did the Uchiha with his sharingan.

Others had to be more inventive. He realized that on the third row most of the students seemed to look vacant, which indicated some kind of genjutsu. The boy on the far left must have initiated it, because he was subtly forcing them to turn their test toward a girl with beady eyes a row above. Probably a teammate. Honestly, the kids were interesting these days, but so obvious it almost made him cringe from time to time.

As a result, more than fifty students had left the room after 45 minutes. Now the fun part began, as he
introduced them to the dilemma that would decide of their success or defeat in this test.

"If you remain for this question, but fail it you will spend your whole life as a genin, it will be the end of all your dreams and ambitions. Or you could quit now, and try again next year."

After a wave of silent protest went over the room, first, the chunin plants left. After that a few cowards got up and abandoned, in less than a few minutes more than thirty people left, until again a tense silence filled the room.

Ibiki was ashamed but not surprised to see that a lot of the one’s who abandoned were Konoha shinobis, proportionally at least as many as from the other villages. But the teams who remained seemed to be strong, even if surprisingly the rookies were all still in the room.

And then that loud blond brat went and surprised him, explaining brashly that nothing would stop him from becoming Hokage and brushing away all the other attendant’s fears. Well, they were one crazy generation, different enough, worrying sometimes, but Ibiki felt a spark of hope and excitement in his chest. His sarcastic smile became a wide grin and he told them they had passed.

After the test the genin rushed out of the room in different states of excitement. A one week respite had been ordered. Some of the older genin noticed that it was unusual, the different phases of the exam were usually completed the one after the other with the exception of the final fight. Most just appreciated the extra time to prepare. Only the jonin knew it was a security measure that allowed the village to set up the security for the next task.

When team 7 exited the building they saw their sensei lazily leaning against a tree on the opposite side of the entrance to the exam place. When they came up to him the orange book he always read was put away and he took the time to look at each of them and said in a unusually serious voice:

"You passed. I'm proud of you."

Even Sasuke had to admit that the warm feeling of pride, of knowing that he had shone in the eye of his sensei was nice and strangely new. For years he had trained and pushed himself, only to achieve his goal. The praise of his academy teachers seemed fake and unimportant.

Even before that when the clan was still alive most praise had been for his brother. Actually Itachi had been the only one to praise him in a way that felt meaningful. He looked at his teacher and absently wondered if Itachi and Kakashi-sensei had ever met.

Sensei bought dinner for all of them and they ate the take-away sitting on one of the roofs of Konoha. The sun was shining orange-red on the village. The Hokages stone faces didn't seem to look down at them with their usual seriousness, instead it felt like proud endearment and Sasuke could admit to himself that he felt happy. Not just content that he progressed on his path, but truly happy. Naruto was smiling and talking loudly and for once Sakura seemed to listen. Kakashi-sensei was looking at the mountain walls with the Hokages faces and seemed at peace. When he looked at him and caught his gaze, instead of the fake one-eyed smile, he only saw a slight twitching under the mans mask and guessed the man was giving him a little genuine smile. He didn't quite smile back but he wasn't scowling either.
So, some random comment about my plans for the characters.

Each arc of the story focuses on the development of one of the three team 7 kids more than the others. In the first one it will focus a little more on Sakura, mainly because I can't bear to write a completely useless female character that has no interesting characteristic.
Interlude: of obedience

Chapter Summary

Hello. So this chapter is special. There will be interludes throughout the story, which I use to explore characters I don't usually have the time to write in the main story. They are quite short so I will always post them with a "normal" chapter. You don't really need to read them but they usually offer some clues about the main plot.

Interlude 1: Of obedience

Temari was waiting in the room Konoha had given them for the week. She shared it with Kankuro because Gaara had taken the other room and neither of them wanted to be alone with him. Their sensei was talking with the other sand-jonins and Temari knew why. She felt a weight settle in her stomach.

Aged thirteen she had never been on a battle field before. She had been on missions of course, had seen death in the eyes several times. She was the Kazekage's daughter after all she reminded herself. She had made genin when she was ten and the only reason that could prevent her from becoming chunin this year was if she had to carry out her fathers, her Kazekage's orders before the end of the exam.

This was what she had been trained for all her life. What they had been trained for the three of them. Kankuro, Gaara and her would be her father's best soldiers. It wasn't quite the truth of course. Everybody knew that even the Kazekage feared Gaara. He wasn't a soldier, he was a time bomb. Still, on this mission he would serve his purpose and contribute to Suna's victory.

Temari did her best to forget he was her brother too and not just Suna's weapon. It was easier when she felt his murderous aura that could turn just as easily against her than against a stranger or an enemy. It was harder when she saw him alone in a dark room, the eyes wide open and looking up at her and suddenly she couldn't ignore that he was still the same frightened boy she had once protected fiercely.

When Temari was eight, Kankuro seven and Gaara six she had always been the one to get punished. She was the oldest and cared for her siblings more than for the village. For that alone she got punished. When they took Kankuro from her and told her that he had the best chakra control and that from now on he would train with the puppeteers she had refused and began a strong resistance. She went and tried to change her father's mind with sound, logical arguments and not with pleas and begging because her father hated "useless sentimentalism". He ignored her and when she insisted he
punished her. They took her brother away. When she saw him again two years later he was almost completely mute as if the dark caves in which the puppeteer apprentice learnt and lived had taken his voice. Puppeteers were silent people, used to guard the secrets of their craft. They lived in the cold caves in the desert so that they could work without distractions. They were good soldiers. They left their feelings in the caves and hid their traits with the ritualistic paint. They became puppets themselves at the hands of the brass.

Kankuro over the years had taken it one step further and he had let his puppet take his place. Temari knew that the person at which side she walked was her brothers proudest creation and not him. When she had seen him again after two years she hadn't recognized the silent, calm boy which skin was completely white from never leaving the caves.

Temari's skin was golden-brown, burnt by the sun under which she trained every day. The wind lived in her and she had learnt to love the kiss of the sand on her skin. She was brilliant everyone said but none of her teachers had been able to inculcate obedience into her. After all her real teacher had been the desert and he had taught her the cruelty of life, the beauty of the world and the taste of absolute freedom. No one can cage the wind.

At age ten she got punished a lot. They made her a genin because she was too good for them to deny her. She still didn't know how to obey. Each morning she left the city walls and danced, trained in the desert. Her father forbade it, she did it anyway. They punished her. Some days her hands were numb from the hits they gave her on it. Her sensei bandaged them carefully and threw her long, contemplative looks. He came from the west of the land of wind and knew the rocky mountains like Temari knew the desert. She liked her sensei.

When Temari was eleven her brother Gaara began to kill more and more. Her father locked him away. Temari went to change his mind. She knew it wouldn't work, she knew she would get punished, she did it anyway. Gaara broke out of every cell he was locked in. For some time it made Temari laugh with unrepentant glee. Then Gaara began to slaughter again. Temari learnt to fear him.

Temari grew up and she didn't always have the time to dance, train in the desert. She had to go to her father’s councils. She was not allowed to say anything and had to bite her tongue until it bled to refrain from saying what she thought. Her father did not care for Suna's shinobi, he did not care for Suna's people, he only cared for Suna's pride she realized at that time. Sometimes she couldn't stop herself and protested with sound, logical arguments because her father hated "useless sentimentalism". She got punished anyway. She repeated her arguments to her teacher and some of the chunin. And they nodded jerkily. More and more people knew she was right.

Her father caught wind of it. He punished her but that was nothing new. He sent her on a long, difficult mission. She came back even stronger. She was informed that her brother had been sent on a mission to, he barely came back alive. Waiting in the hospital room for Kankuro to wake up she realized how selfish she had been. She promised Kankuro to be obedient now, he asked her not to be in his quiet voice. She went to her father and promised to follow his orders from now on. The desert wind had stilled.

When Temari was thirteen she was more calm and rarely got punished anymore. She loved her siblings but feared them too. She was good at pretending they were only her fellow sand-shinobies. Kankuro got louder as if to fill the blank and he got punished from time to time. But Kankurro had
never known the freedom of the desert and learnt its fair but bitter lessons. He knew some things
were wrong but he didn't see like Temari did. When they got their mission: infiltrate the chunin exam
in Konoha and help the surprise attack against the leaf, he accepted because they would be together
and they would be able to prove themselves outside of their father’s influence. Temaro bit her tongue
and did not say that attacking the leaf was stupid. The leaf was no threat for them. On the one hand
the desert protected Suna from the land of fire but on the other the wind could not force its way
through Konoha's deep forests.

Why risk such a long standing peace? Why endanger their shinobi? Why burden their citizens with
the consequences of disrupting their exchanges with their main trade partners. After all crop does not
grow in the desert but it does in the large fields that stretch themselves beyond the deep forests of the
fire-nation's border. Temari bit her tongue. She was only thirteen, a genin and her father's soldier. In
her room in Konoha she went over the battle strategy instead of wondering if her brothers would
survive the fight.
Team 7 met again the morning after their quiet celebration on top of Konoha’s roofs but the relaxed atmosphere of the last night had been put behind. For once, their teacher had arrived on time and his book was nowhere to be seen which was a sure sign that he was serious.

“I suppose that you already understand that this exam is no joke. The proctors will do anything to get past your limits. It’s not so much about seeing what you can do and more about what you can survive.”

The genin gulped.

“So I will train you. We have seven days. We will train for the six first days. We will meet each morning here at six and stop at eight in the evening. Don’t worry about the food I will bring it.”

For one second their teacher seemed to hesitate then looked at them a determined look in his eyes.

“I want all of you to prove that a few rookies cannot be underestimated.”

Naruto nodded with enthusiasm and Sakura and Sasuke seemed just as determined.

“First you have to accept that you are at a disadvantage. To put it bluntly compared to most of the other contestants you are weak.”

Sasuke wanted to growl his disapproval. He wasn't weak, he was the best genin of his year, he had completed the first task easily, or kind of easily. He wasn't weak.

“You are at a disadvantage for two reasons: one, you are rookies. You have less experience, less knowledge but I do think you can overcome that because you are good. You have more potential, more inner strength, and more talent than almost all of the others but the others don’t know that which means that without a doubt you will be targeted twice as often as the other genin because others will believe that you are easy preys. You should keep a low profile. Most good chunins are silent chunins. So got it. Be discreet. Naruto, don't get distracted. I'm talking to you specifically: look me in the eye! I repeat: be discreet.”

Naruto pouted and huffed.
“I got it sensei I won't attract too much attention. You don't have to insist.”

“Mmh, I think I will insist. Naruto if you ever want me to buy you ramen in the next ten years you will be very, very discreet and silent and careful not to make a mess.”

“Why don't you tell that to teme over there.” He pointed at the Uchiha

“Naruto, how dare you to accuse Sasuke-kun he would never...”

“...Actually, I think you make a good point. Sasuke, don't pick fights without reason, don't insult people and stop emitting these... waves of arrogance and sullenness.”

Now, Sasuke was really annoyed.

“I'm not the one attracting attention, I mean I'm not the one going around wearing orange!”

From then on the discussion erupted into chaos. Two minutes later relative calm had settled over the group again.

“If I were to train you in a normal way I would try to find your weaknesses and we would train to overcome them but we ain't got the time to do that. Instead, we will train what your best at and you will have to rely on each other to cover your weaknesses.”

“So Sasuke. You have the Sharingan and you're beginning to know how to use it. You have good chakra reserves, you are quick and you are strong. You will be the offensive element of the group. Basically, you are the one who is supposed to take out the enemy.”

Sasuke nodded, he liked the sound of that.

“So you will be training me to use the sharingan.”

“No. I'll teach you how to use katon great fireball correctly.”

Sasuke looked incredulously as his teacher.

“That's bullshit, I learned that as a kid.”

“Then its a shame that you still don't know how to use it correctly. Look, Katon is the most appropriate release for offensive warfare, as you so politely pointed out you are already more than familiar with it. I think that a week will be enough to master it completely.”

Now on to you, Naruto...”

The kid was excitedly looking at him.

“You will be the defense.”

“What!” With a cry of indignation, the blond boy began gesticulating around. "No way I will be a boring guard. If I want to be Hokage one day I need to have super strong attacks to wipe out all my enemies and look cool.”

Kakashi sighed and decided to go for a little manipulation.
“It that really what you think. Isn't the Hokage's greatest task to protect the village and all its inhabitants? But maybe you don't want to be Hokage anymore...”

Naruto immediately deflated.

“Ok. You may be right, Kakashi-sensei.”

“You have the most chakra and endurance but you lack the precision to actually land hits.”

“That so wrong Kakashi-sensei. I beat up a lot of people with my attacks.” Their teacher let out a tired sigh.

“Let's put it that way: right now you have more chakra than me Naruto.”

“Reaallyy!!”

“Yes. Admittedly, for a jounin, I have pretty little of it but for a genin your chakra reserves are extraordinary. But even if you used your strongest attack, even if I taught you a very strong jutsu you would still not be able to beat me. I have more skill and speed and experience and you would never be able to touch me. There is little chance that you could beat an experienced opponent.”

Now let's think of it the other way around: if a stronger opponent tried to attack you he would have a lot of problems to beat you. You have so much chakra and you have enough resistance to just get back up on your feet every time someone lands a hit. We will work on that to find a way for you to use that to protect your teammates.”

Again, the boy was nodding enthusiastically. It was almost sad how little one had to do to make Naruto happy. A little like a stray dog whose loyalty could be bought with only a scrap.

“We will work on new ways to use your clones and I will teach a few tricks to defend with chakra. Now, on to you, Sakura.”

The pink-haired girl stood straighter and listened obediently like the proper little schoolgirl she had been raised to be.

“Your strength is your intelligence. Your job will be to direct the energy of these two. In a fight, you will have to try to figure out the opponent's moves and decide how you will counter them. For the following week, you are allowed to question every one of my orders and you will be allowed to order Naruto and Sasuke to do anything that you see fit. Sasuke, Naruto you are allowed to question or ignore neither my nor Sakura's orders understood.

An angry shout of "whaaaat" came from Naruto's side and Sasuke growled. Well, they would learn to deal with it. He wanted Sakura to learn to think for herself, the boys on the other side were already thinking too much for themselves.

"In the morning we will train your mastery of jutsus and chakra together but Sakura you will join us only in the afternoon. Physically you are weak and I can't accept that and neither should you if you don't want to be a burden for your team during the exam."

Sakura flinched but nodded.

“Do you see the Hokage mountain behind us. You won't train with us before you have been able to climb to the top without using chakra.”

The young girl gulped and looked skeptically at the rocky, vertical surface but nodded again.
“To begin I want to have a good grasp on your chakra reserves and your chakra control. I want you to tree-walk as you learned in the land of waves, keep walking up and down and we will see who tires first.”

All three of his genin readied themselves and began the exercise on his signal. Kakashi on his side uncovered his left eye. While the Sharingan was a much less precise tool to analyze chakra than the Byakugan, paired with Kakashi's experience he had a cursory impression of their use of chakra.

Sasuke on the left was a strong concentrated presence. His chakra was rushing to his feet with the strength of his intent. His chakra had the incisive coldness he had observed in most Uchiha. His chakra reserves were remarkable as could be expected from the son of a clan head. However, his control was lacking. He directed his chakra with a kind of furious determination that still wasted too much energy.

Sasuke's chakra was plenty and intense but was dwarfed by the radiant presence of Naruto's chakra. It emitted an almost blinding warmth. The feeling of it crashing against his senses was accompanied by a sad sense of familiarity. More than once he had had to rein in his emotions when he felt that chakra and forgot for a second that it was Naruto's and thought for a second that he recognized Minato's brightness. Underneath that warmth, he could feel the ferocious and nefarious power of the Kyubi that slowly diluted into Naruto's warmth, like black ink in water. Kakashi made an effort to not let the Sharingan get overwhelmed by the raw energy and concentrate on the way Naruto used it and sighed. All similarities stopped there. While Minato's chakra had always projected careful control and restraint his son didn't seem to have the slightest idea of what these words might mean. Waves of chakra were escaping through every wasteful movement he used to climb the tree. And while the boy could now tree-climb his step were still unsure and irregular.

Next to him, Sakura's chakra was almost unnoticeable. She had good chakra reserves for a civilian but for a regular genin her reserves were average at best. Kakashi knew more than anyone how annoying that could be. He was best known in Anbu as the one who failed only three missions in his ten years carrier but was almost as well known for being the one operative who came back from missions unconscious more often than conscious. But still he also knew better than everyone how to make the most of the reserves he had. Sakura wasn't without potential. Her chakra had a interesting kind of sharpness and her control was better than a lot of chunnin with which he had worked with. Assuming that as a civilian she had not had any help when training her chakra control also proved how determined she was and how much she had worked.

After an hour Sakura tired and had to jump from the tree. Kakashi told the other two to come down.

“After the Chunin exam if you are still my students we will tree-walk every day to push your limits. At least Sasuke and Sakura will, you don’t really need it Naruto. However enlarging your chakra pool takes time and there is little sense in doing it know. Naruto and Sasuke you will train your control. Yes, Naruto, again. Chakra control is the basis to learn jutsus. Take this and this.”

He put a pebble into Sasuke's hand and a tinier one in Naruto's.

“Now try to do this.”

He put a little stone on the back of his outstretched hand and pushed his chakra to let it roll towards
his fingers and then flip onto the palm of his hand which was facing the ground. The stone was easily stuck and didn't fall. He let it trail slowly on the underside of his arm before it came back and rolled into his hand.

Naruto immediately tried and immediately failed.

“If you master that technique I will teach you a jutsu tomorrow.”

Sasuke and Naruto threw each other a challenging look.

“Don't misunderstand me, I will teach you a jutsu if both of you master it.”

Naruto began to pout but Sasuke looked at him with a downright murderous glare.

“There is no way dead-last will get it in an afternoon.”

“Well, thankfully he will have your help, right?”

Rivalry was good, teamwork was better.

“Euh, sensei, shouldn't I do it too?” Sakura's timid voice sounded from next to him, she seemed almost hurt.

Instead, he just put the little stone on her small hand and told her to try. Right of the bat, the stone moved on her palm. It was still somewhat jerky but in just a few minutes she was able to make it move without a hitch along her arm.

Naruto was stuck in admiration of her skill and she did her best to try to hide her pleasure while throwing a few glances at the Uchiha. Sasuke only tsked and began to train.

Sakura felt a twinge of disappointment and even anger at the retreating boy. Sasuke could be such a sore loser. Why couldn't he react like Naruto at least once? She turned back to her teacher feeling somewhat intimidated that she would train with him alone. His bored gaze turned to her and she straightened a bit.

“We will do taijutsu.”

Sakura frowned, she just didn't like taijutsu, mainly because she was bad at it, also because in Konoha the beginning of fall was accompanied by an atmosphere charged with humidity and a warm wind that did nothing to dissipate the lingering summer heat and she was sweaty just from walking up and down the tree, also her mother had washed her red dress yesterday and would complain if she came home dirty.

“Ready?”

Sakura wanted to say no but nodded because anything else would make her look like a sullen little girl in the eye of her sensei. Sakura had read the statistics of the third war. She knew her sensei was the youngest academy graduate ever. At her age he had been about to make jounin. She refused to seem lazy. So she fought as well as she knew. Tried to remember every move she had been taught at the academy. She saw a fist coming her way. The standard defense flashed through her mind. She raised her hand and blocked. The power behind the fist made her stumble backward. Still, she tried a
high kick. By throwing a punch his left side should be unguarded. Only her sensei wasn't there anymore. She felt a blinding pain in her side. Well, she had been presumptuous for thinking that such weaknesses could be applied to a jounin. Well, it applied all right for a young genin which side had been left unguarded after her kick.

“Stand up and try again.”

And her side hurt a lot but she didn't want to seem ridiculous so she got back on her feet.

The fights never lasted a lot more than a few seconds and she felt more and more angry, more and more frustrated. Angry tears came to her eyes and she squinted praying that he wouldn't see them.

Again he threw her to the ground and stood above her, looking down at her and that was the last straw. Channeling all the strength she could in her left foot she kicked up between his legs in a move that was certainly not on the standard taijutsu list of the academy. He still evaded but his left eye twitched in what seemed to be a mix of surprise and amusement which was a lot better than bored skepticism.

This time Sakura didn’t bother getting up again.

“Ne, Sensei why do I fail.”

Kakashi crouched down and she looked at him without hiding how annoyed she was.

“First, you fail because you have absolutely no chance to beat me. There are not a lot of Jounin who could take me in a fight. So I never expected that you could even land one hit. It was just a way to measure your progress.”

You probably know yourself that taijutsu is your weakness. But I'm not sure you know why.

“Because I'm weak. She quietly repeated her sensei’s words from that morning.”

“Not exactly. Certainly, you should make efforts to become stronger but my main critic for you is that you fight stupidly.”

Sakura felt her cheeks redden and anger rise inside of her. One thing she had rarely been accused of is stupidity.

“In every one of your movements, I recognize the academy taijutsu basics, which isn't bad as such. I don't expect from a young genin that he already possess his own style, especially without a clan to show him how. But you should be realistic enough to know what can work for you and what has no chance of working. Your small and light and weak compared to most ninjas. Learn to work with that.”

“So what should I do?”

“Continue working on your speed. Stop trying to block and learn to dodge. In your place, I would try to become more flexible.”

“You say that because I'm a girl, right? In the academy, only the girl had to do flexibility exercises.
Most of the boys just skipped it and did strengthening exercises instead.”

“That's bullshit. How do you think I can keep up in Taijutsu with people like Gai. Do you really think that physically I'm as strong as he is.”

Sakura thought about that and looked up and down her sensei who bore it with an amused expression. Her sensei certainly didn't look overly muscled and burly. He actually looked pretty thin and willowy. Which did not mean he wasn't strong. She remembered that in wave country he could wield the big sword of the mist swordsman with only one arm. And in a contest against Gai, she had seen him balance all his weight on two fingers. But still, he certainly wasn't quite as frighteningly powerful and muscly as Gai.

“So you are really doing flexibility exercises.”

“Yes.”

“Then why don’t you tell Naruto and Sasuke to do it too.”

Kakashi seemed to think for a moment.

“If I thought they would really listen to me I might but they must think that "girly stuff" beneath them and that they don’t need it which isn't really wrong. Both Sasuke and Naruto are very strong, physically strong, for their age. Naruto is extremely resistant and without a doubt, he will become stronger and stronger with age. He can afford to fight frontally. And if he is really serious about being the defensive element of your three-man-cell then I even encourage that. If your task is to protect your teammates you cannot dodge. Sasuke's technique is excellent, he is strong and quick. Maybe at one time, he could profit from more flexibility but right now I won't force him.”

Sakura nodded, satisfied. These seemed like reasonable explanations.

For the next hour, Kakashi walked her through various exercises to make her more flexible. And she thought strength work out hurt! Her teacher demonstrated several twisted routines that she found completely impossible to reproduce. Kakashi constantly adjusted her stance and movement and often seemed baffled that she couldn't do certain things ( Ma, what is that. Why can't you do splits. Can't all normally constituted humans do splits. See? It's easy.). She thought that if Ino had been here she would have made several lewd comments but she hurt too much to think anything of her teacher's hand on her thigh when he told her to move it more to the left or took hold of her shoulders to force her to sit straight.

Finally, she rolled to the ground forgetting about dirt and sweatiness and just moaned in pain.

Her teacher chuckled awkwardly:

“We may have gone overboard a little. Want to see how the boys are doing?"

And so she forced her trembling legs to take her weight again and shuffled behind the copy-ninja feeling wrung-out but quite satisfied with the world. After they neared a clearing in the tree-covered training area Kakashi turned to her and signaled her to be quiet. For a second she wanted to admonish him about sneaking up and spying on people but the thrill of excitement and mischief
affected her too and a sinister smile crept on her face.

They were both very careful to not make any noise while approaching, him with swift, agile movements honed over years of stealth-missions, her with the careful meticulosity that her determination inspired her. They hid in a tree a few meters away from the clearing and quickly understood that they hadn't needed such carefulness. Both boys attention was riveted to their task. Sasuke was able to slowly let the pebble roll on the underside of his forearm but his tense expression and sweat-beaded brow showed that the exercise was still difficult for him. Naruto hadn't come so far. He was still struggling to maintain the minuscule stone stuck on his palm turned towards the ground. Suddenly he seemed to look away following the take-off of a bird and the stone fell to the ground.

Immediately he groaned in frustration. Then a second later Sasuke's fist slammed onto his head.

“And again! You're you but still how is it possible to fail that often.”

“Shut up, stupid. I thought you were supposed to teach me!”

Both Kakashi and Sakura mentally prepared themselves for the upcoming storm of an all-out shouting match that seemed to be the inevitable outcome of all interaction between these two. However, they must have had that argument so often already that afternoon that they only focused back on their task. After a few seconds and a few looks to what Naruto was doing Sasuke sighed and walked over to him.

“See dead-last, the problem is not about how much chakra to use but how concentrated it is.”

Naruto nodded vigorously which was a sure sign that he hadn't understood.

Sasuke tsked:

“Give me your hand.”

“Huh?”

Sasuke growled and took Naruto's hand before turning it to face the sky.

“Close your eyes dead last. Now concentrate.”

He touched the palm of Naruto's hand with a finger.

“Do you feel my chakra? Try to gather yours just there. Got it. Ok, I think you're getting it. Gather more of it.”

Then Sasuke drew back carefully as if he was afraid that even a breath could crash Naruto's concentration. Then he picked up the stone again and deposited it slowly on Naruto's hand.

“Now turn your hand, slowly.”

Naruto did as he was told and to both Sasuke's and Naruto’s surprise the stone remained attached.

“Move it. No, not like this just let it roll, careful...”
After a few seconds, the pebble began to roll slowly upwards.

It's the moment Kakashi chose to emerge in the middle of the clearing among a completely unnecessary cloud of smoke.

Sasuke jumped...discretely. Naruto cried out clutching his heart and dropping the stone in the process. Sakura stepped out from behind the tree with a sweet smile. Their team would be alright.

The boys demonstrated their progress and their sensei seemed satisfied since he promised to teach them each a new jutsu the next day.

Sakura got home quickly afterward, annoyed for once that most civilians lived so far away from the training grounds. She didn't even hear her mothers angered reprimands at her appearance through the haze of exhaustion and fell asleep a second after shrugging off her red training dress.
The next day found all three of Kakashi’s students gathered for lunch on a flat stone at the edge of training ground 9. Sakura had spent the morning trying to climb on the uneven surface of the Hokage mountain, her knees, elbows and forearms were covered in bruises and nicks. Several times towards the end, when she had managed to climb more than a few meters, she had felt herself falling only barely gluing herself to the wall with chakra before climbing down and trying again.

During that time Kakashi had worked with Naruto and Sasuke on how to best use their signature techniques. He had suggested a few new ways in which Naruto, the self proclaimed most unpredictable ninja of Konoha, could use his shadow clones. Stick an exploding tag on a clone and set him on the enemy, henge into an enemy’s teammate, use the clones as human shields against jutsus, and so on.

With Sasuke he trained to perfect ‘Katon: Great Fireball’. He challenged Sasuke to send the jutsu at different ranges, to see exactly at which it was most effective and at which it became completely obsolete. Then he forced the boy to change the size of the ball. Sasuke discovered that creating a smaller ball made the jutsu more intense but that lessening the size was limited and creating a small ball was impossible for him for now.

“It's called ‘Katon: Great Fireball’ for a reason. Of course it can't become tiny.”
Kakashi had just smiled sweetly at him. Annoying but he had to admit that he had learnt some tricks about his family jutsu. Which annoyed him too, actually. Why did a Non-Uchiha know so much about that attack.

They were eating the lunch Kakashi had brought. Naruto was complaining loudly. To many vegetables, no ramen. Sasuke was complaining grumpily. Little to no flavor, the ingredients had only been cooked and salted. Sakura didn't complain but her expression of clear distaste may be the most offending of the three reactions, Kakashi mused.

It wasn't his fault exactly. The dishes contained a good balance of all necessary nutrients for optimal functioning of the human body. Kakashi had never been the kind of person who enjoyed food for something other than its nutritional value. Hell, he had only recently upgraded his meals from rations to actual food. He should be complimented for making such an effort.

After the meal came the much awaited prize for the former days efforts. He asked each student what kind of jutsu they wanted to learn. Sasuke wanted a jutsu to throw someone of. Interesting enough, Sasuke's fight against Gai's student must still be on the forefront of his mind. Kakashi could understand that, he knew better than almost everyone else how uncomfortable Gai's techniques could be.

He showed the young Uchiha a katon jutsu he had picked up from an older shinobi long ago, at the end of the third shinobi war. Using his sharingan Sasuke copied the technique. It allowed the user to project burning heat from his palm but required careful chakra control. It was a useful jutsu, in close-combat but also to escape an enemy. It was simple enough with only two hand-signs and had come in handy more than once. To produce the heat the user had to emit some chakra and use some to protect his own hands. Burns were inevitable when learning the technique and Kakashi sent Sasuke off to train with a bottle of salve.

Naruto had wanted ‘a super, duper strong jutsu to crush all enemies and protect his teammates’. Which was quite challenging, especially when Kakashi considered that he needed to find a technique that Naruto could learn in less than a week. Finally he settled for a simple trick. He showed the young jinchuriki how to emit raw chakra from his hand a little bit like the Hyuuga did for the gentle fist, well if the Hyuuga hadn't been the masters of precise and destructive chakra but merely pretty pig-headed powerhouses.

For most people it would be a waste of chakra, for Naruto it was the kind of waste he could afford. Still it was a struggle from the beginning to the end. Narutos chakra control was abysmal to a point where Kakashi began to feel honest admiration for the academy teachers who had been able to pound at least the three or four most basic jutsus, sans the basic clone, into a younger and even more volatile Naruto.

After an entire day Naruto wasn't even close to succeeding, he wasn't even close to beginning to get it, he was a lot closer to failing completely. The jutsu, that wasn't really a jutsu, demanded that the user build up some chakra in his hands and punch it outwards with some precision. But the amount of chakra, the direction, the distance didn't have to be controlled. It led Kakashi to believe that Naruto might get it.
"Just imagine pressing on a balloon filled with water until it suddenly explodes. That's more or less what this jutsu does" he had explained hoping a more concrete image would help the boy. Used and timed correctly the explosion of chakra could be used to deflect weapons and a lot of jutsus. Kakashi still had hope, that Naruto might get it, but not a lot of it.

Finally Sakura wanted a jutsu to distract an enemy and buy herself time. Reasonable Kakashi found. She could use it to protect herself and not be a burden for her team, which was still a possibility at her skill level, but it could also be used to support her team members. He showed her a genjutsu he knew could easily be used in a combat situation.

It first worked on the auditory system and gave the illusion of a great rumbling sound before the visual part of the illusion kicked in and showed the ninja trapped in the genjutsu that a gigantic worm was bursting through the ground just beneath the victim. If the person couldn't escape by dodging or recognizing and dissipating the genjutsu he would be sent into unconsciousness.

With her chakra control becoming a genjutsu master was a very real possibility for Sakura. With how many masters Konoha had lost with the Uchiha massacre she could easily become tokubetsu jonin in five years or so from now. Kakashi wanted to slowly warm her up to that idea, see if it could interest her.

Sakura went off, to learn 'Demonic Illusion: Attack of the Death Worm'. Kakashi spent the rest of the afternoon and the better part of the next day going from one of his students to the other correcting a hand-sign, checking for correct chakra-use and trying, maybe in vain to help the last of his students work his jutsu out.

Progress was quick for his first two student. Sasuke could use the technique quite efficiently and while the heat it produced wasn't quite as high as it could be it was sufficient for most situations. The young Uchiha still burnt himself more times than not and Kakashi had him work on it.

"If you can't hold a kunai afterward it's not a very practical technique, isn't it?"

Sakura had mastered most of the technical aspect of the genjutsu. It was a moderately complex jutsu but demanded good chakra control and the ability to project the illusion flawlessly onto ones surroundings. Kakashi still pointed out a few discrepancies. A fake looking patch of dirt, a rock that looked slightly transparent but the girl's mistakes became fewer and fewer.

Even Naruto progressed at a somewhat slow pace, he could finally gather some chakra in his hands but most of a time he let it out to quickly so that he couldn't yet produce the intended effect of an invisible outwards going explosion.

The mornings were still used for chakra control and, in Sakura's case, rock climbing.

On the fifth day she joined them a little before midday and proudly announced that she had left a
note for Kakashi-sensei on top of the rock wall. Kakashi eye-smiled at her, already knowing that she managed it. Naruto wasn’t the only one who could use the shadow clone.

That evening he corrected their taijutsu. Sadly there was less progress. Taijutsu was a skill you refined slowly, through constant training. Unlike ninjutsu or genjutsu there were no leaps and bounds only a slow ascent. Still he was somewhat satisfied with their abilities. Sasuke had an excellent form and technique but lacked some imagination. Naruto had strength and a strange kind of intuition for finding an opponents weakness, even though his technique resembled that of a drunken bar-brawl more than shinobi taijutsu. It would make Gai weep, but it was somewhat efficient. Finally, Sakura was still by far the weakest taijutsu user of the three and compared to the rest of the genin of her generation she was mediocre but she improved step by step, hit by hit.

On the sixth day he told them not to meet the next day and forbid them from training. Letting their muscle repair and their chakra replenish was the best kind of preparation they could have. He just hoped that these five days were enough.

Chapter End Notes

If you ask yourself why I did not use the shadow clone training for Naruto it is, basically, because I don't like it. I know, like a lot of people, I thought it was pretty cool at first, but it also makes training time extremely short and when you think about it it's incredibly powerfull.

Naruto could read tones of books while using the clones and become insanely knowledgable, he could replace the whole working force of Konoha's economy. Konoha could become an industrious city and outbuy it's opponents just by using the insane potential of Naruto's shadow clones.

I know I'm taking a lot of liberties with the plot and I apologize for it but to still make this story realitic I layed some "shadow-clone ground rules":

Naruto can make a lot appear when they are close to him but the farther away they go, the more chakra they need, the fewer Naruto can make.

That's all for now.
September VI

Chapter Notes

Next chapter and next test in the chunin exam, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

September VI

The morning of the exam found most of Konoha's genin and the newly arrived Suna, Ame, Taki and Kusa genin assembled around the impressive gates of the Hattori clan district. Long ago the Hattori clan had been a merchant clan with skilled traders and a few shinobies. They had always followed the saying that money has no smell and perhaps taken it a little too far when they'd insisted on remaining trade partners with Iwa during the Second Great Shinobi war. When it was discovered that some of their trade included iron to forge weapons there had been all kinds of protests. They weren't doing anything illegal as such, but no one among Konoha's military was sad nor surprised, when soon later the clan chief died in mysterious circumstances. The close family fled to Taki, other clan members left Konoha for calmer parts of Fire-country, and the rest integrated into the population. The clan grounds remained almost unchanged. Some would suggest it was a symbol to remind everyone that loyalty was valued above all else in Konoha and that any perceived treachery could be ended quite brutally.

Now the condemned entrance of the big clan compound instilled a feeling of excitement and fear in the young ninja for a completely different reason. This would be the playgrounds for the next exam. Here they would risk their lives. Sasuke was looking around trying to gauge the abilities of the people around him. As far as he knew 26 teams had made it to the second task. As he had suspected the trio from Suna that they met a few days ago, had passed. The ominous chakra he had felt from the red-haired boy had made the hairs on his arms stand on ends. Immediately he had known that he wanted to fight him. Soon he may have the opportunity. He could hear Kakashi-sensei's voice in the back of his mind telling him to avoid fights against opponents with unknown powers. He would try to avoid it, but not to hard.

A woman appeared from a nearby tree, long beige coat fluttering in the wind and crashing in the middle of the field, raising a cloud of dust. How flashy and unnecessary. Sasuke however hadn't been able to sense her at all, he admitted to himself, which meant that she must be strong. That, Sasuke felt, was good. He respected very little things apart from strength. The woman began to explain the rules of the exam. Each team would get a scroll, either a black "earth" scroll or a white "sky" scroll. Then they would be thrown into the Hattori ruins for three days. At the end they would pick however had survived and had hoarded together two scrolls: an earth scroll and a sky scroll.

After getting the nodded agreement from Sakura and the loud ok from Naruto he went to get their
own scroll. On the way there the Hyuga guy threw him a challenging look and a condescending smirk but the raven-haired boy ignored it. He had promised to avoid confronting everyone who crossed his path. In the little secluded area he gave all three of his teammate's written agreements to the conditions of the test. They had received the papers a few minutes ago and signed without hesitating. At this point they were all determined to go through with it and, in Sasuke's case, win every fight he'd be involved in. He received a black scroll which he hid under his shirt and not in is weapon pouch. Stealing was forbidden before the beginning of the task but he didn't want to take any chances.

They were brought to four separate doors to the Hattori district. With his group he was told to wait at a side door near Konoha's outer wall. Five other groups were waiting as well but none that had left a particular impression on him.

“You will enter this task one group after the other. We will wait five minutes before letting the next group in. The order has been chosen in relation to the scores of the first exam.”

That's the moment Sasuke realized they were in a bad place. Sakura must have noticed too. The second the first team had been let in she hit Naruto on the head.

“See in which kind of mess we are because of you who couldn't score even one point in the written exam!”

“But Sakura”, Naruto whined, “we just have to wait for fifteen minutes.”

“Twenty-five, stupid”, Sasuke cut in, “and that's not the problem. What do you think will the other teams do during these twenty-five minutes?”

“Go away.”

“No, they will set an ambush for us.”

Naruto pouted.

“Then we will just show them that we are stronger.”

Sakura seemed to want to shout at him again. But Sasuke interrupted her.

“For once your right. I don't think any of them are any good anyway. None of them stood out in my mind.”

“Sasuke you’re so right.” Sakura swooned. “We trained so hard this week, there's no way they can get us!”

Twenty-five minutes later they were finally allowed to step into the Hattori ruins. They were faced with small crumbling buildings that were slowly destroyed by the growing vegetation. A narrow road led into a dense forest of long, lean birches. The ground was split open in several places when roots had cracked open the stone pavement.

Carefully the three stepped onto the road. Behind them the metallic door fell shut with an ominous click.

Their eyes roamed the surrounding buildings. The broken windows let them peek into dark rooms which seemed to be perfect places for a sharp-shooter to take position in. Sasuke activated his sharingan but did not see anything suspicious.

Maybe the other teams didn't want to take the risk of being so close to each other and had set out.

Slowly they entered the forest. Sasuke felt something to his right but it was only a bird. These were the kind of moments where he could feel the shortcomings of a sharingan. The Ushiha kekkai genkai allowed the user to perceive every detail of his surrounding even ones so small that no normal human should be able to take note of them. He should be able to see every disruption of the natural environment, every detail that indicated that something was out of place. It was a great tool but it wasn't the Byakugan which could detect human chakra a mile away, see through everything and made every camouflage obsolete. Of course, the analytical abilities of the sharingan were one of the many skills it offered and there was no kekkai genkai that could rival it's abilities in genjutsu or it's prowess in helping master ninjutsu.
Suddenly he felt a whoosh of air behind him and ducked instinctively. The next second a kunai flew a few millimeters past his shoulder. His sharingan had seen the throw. The attacker must be somewhere behind him, on the left probably behind that big tree.

“Careful we are under attack”, he shouted out. Immediately they set into a three man formation. Naruto in front, Sakura and Sasuke behind. Sasuke was still in possession of the scroll, he had insisted he should keep it and while Naruto had argued Sakura had agreed. He was to defend it at all cost.

In a flurry of movement an attacker was upon him. He narrowly avoided a ball of water aimed for his face. Before his sharingan caught sight of a kick coming for his face. He dodged easily but his opponent raised a wave of water behind which he disappeared. A second later his sharingan saved him again when he was able to distinguish the fist coming his way through the water. He attacked in turn and his feet caught the water clone under the chin before it disappeared into a splash of water and he saw who was fighting him. His opponent was a girl a few years older than him, with round doe-eyes and shoulder long hair. Her expression was blank and her moves careful and flowing. She seemed to be constantly in movement favoring sweeping kicks and rolls to more straightforward attacks. Reading her hand signs he executed a very large fireball that successfully dissipated the barrage of water-bullets before they hit him. Hoping that the mist would hide him he launched an attack in the girl's direction but she deflected his kick and sprang back.

He jumped back and they looked at each other.

He had to admit she was strong, probably as strong as him. He had underestimated the other teams. At no point did Sasuke notice that girl or any of her teammates. She was a Konoha genin her forehead protector said so he must have crossed her path from time to time.

Sasuke wanted to damn his own stupidity. How many other teams had he overlooked because they weren't obnoxious in their display of power, how many other unnoticeable genin were actually just as strong as him. The exam may very well be harder than he thought.

Again they clashed. His kunai against hers and only his reflexes allowed him to jump over her kick. Just in time he aimed a fireball at the spray of water that came his way. Behind him he could hear the clash of kunais which meant that Naruto and Sakura must be fighting this girl's teammates.

It seems that they did indeed land in an ambush and Sasuke began to doubt it would be so easy to win against these guys.

Sakura turned around the second Sasuke alarmed them. And not a second to late. A barrage of kunai was headed her and Naruto's way. The young blonde immediately expelled some chakra and deviated the weapons and Sakura jumped behind him as they had trained to in the last few days. The moment Naruto's chakra dissipated she threw her own shuriken still not knowing exactly where their opponent was hiding.

The next second something slashed her arm and she realized a second to late that the kunai were attached to ninja wire. Naruto to her right cursed and asked her in a rushed tone if she was ok. She nodded, the gash was superficial. A second later they turned again. A girl had landed behind them and in a wide arc a kunai came whirling for their throat. It had been attached to wire and the girl was wielding it like a lasso.

Both jumped back in time but their opponent didn't let up and threw her kunai again while running up to Naruto and aiming a downward kick at his face. The boy blocked but stumbled back. He immediately materialized three clones that he launched at the girl. Their opponent didn't seem bothered by it and used a long rope that was still hanging from the tree to lift herself up in one
smooth move before hitting a clone, letting go and concentrating all her downward momentum in a kick that killed of both remaining clones and almost caught Sakura in the shoulder. The young kunoichi sprang back behind her blond teammate. Taijutsu was her weakness. It certainly wasn't that girl's weakness. She must be a few years older than her and wore her Konoha sign on her forehead. A short blond ponytail moved at every one of her jumps and rolls. She was wearing dark blue pants and no shoes and constantly aided herself with ropes and ninja wire. She looked at them with a wide grin.

Again Sakura had to duck under three shuriken and then jumped up when she realized that one of them had been attached to wire that was meant to trap her.

She retreated behind Naruto remembering what Kakashi had told her: her task was to think a way out of this situation.

Their opponents were strong: the girl fighting against Sasuke knew at least five different water-based ninjutsus and was good enough to avoid every one of Sasuke's attacks. Sasuke seemed to be able to keep up with her but defeating her would be difficult.

The girl they were fighting against seemed to use little ninjutsu, nothing more than basic replacements, however her style of fighting, her constant barrage of kunais and shuriken, her tricks and her powerful taijutsu, were keeping Naruto occupied. She thought of trying a genjutsu but the blond girl was moving across the clearing without leaving herself open for an attack for more than a second and the brown-haired one was fighting Sasuke in close combat, their was no way she could project it on her without touching Sasuke.

Sakura was the first to see the girls' third teammate emerging from behind a bush finishing the last hand-sign of what seemed to be a basic genjutsu. She said Kai before the illusion of hundreds of moths could take her under. Sasuke was already free and it took her only a second to wake Naruto out of the genjutsu. They had enough time to see the attack from their third opponent easily.

The boy was aiming a kunai at Naruto's exposed midriff but the attack was clumsy and his hold of the kunai was awkward which was absolutely ridiculous. Academy students learnt how to hold a kunai in their first year. Sakura was about to dismiss him as a weak opponent, one even she could take out, when her eyes, still drawn by the blatantly wrong grip of the kunai, fell onto the shape tattooed onto the boy's hand.

The next second she looked up and saw that Sasuke had aimed a fireball at the boy's head that the genjutsu only barely dodged before the Ushiha was drawn back into the fight against the water-jutsu using girl. Naruto however threw a kunai at the boy, that hit its mark and the boy fell to the ground with a kunai in his thigh. Sakura was on him the next second, holding a kunai to his throat.

"Everybody stop fighting or your teammate will die." She shouted knowing she wouldn't act on her threat.

The two other girls stopped for a moment but the blond-haired one settled in a battle stance.

"No way you will have the guts."
"Maybe but I won't hesitate to cut the ligaments of his feet. I don't think you can complete this task with him unable to walk."

The blond tsked but did not say anything.

In the next few seconds no one said or moved and Sakura began to feel unsure. Considering they were supposed to be strong opponents, she found them pretty unresponsive.

"Give me your scroll and I will let him go."

After a second the brown-haired one took out a scroll and walked slowly up to her. Sakura tensed up. This was too easy. She caught a strange movement from the side of her field of vision. The air seemed to flicker like it sometimes did in summer. It was also a tell that one was trapped in a genjutsu.
“Shit. Kai!” She swore before jumping back and joining her two fingers.

She found herself looking at the upper branches of trees hanging upside down from a branch, her legs bound together and her arms secured to her side. A second she had to fight an almost overwhelming nausea and sense of disorientation. Her two teammates were dangling a few meters apart, obviously still trapped in a genjutsu.

It took her almost ten minutes just to free a hand and manage to do the three hand signs for the rope-freeing jutsu. She felt the bindings around her hands loosen and lifted herself up until she could carefully unbind her feet and then swung herself onto a nearby branch. She disrupted both Naruto’s and Sasuke’s chakra and helped them get out of the ropes binding them. Sasuke immediately checked if they had the scroll and swore when he realized it had been taken.

“We have to go after them.” Naruto immediately suggested and Sasuke seemed murderous enough to agree.

“We will not do that.” Sakura stated and tried to ignore the dark look Sasuke was sending her.

“These guys surprised us. They are really good”, after a second of silence she added: “Probably better than us. The two girls could easily keep up with you two and the boy was able to layer two genjutsus. That’s pretty hard, I don't think a lot of genin can do that.”

“How did he do that anyway, I didn't feel it at all.” Naruto asked.

Sakura refrained from saying that he never felt genjutsus anyway.

“I wondered about that too. Its very hard to trap three people at the same time but I think it was the sign on his hand.”

“The strange kind of swirly thing?”

“Yes, it must be a conductor that sucks our mind into a genjutsu. And I think we were all glancing at it because he was holding the kunai so strangely.”

“I did.” Sasuke said

“I think I looked at it too.” Naruto admitted.

“They planned it all”, Sakura sighed. “They aren't even that much stronger than us but they knew exactly what they were doing.”

She gathered her resolve, they still had the better part of three days, they couldn't give up.

“We have to do the same they did: find a group, make a plan and then trap them!”

Chapter End Notes

So a few changes I made:

- It's not in the forest of death. This is the result of a mistake I made. I thought the manga stated that the forest of death was Orochimaru's former favorite training ground and as in this story people know he may be up to something during the exam, I thought it would be stupid to have the exam happen there. But I reread the manga recently and it is only implied that it is Anko's favorite training ground and not Orochimaru's so I could have kept the Forest of death. At that point I had already written a lot of this and did not want to change it so hopefully it does not bother you to much.

- I added new oppoments, a slightly older Konoha-team. This is part of my ungoing effort to show that there may be other ninja in Konoha appart from the super special and talented Konoha 11. I mean it's weird that almost all Konoha-nin who made it past the
first task in the manga were rookies. So for those who really hate OCs don't worry, these characters are not really important, they may appear as background Ninja again but they will have little interaction with team 7 except here, fighting them.
Kakashi was patiently waiting near the entrance of the Hattori ruins that served as the location for the second task. The atmosphere was tense, as everyone knew these kinds of trials would be the most opportune for infiltrations or covert attacks. To make matters worse, at the beginning of the task a Kusa-team had been reported missing and despite some last-minute searches they had had to start without them. The number of entrances had been limited to four and large-scale seals had been placed around the Hattori ruins. It was easy enough to reactivate the old seals the Hattori clan had put in place when they still lived in the old compound. It needed a little more than just a quick fix but all of Konoha's admittedly few seal specialists (including Jiraiya) had worked on it for the last two days.

Finally, this morning, it had been activated by Jiraiya himself and ten other jonin placed around the perimeter. Kakashi had been excused, he certainly wasn't known for the vast chakra reserves needed to activate a seal of such a size but he had been asked with some Hyuga to check for weaknesses with his Sharingan.

In his youth, Kakashi had had the luck to observe some seals from his teacher and still remembered the elegance and efficiency of the chakra constructs, the Yondaime was able to weave. This one didn't look quite as graceful but was solid nonetheless. The first part, relying heavily on the old wards installed by the Hattori clan, made sure that the only ways to enter were the four official entrances, the second was the most daring part and was meant to dissipate any kind of disguise. Anything from henge, to complex body-modifying jutsus, should be destroyed by the seal. Finally, the last part had only activated a few minutes ago. After the last teams had entered, it had sealed the four entrances completely for three days. During that time, the place would be on complete lockdown, with no ways to enter or leave the place.

Hopefully, that would stop Orochimaru from sending any of his people in disguise into the test. Only real genin would be able to take part. Admittedly even those could be spies, especially the ones coming from Grass, Sound or even Sand, but that was unavoidable.

Of course, it also meant that the genin were entirely on their own, no medical help could be brought if their life was in danger. Kakashi did his best to reassure himself, his team was competent and would be careful (he could dream, right?) but he had gotten used to being by their side, a safety net if they couldn’t manage what he threw at them.
Kurenai approached him from the side. He lazily did a half turn to avoid her getting on his blind side. The fact that she didn't know to remain in his sight already showed that she wasn't used to dealing with him. They had had little contact during the years. She had graduated a lot later than him and she hadn't been in Obito and Rin's group of friends. He had only begun to encounter her more as a shinobi when he had already entered Anbu and the black ops members didn't socialize a lot. She had gained his respect when she had shown him a quicker way to cast a three-layered genjutsu and since then they had worked together on one or two missions but outside of that the only times they talked was in front of the mission room or at jonin-senseis meetings.

“I never thought as myself as the motherly type but I must admit I cannot help but worry about them.”

Kakashi spent a second wondering why she chooses him to discuss her feelings with but quickly concentrated back on what she said. He did not think of himself as the motherly type either and the fatherly type even less, but he did worry a little bit. Like when he sent out his ninken without knowing exactly what his opponent's powers where. That was quite accurate actually. He felt like he had sent out pups that hadn't yet been trained enough into a fight.

“Yeah, they grow on us when we’re not careful”

The woman chuckled and looked back at the forest.

“Asuma said he knew that his squad was way to unfocused to pass anyway and he does as if he doesn't care but I think he's even more panicked than us.”

Kakashi huffed, Asuma's love for his students was proverbial.

“Gai's doing various dangerous and strange exercises to share their effort and pain or so he told me.”

Again, that seemed quite in character.

“The older jonin-sensei like Gaku-san or that Senju-woman which name I always forget, I think they are more used to it, they already trained several teams, they must get used to this kind of...helplessness.”

Kakashi didn't know the first one and didn't care much for the other but hummed in confirmation
“Well, let’s hope the lesson they will learn are valuable ones. “She finished. “We have to wait and see what will come of this.

Kakashi nodded and let her walk away. Hopefully, the lesson they would learn wouldn’t cost them too much.

Team 7 scouted the part of the district in which they were, taking note of the teams, they encountered. Some seemed to be constantly on guard and became restless the second they could feel their presence. They carefully avoided these kinds of teams.

When the sun began to set they finally found their perfect victims. A group of three young genins not more than a year older than them, were camping out in the relative comfort of a half-demolished house. They had even lit a fire, a dangerous move, and the one that seemed on guard was frequently turning to one of his teammates, a blond and thin boy with clear eyes, and was talking, completely failing to notice their presence.

They decided to spare them until the next morning. While Sasuke’s sharingan would help him see in the dark both Sakura and Naruto would be hindered by it and they did not know their opponent’s abilities. Sakura would have felt bad to attack fellow Konoha-shinobis in such an underhanded way a few months back before a mission in Wave taught her what price shinobis were willing to pay for peace and she had begun wishing that things were different but known that they weren’t.

They camped out in a dense thicket, hidden in a hole in the ground that Naruto and a few clones expanded discreetly. Sakura and Sasuke assembled some branches to hide their presence even more. Hopefully, only an Inuzuka or a Hyuga would be able to locate them and the ones they knew should be in the opposite direction. Then they began to plot. They had formed plans more than a few times before but admittedly only for D-rank missions. Sakura was convinced that catching the daymo’s wife’s cat mustn’t be any different from catching three genin so she declared herself assistant strategist to Sasuke. The blond-haired boy she assured, was a yamanaka, one of the numerous cousins of her friend Ino that she saw when she went to visit. The girl they had seen in the background was wearing a cloak and was somewhat of a wild card but the other boy was wearing a katana quite ostensibly.

“The Yamanaka has to be taken out first.” Sasuke decided. “We can’t risk him turning one of us against his teammates.”

Naruto volunteered for throwing some shadow clones at the guy but Sakura explained that she would try to trap him in a genjutsu instead. Sasuke would take him out the second he saw if the genjutsu was working. Naruto was to create a shadow clone of Sakura and with it launch himself at the first of the two remaining teammates who came to help the Yamanaka boy. That would hopefully
distract the last one enough that Sakura could take him out either with the genjutsu or with a good old-fashioned hit to the head.

Luck seemed to be on their side this time as the Yamanaka was on guard in the early hours of dawn when they decided to attack. He was still half asleep and Sakura had enough time to carefully cast her illusion. Sadly, the element of surprise vanished quickly because he screamed out when he first caught sight of the terrible image Sakura had created for him. Sasuke was quickly on him and even though he was able to escape with Kai the Yamanaka had no way to avoid the hit to the face and crumbled to the ground. A second later the katana-wielding boy had drawn his weapon and swung it at Sasuke but caught a Naruto clone instead. He was quickly surrounded by Sasuke, the real Naruto and one of his clones disguised as Sakura. The cloaked girl tried to attack Naruto and only barely avoided Sakura's kunai. For a second she did not seem to understand looking at the three people before her and then turning around, to the direction from which the kunai had come. That was enough time for the real Sakura to sneak up to her and wrap her arm around her throat. The girl struggled and began to form hand signs but another one of Sasuke's hits caught her in the side of the head and she crumbled in Sakura's grip.

They turned to Naruto who was still fighting the katana boy but quickly the fight drew to an end when Naruto sent a strong kick at the boy's sternum and then pointed a kunai at his throat.

They bound both of his arms separately to his sides and even secured some rope around his legs. A quick search allowed them to find a sky-roll in the Yamanaka's weapon pouch. Sakura left her water canteen near his face and quickly made sure that none of the other's injuries looked life-threatening. Sasuke was getting impatient pointing out that the ruckus they created while fighting could attract other teams in search of a scroll and finally they quickly left.

A certain kind of euphoria floated around the group for the rest of the morning and everyone's spirit was lifted. Sasuke admonished Naruto for thinking they would win "super-easily" but even he seemed in a better mood. Emboldened by their victory they decided to advance to the middle of the clan district where most teams must have ended up. Their high spirit didn't make them any less cautious and they avoided what seemed to be a group of two different temporarily allied Suna-squads. Even Naruto reasonably agreed that they didn't need to fight against these kinds of odds if they could find alternatives.

Finally, Sasuke was able to find a squad hiding behind a large building which must have held some kind of ceremonial purpose. According to Sasuke one of their member's presence was weak. His chakra was disturbed in a strange way, maybe a genjutsu or some kind of strange jutsu or even a weird injury, the young Ushiha couldn't say.

Naruto was of the opinion that they could charge in immediately. His argument he thought was even sound. If they waited too long they may be detected, with a weakened member the squad must be on his guard. He was brushed off by Sasuke.

Later when they concluded that the fight had been a mess Naruto happily pointed out that he had had a better plan which only earned him a glare from his female teammate.
They had attacked an hour later with a plan similar to the last. Naruto was to distract them with clones, Sakura was to trap the weakened one in a genjutsu and Sasuke was to take care of both him and then with Naruto was to fight the two others. What had worked so well once should work just as well twice, or so they thought.

It worked well for exactly two seconds. Before Naruto had been able to truly approach them, he was caught in an elaborate trap. Whoever these ninja's were they liked explosive tags and only a clone and the real Naruto escaped from the explosions. The blond boy was immediately overwhelmed by two of the squad members and Sasuke, to Naruto’ s greatest displeasure, must have felt he had to intervene and had rushed into the fight. He had no idea what happened with Sakura but at the end of the fight she had been half-beaten to a pulp by the not so weakened third member and was only able to incapacitate him when he was distracted by both of his teammates demises. Naruto would have liked to say he was the one who turned the fight to their advantage but actually it was Sasuke even if it wasn't quite planned. One of the Ushiha's stray great fireballs had landed on the heavy draping that were slowly rotting away in the open room in which they were fighting. Soon it caught fire and heavy smoke filled the room. They all ended up fleeing but Sasuke with his sharingan was able to take one out in the chaos and mercifully dragged him to a place where he wouldn't get quite as roasted.

Finally, together, they were able to take the last one out but only at the cost of Naruto's left arm that was broken by a vicious hit from the heavily armored arm of their last opponent. It was another thing Naruto boasted about at the end of the fight: how he had mastered his protection-duty expertly by deflecting the blow aimed for Sasuke. The ungrateful bastard pointed out that it was no use if he was incapacitated instead but Sakura seemed grateful. Thanks to his great act of bravery, the Ushiha was somewhat intact when they finally exited the burning building. It's at that point that they found Sakura who was struggling against the weakened third shinobi and Sasuke was able to hit him on the head while the girl was trying to keep the other pinned to the ground. Naruto was somewhat impressed to see that while the girl was clearly beat up the other didn't look much better and was littered with bruises and even claw marks. They quickly searched the ninja's various pockets and as if life wanted to prove them that this encounter could end even worse they found another sky-scroll in a secret pocket of the last shinobi's jacket.

When Sasuke came back with the white roll Naruto let out a long groan of disappointment. His legendary enthusiasm had been tempered somewhat by his broken arm which hurt like hell and the bitter disappointment was souring his mood even more. He could feel in Sakura's tense voice and Sasuke's angry glares the creeping edge of desperation. They still had a night, an entire day, another night and half a day, Naruto reasoned but even that didn't really bring back his usual energy. Suddenly Sasuke looked up and swore.

"We have to run, someone noticed the fire and is heading in our direction, fast!"

Not a second later a flurry of senbons flew in their direction and they dodged awkwardly before taking off. Sasuke was in front and tried his best to find a way back to the edge of the large compound, Sakura was in the middle and Naruto was running a few steps back, trying to deflect some of the projectiles aimed their way with his new technique. The blond boy was seething, he absolutely hated this situation. Running, dodging and guarding at the same time was hard, especially with a broken arm. A few months back he would have turned around and just faced their opponents up front instead of running like a coward. Only Kakashi-sensei's constant lectures kept him from acting on his impulse.
At one point, he got the feeling that they had shaken them off, at least no more senbons were flying their way. Honestly, he was getting frustrated and the burning pain in his arm was getting worse every time he stumbled or moved jerkily. He had to grit his teeth against the burning waves of hurt that came off from it. Dammit, he just wanted to sit down and not move. Sakura seemed out of breath, she had fallen back a few steps and was panting. Only Sasuke seemed still fit and Naruto began to resent the baka, and was about to shout that he should wait for them when suddenly the young Ushiha cried out. Naruto rushed forward but suddenly a large gelatinous mass fell on him and he felt a piercing pain on his shoulder as if something had bitten him. He blindly thrust his arm at the thing and touched the slimy skin of a rounded animal, he tried to get a grip on it and tear it off but it was too slippery. In a smooth move, he took out a kunai and slid the weapon upwards and sliced through the thing. The two halves of what appeared to be a giant leach slowly fell off of his shoulder. Though not a second later the parts of the gelatinous animal began to move again and two leached were slithering back towards him. Naruto jumped back and looked how the others were faring. Sakura seemed to have mostly avoided the leeches except for a smaller one that had attached itself to her right foot. The contact with the animal seemed to disturb her a lot and she was moving around in panic. Sasuke had two bleeding marks on his hand and thigh but had shaken of all the animals but these were slowly inching back. When Naruto looked around he noticed that several dozen of leaches were crawling around them or hanging of the tree branches.

“We can't let them split us up. Sasuke shouted at them. Fall back towards Naruto.”

Both of his teammates rushed back to him and the slightly less leech infected part of the clearing. As soon as he was near enough Sasuke grasped the leech on Sakura’ s foot while applying the technique sensei had showed him. With a disgusting tsiching sound the leech shriveled up and fell off, burnt by the heat Sasuke had produced.

A few seconds later two forms fell from the trees and walked up to them.

“Carefull”, Sasuke told them without taking his sharingan eyes off of the two approaching shinobies, “Don’ t let your guard down the third one is hiding on our left.”

“Interesting eyes you got there boy. “The left, slightly taller figure said. A leech was crawling on his shoulder and his arm and Naruto understood he was the one responsible for the disgusting things. “The famous sharingan... “ The second one, a long and thin girl, muttered with a drawling voice tainted by mockery. “So we have discovered Konoha’ s little jewels.”

Her ame forehead protector was dangling from her neck and she tapped it distractedly.

A second later a dozen of senbon were sent their way. Naruto noticed them in time (thanks to the baka’s warning he had to admit) and deflected them again. At the same time both shinobies rushed at them. Immediately they were overwhelmed. These enemies were used to fighting together. They were absolutely certain they would beat them. Naruto was still injured and both him and Sasuke were bleeding heavily from the leeches’ bites. The fight quickly went from bad to worse. Naruto lost sight of Sasuke and could rarely stop the still incoming senbons with his technique as he was to focused on surviving. The ten shadow clones he created offered him a moment or respite but they were quickly killed off by a strange water attack from the thin girl.

Sakura was near his side and holding her own against the quick attacks from the girl who was able again and again to pierce Naruto’ s shadow-clone defenses. They were quickly getting tired and they knew it. Their opponents were herding them back together and the senbon attacks were getting more and more intense. Two needles stuck into Naruto’ s already injured arm and the boy cried out. Sasuke who was constantly breathing fire to keep the leeches at bay was the next victim and got caught in the shoulder.
Suddenly he heard Sakura rushedly whisper something at his and Sasuke's intention. 
"At ten jump away and Naruto make clones of us, then run."

Naruto didn't ask question and counted in his head, on ten he jumped to the right rolled and jumped again. Behind him he heard an explosion and felt the heat of it on the back of his arms. With a loud crack, the whole ground began to shake and cave in.

The blond boy hid behind a tree and made the hand signs to create three copies of them somewhere in the opposite direction. Then he ran without looking back. He didn't know how Sakura had done that, didn't know if their opponents had been stopped and didn't know how his teammates were faring but he ran.

Ten minutes later he slowed down and looked around. It seemed that he had escaped. His arm was killing him so he took a second to fold it carefully and tuck it into his jacket. It could hinder his movements but enough was enough. The leeches' bite was still bleeding a little bit but had almost stopped. The senbon wounds however where still oozing blood. He ripped them out and saw that a whitish liquid was mixed with the blood. Urgh, poison. Well, he didn’t feel to terrible yet so it was ok.

He decided to walk slowly to the border of the compound like they had planned to. After half an hour, he heard a sound in front of him but quickly saw it was Sasuke and Sakura who were stumbling towards him. The Ushiha looked pretty bad, having to let Sakura support him.

Naruto ran up to them but was stopped by Sasuke who took out a kunai.

“How did we pass the bell-test.” He asked.

“What!”

“Just answer Naruto.” Sakura pressed him tiredly.

“Euh, I almost got the bells but got caught in one of sensei's very difficult traps and then he bound me to some post and at the end Sakura accepted to share her meal with me but then suddenly...”

“... It's ok.” Sasuke cut him off and sagged somewhat.

It took them almost two hours to arrive near the outer limit of the tasks' s location. Sasuke was completely silent and breathed heavily. Sakura looked worried and even Naruto found that the Ushiha wasn't doing well.

Finally, they found a caved in cellar which they deemed safe due to the large amounts of vegetation growing near the main exit and a crumbling window in the back that as Sakura rationalized they could use as an emergency exit. During the next hours, they rested huddled against each other.

Sakura, the only one who was still relatively unharmed went out despite the risk of being caught alone to find something to eat. Naruto was honestly quite terrified to be left alone with the Ushiha. At least Sakura had been able to do some of the first aid techniques they had been taught at the academy. She had forced Sasuke to drink something, had checked him over for injury and had grimly stated that it was indeed poison that was the cause of Sasuke's state. A paracetic probably, hopefully a non-lethal one. She had bandaged Sasuke's wound and her own from the leeches that were still bleeding. Naruto's had stopped completely and his arm didn' t feel quite as terrible as it did which puzzled the pink-haired girl. Then Sakura had gone find something to eat.

With Sakura away he felt quite miserable. Sasuke was breathing quickly and didn't seem able to move. He was trembling and Naruto finally decided to divest himself of his jacket and lay it carefully on the other boy. He was pretty sure Sasuke-baka would have protested loudly if he had been able. He berated himself for the hundredth time about not paying attention every time they talked about medical care in the academy. He had no idea how to get the last scroll but the mere thought of giving up made him want to throw a tantrum. He knew he had to calm down. Kakashi-sensei told him that contrary to what others said he wasn't stupid he just let anger and excitement get in the way of clear thinking. What would Kakashi sensei say if he was here... He would tell them they had to be careful because they were hurt and people could beat them easily. He would tell them to check their surrounding and guard their back first and then try to find a way to make the best of the situation they
were in.
Sakura with her amazing chakra control had always been pretty good at sensing people and Sasuke had the sharingan so normally either one of them would check for enemy presence however Kakshi had taught all of them, it's not because he's less good at it that he can't do it. He concentrated and began to feel for other people's chakra. It seemed that at least in the immediate vicinity there was no one. Well, no one who wasn't very good at masking his chakra. He stepped outside and walked carefully around their hideout and looked carefully for anything that seemed out of place. He still remembered their mission in wave where they had been able to detect the presence of some enemies just by noticing that there was no way the puddle on the ground was normal. When he arrived back at the entrance of the cellar he concluded there truly was no one.

Ok, so what was good about their situation that he could use. They were all somewhat or even in Sasuke's case very injured, they had no food, at least yet, they had two scroll but not the ones that would allow them to pass...euh, their hideout was more or less ok? Still if someone was a good at feeling chakra they would be found easily and they could even trap them by intruding from the back and the main exit. That wasn't good, that was even pretty bad. Maybe he should close the back exit, with his shadow clones it should be easily. Ah, but if he did that they could be trapped inside too. Oh, he could lay a trap, or even several traps: An obvious one in front, a more discreet one in the back. And even others farther away if their enemies decided to barge in through the roof for example. And traps were one thing he was pretty good at and he had plenty of experience with.

Naruto grinned and fished out some ninja wire, some tags and some kunai from his back pouch and went to work.

Chapter End Notes

Obviously the story is clearly different from Canon at this point, firstly because it would bore you to death to just reread the same fights, secondly, because I never understood what was the logic about the sound-guys attacking them and I especially disliked the fact that Sakura's most glorious moment was when she cut her hair. So instead they fight regular guys, who can still be strong.

Next chapter will be the end of the second task.
And here again, the second interlude... I'll post it as it is but I'll have to read through it again tomorrow.

Chapter 10: Interlude, of affection

During the three days of the task Kakashi felt somewhat aimless. If his encounter with some other Jonin-sensei was any indication such a state was a normal reaction to the situation. Asuma had told him he had decided to clean out his rooms in the big Sarutobi main house that he hadn't moved back in again since he came back to the village. The big house was located outside the village proper but still inside the village's walls. In his youth Asuma had complained endlessly about how cramped it was, filled with various cousin, uncles and aunts and their respective families, about how annoying the long walk to the village center was and when loyalty and maturity led him back to the village he had chosen a nice apartment near the Naka river instead of it. Various things of his had remained in the clan house however and the fact that he had decided to occupy himself with it showed that the older jonin must be terribly bored and restless. After all, organizing, cleaning and reminiscing about the reasons why he temporarily left the village must be some of the things Asuma hated most.

Kakashi had always both admired and resented Asuma for leaving. While Kakashi had graduated and become chunin before Asuma, they had both had the dubious honor of fighting in the third shinobi war. Both witnessed the horrors of the worst years of the war, when Konoha was fighting Suna, Ame and the Kiri-Iwa alliance at the same time and the village, cracking under the pressure had forgotten some of his will of fire and used absolutely any means at their disposal to fight back, bitterly, bloodily. Both had seen up close exactly what crimes the village made itself guilty of. But while Kakashi had accepted it with a grim kind of fatality and the feeling that despite everything the village was worth the pain and the guilt it charged its shinobies with, Asuma had finally thought he had enough of it and that the village's victory couldn't erase the blood that now coated its ideals. After Suna, Ame and Iwa retreated from the war and a year into his father's second reign he had left the village. Kakshi had admired his courage and independence but had begrudged the fact that he hadn't the luxury to even think of making such a choice. At that time guilt, promises and duty were binding him securely to the village and only very rarely, when he felt particularly tired and bitter did he catch himself dreaming how it would be if he left too, traveled far away...

But Asuma had returned, stronger and more certain in his believes, never quite forgiving the Sandaime but understanding, maybe, some of the choices he had made. And all his struggles and choices had led him to this fated day where he found nothing better to do than to clean out an old dusty room full of trash and old memories.

And all of that because of three brats that were probably getting their ass handed to them by their competitors. How low all of them had fallen, Kakashi mused. Kurenai was feeding fishes with her niece looking as if the energy needed to remain calm and listen to the babble of a four-year-old was almost more than she possessed; Nena Tenshin, who had been in anbu at the beginning of his career there and he remembered as a cool, almost cold woman was meditating in the common dojo of the jounin command room with the amount of success and concentration Naruto had on his bad days. He had met Gai the first day in the mission room pleading desperately for a three day, S-class mission and had then seen him break down in loud sobbing when the predictable negative answer came. He tried to delude himself into thinking that he wasn't that desperate but he felt a kind of itching tension in the back of his head that made him unable to remain sitting in his apartment, unable to read his precious literature, unable even to work on his recent pet project: updating the suiton: water bullets jutsu. It left him roaming the village, observing his fellow-jonin sensei's misery.
Some time later his aimless wandering brought him near the restricted anbu training ground. He quickly passed through a hidden opening in the high fence. The sight of the familiar grounds brought back a feeling that could have been nostalgia if this wasn't anbu.

Looking at the well-worn training posts, the crisp stretches of grass, the long silhouette of the anbu HQ, he wondered if that feeling shouldn't be called nostalgia anyway. At least he did not have to care for three troublesome brats at that time. He did have to go on pretty grueling missions though, he reminded himself. No point in idealizing the past, which wasn't to hard. Idealizing anbu would require a quite amazing amount of delusion. He had spent some of his worst years in anbu, had done some of the worst missions but that wasn't all it had been.

When he had joined anbu in the wake of his second teammates death, feeling completely unable to deal with the knotted mess of grief, loss, regret, guilt, horror, pain he had been left with, the promise of numb anonymity had seemed to be just what he needed. Sensei had protested of course, had reminded him of how much other's had been willing to sacrifice for him to be alive and happy, two things anbu didn't seem particularly conducive to. But back then the hurdles of building himself up again, of trying again to really live outside of missions had been too much for him to handle. He had planned to try one day, when he could work his feelings out, when the village wasn't slowly bleeding out from the wounds of almost twelve years of ongoing war.

For the first few years anbu held its promises. It was just as hard, as unforgiving and as cold as he had imagined it and it was just what he wanted at default of being what he needed. He could fight on in the war, he could protect Minato when, some short time later he was made Hokage, he could forget himself and the expectations of those that died for him. Ravaged by the war the anbu ranks were constantly changing, squad mission could become solo missions a day before begin because two of the three chosen operatives had been felled on one of the fronts. War again allowed Kakashi to rise in the ranks quicker than he should. He knew he was doing terrible things, things to protect the village, but terrible things anyway. Things Minato would frown at, probably did. He also knew they were necessary, after all he had a very intimate understanding of war, had known it longer than he had known any living person. War had been a father longer than his father, had been his teacher before his sensei had been there and taught him the most important and all-encompassing lessons: people die, they can die at their own hand, they can die at other people's hands, they can die at your hand. In the last case your own survival is more likely.

Then war calmed down, Suna retired, Ame was distracted by civil war, Iwa signed the peace treaty, Minato made Hokage. Suddenly the constant onslaught of missions lessened, he was assigned to a real anbu squad and didn't know how to deal with that. Minato wanted him to try again, to live for himself, to form new bounds, to quit anbu. Kakashi refused. Minato gave him that mission: protect his pregnant wife, guard the jinchuriki. Kakashi balked, Minato insisted. Kakashi felt satisfied with the life he had, he felt he could manage, he didn't know how to deal with normal life. Minato's hope that one day he would be happy felt like a terrible burden. Kakashi was content as he was. Content to work for the village, content to watch Minato from afar, his happiness with Kushina. It made him feel a kind of bittersweet longing that he cherished and bathed in.

When Minato died, among his desperation he felt a bitter feeling of "I told you so" and "I was right all along". How could he expect Kakashi to be happy when he did the same thing he admonished him for: scarifying his wellbeing, no his being for the village. Kakashi found himself wanting to play a game of one-upmanship: if sensei had sacrificed his life and happiness for the village then Kakashi was willing to sacrifice his dignity and sanity on top of that.

It's then that surprisingly anbu betrayed him. Without the war, the squads were more permanent. He had teammates again and while all of them were mere shadows for the outsiders, inside the walls of anbu HQ his teammates weren't ready to treat him like a disposable weapon anymore. There were
times when Genma refused to leave him after a mission even if he ordered him to. Kakashi did not punish him for insubordination. There were moments were Aoba just shook his head and stood his ground and called upon his right of seniority which had absolutely no weight in anbu, Kakashi protested weakly. There were occasions where Koara dragged him out of HQ with the others and its with them that he got drunk for the first time.

And even after they left there was Tenzou and then Itachi and suddenly he fought for them and not the vague notion of the village’s wellbeing. And honestly, he still lost it more than once, they all did. Anbu was still hard, was still unforgiving but not quite as cold.

Wandering through the empty grounds was strange. Less than a year ago, he had still been an anbu and this place he had called his home a lot more than the tiny apartment that served as a place to sleep. A jumbled mess of good, bad and terrible memories were awakened by the familiar sight. It was on that field up there that he had learnt wind-release, it’s there on that bench that he had began to read the very first icha icha volume he had gotten his hands on. It was there in front of that side entrance that he had once fallen unconscious and almost bled out when he had stupidly forgone the hospital to deliver his report. And there under that tree Koara, a woman from his first real anbu squad had kissed him once. Something he had never quite understood, as far as he knows she favored women, well, had favored. She had died a month later on a mission.

It was hard to say really if he longed to be here again or if he was relieved to have escaped it. He was probably biased and hypocritical about it. He had turned a deaf ear on all of those who had criticized him for joining, for remaining or were just worried about what anbu did to him. It hadn’t always been that bad and anyway he was realistic enough to know that Konoha needed anbu, anbu needed shinobis who were good at getting their kind of job done, so even if anbu did not make him a better person, he made sure Konoha was kept safe and if their was one thing all of his precious people had had in common it was their love for Konoha.

He felt a presence approaching him quickly and was already tensing up before he recognized that particular brand of annoyed and slightly murderous intent.

"Tenzo how are you?", he said in an overly jovial tone staring at the cat mask.

"t’s Yamato, sempai."

"All the same to me."

The masked anbu did a full body sigh and suddenly with slumping shoulders and a tired air about him he didn’t seem half as impressive.

"Sempai, what are you doing here? You know you are not allowed to come anymore. This place is technically warded against intruders but I suppose it was to much to hope it would keep you out."

"It just makes me happy to now that my cute little kohai doesn’t yet know all my tricks."

Tenzo muttered something that sounded vaguely insulting but that Kakashi couldn’t hear through the mask.

"Don’t sound so accusing, I just thought that such a nice, sunny day was best spent wandering around."

"And I suppose that since your students are in the middle of the exam you have nothing better to do than lounge around."

"More or less."
Yamato took off the mask and sighed.

"I may be somewhat jealous."

"Of my students? Don’t worry, you will always be my favorite little kohai."

"Not of them, of your free time. Having three young children looking up to you, several years to train them and rarely anything above a C-rank."

"That’s not exactly how it works. These genins are little devils in disguise and you would miss the higher ranking missions."

"Not like you do. Not everyone needs adrenaline and near-death situations to feel content."

"I think that your respect for me is dwindling. What about a spar to prove to you that no amount of C-ranks will bring me out of shape."

Yamato seemed to think about it for a few seconds.

"I did come to ward off an intruder, sempai."

That was as much an invitation as he would get and Kakashi felt some excitement at finally having found something to distract himself and pass his restlessness with. With a small hidden grin he lifted his Hita-ate.

Fighting Tenzo was like executing a well-known routine. He knew most of his tricks and Yamato knew a lot of his. They had trained together from the time he had dragged him from Root. However, he was good enough to keep Kakashi on his toes. Kakashi avoided using too many chakra-exhausting jutsus and compensated with bolder taijutsu moves. He pressed in close using the speed and agility that he still had on his kohai, dodged the mokuton instead of guarding against it which would use valuable time and energy. Several times Kakashi came close enough to force Tenzo to retreat and guard. But the younger shinobi was a specialist of defense. He was a human wood fortress, quite literally. Neither the sempai nor the kohai tried to end the fight to quickly, they hadn’t spared since Kakashi quit anbu but the gap was widening slowly. Kakashi’s speed picked up while Tenzo wasn’t able to keep up as easily. Kakashi was adding tricks, minor jutsus and the odd genjutsu move, Tenzo stopped limiting himself to Mokuton and was throwing his whole repertoire at Kakashi.

Both were feeling that the fight was drawing to an end and it would probably be in Kakashi’s favor. That was Tenzo’s cue to try a more daring move. In a second the training field was covered in trees and Tenzo had disappeared. The older Jonin fell back in a vary defense position and tried to survey every angle from which he could be attacked. Suddenly an arm shot out of a tree and a kunai touched the back of the silver-haired man.

"Not bad. "Kakashi praised. "But not good enough." And suddenly his image dissolved into lightning and the younger anbu jumped back cursing under his breath. Before being thrown back to the ground by a water-jutsu and immobilized in a headlock by the silver-haired ex-anbu.

"Pretty good sempai, but you will have to do better next time."

Pouf. The clone dissolved and with a loud cracking noise snake-like wood beams griped Kakashi.

The Jonin struggled for a moment but the wooden creations held strong. Another struggle, chakra enhanced this time and the wood creaked ominously. Tenzo walked out of a tree and pointed a kunai at his older comrade.
"Don' t move, you lost Sempai."

Said Sempai just closed his eyes in his usual smile.

"Cute."

Not a second later two hands shot out of the ground and gripped the younger man' s feet. Tenzo had been looking out for a bunshin but did not react quickly enough and the next second Kakashi had him in a arm grip with a kunai pointed at his throat.

"I admit defeat."

Kakashi immediately released him.

"I suppose the real you is hidden somewhere." Tenzo muttered somewhat tiredly.

"There is a bunshin in the trees back there but the real me is actually the one you caught there."

Tenzo looked somewhat vexed for a second but seemed to resign himself.

"Will you leave now?"

"I might actually."

"Good you know where the door is."

"I will find my own way out."

"Do that."

"Remember to come back from the high-ranking missions I envy you for."

"Don' t die on a C-rank Sempai, that would be embarrassing."

"Sure."

Kakashi made a lazy wave and walked away. Soon enough his feet set him on the familiar path to the memorial monument. He could only hope that a chat with his dearest and long-gone friends would calm his worries.
September VIII

Chapter Notes

Next chapter, and the end of the second task. Now what will happen to our cute little genin.
Also regarding whether I take a break to focus on correcting mistakes or go on like this, all those who gave me their opinion were in favor of going on despite the mistakes so that's what I'll do.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

September VIII

Half an hour later Sakura trudged back to their temporary base of operation. Her search for food had been mediocre at best. She had found some berries that she recognized but hadn't been able to hunt for anything. Here in the middle of the crumpling down buildings most animals weren't bigger than rats and looked even less appetizing. Finally, she had found some frogs in a pound and even though they had learned they were a possible source of nutrition she wasn’t looking forward to the meal.

She was still almost fifty meters away from the building when she saw Naruto doing a clear sign for "stop". She frowned and watched as he came closer, taking some turns and avoiding some places.

"Good that you saw me Sakura, you have to be careful I set some traps."

That was...a surprisingly good idea. Still she made a sour expression.

“And what if I hadn’t seen you and had gotten caught!”

Naruto chuckled awkwardly.

“Sorry, Sakura-chan.”

Sakura sighed but followed him carefully. When she entered the room, she went to check for Sasuke who was still unwell but did not look worse.

Then she settled down with Naruto and they began their meal in a gloomy silence, neither of them felt very satisfied with the menu. They couldn't even light a fire to roast the frogs and they forced the raw, slippery meat down with a lot of water. The berries were slightly better but still very sour and Sakura went to sleep still feeling hungry while Naruto took first watch.

She was woken up somewhere in the middle of the night by a loud crash outside.

In a second she was wide awake. She took in the state of her comrades. Naruto was in a battle stance at the entrance of their hide-out and Sasuke was up albeit on somewhat shaky legs.

“What’s happening?”

“A team from Suna. One of them has fallen into one of my traps. Pretty far from our hide-out. I don’t
think they were looking for us.”

“Makes no fucking difference if they do decide to attack now.” Sasuke grit out.

Naruto nodded and made a hand sign and ten shadow clones came rushing at the other team, avoiding the traps.

The one who had been caught seemed to have managed to escape and rushed at the first clone. He swung a short sword at the first clone and with an ease that showed some experience pierced through him. A second later two other clones were killed off when another suna-nin's fist and foot caught them swiftly.

“They aren’ t bad”, Naruto admitted and rushed into battle.

Sakura hesitated for a second but Sensei had told her she was the one who was responsible for taking the smart decisions.

“Sasuke, don’t join the fight. Remain here with the scrolls.”

Without looking if the Uchiha would listen but hoping that for once he would take what she said seriously she followed Naruto. She quickly had to evade the sword a red-haired suna-nin thrust at her. She threw herself back, feeling the bite of the blade on her shoulder and not for the first-time in this damned exam she realized she could actually die.

She tried to duck but had to roll when the boy swung his blade in a downward arc. She tried to throw a kunai but her aim was off and the suna-genin dodged easily. She stumbled back when he attacked again and saw his somewhat large mouth turn up in a grin.

Suddenly a voice rang out from somewhere behind the two suna-nin that attacked her and Naruto.

“Everyone stop for a second. Weapons down and step back, please.”

For a second everyone just froze up. The red-haired boy gritted his teeth.

“What the fuck do you think you are doing Kataki!”

Another Suna-nin came out of the dark. His head was bandaged and he seemed to favor his right leg.

“We may not have to fight. I am injured and we just fought and looking at you I’ d say you’re not doing that well either. Maybe we can negotiate. We do have two scrolls but sadly they are the same. If you have one scroll and it’ s the same as ours we have no reason to fight.”

Sakura made one step in his direction but remained in a battle stance.

“We have two scrolls and they are the same too. Can you tell us wich kind of scroll you have? It’ s not something that can harm you. If you have the same as ours we won’ t need to fight if you have a different one we may even be able to do an exchange.”

The other looked at his teammates. One nodded the other looked angry but finally agreed. The grey-haired one turned back to her.

“We have two earth-scrolls.”

Sakura couldn't suppress a smile.

“We have two Sky scrolls.”
They both began to suggest how to best do the exchange. The red haired suna-boy still seemed warry and Naruto was grumbling but Sakura felt relieved.

Finally, Sakura deposited one of the scrolls on a rock to their left and one of the suna-ninja’s did the same on his left. Then Sakura and the red haired one went to pick them up.

Sakura handed it to the still weak Sasuke to check over with the sharingan. The raven-haired boy complained that he still didn't have a byakugan and that’s not what the sharingan was intended for but concluded that nothing seemed different with the scroll.

Naruto hadn't looked away from the other team for a second and Sakura too was still ready to react at any moment. The other team seemed satisfied with the scroll too.

“It was good doing business with you. The grey haired one interjected by way of farewell and the three of the left quickly.”

Sakura felt all the tension leave her body. They had done it. They had found the last scroll without having to fight.

They spend the next day and night hiding. They found a small wooden house, half rotting and almost completely hidden by vegetation and set camp in a back room under an old carpet in a hole they dug. One of them was constantly hidden in a tree just outside the backrooms window.

They felt more like scared children playing hide and seek than ninja's but that was okay because they had a sky-scroll and an earth-scroll.

Around midday Sasuke was more or less fine again and insisted on taking guard. Feeling so helpless for so long had been an absolutely agonizing experience. The day before, when he’d been at his worst, he couldn’t even move his eyes and was left with a terribly clear conscience but no feeling at all, floating around seeing only vague shadows and hearing muffled sounds. When the fight with the Suna-nins had broken out he had forced his still numb body to obey but the energy needed for it had sent him back to the ground soon after they left.

Sasuke had been so certain that he was much stronger than that. Stronger than all these genin. Damn, his brother had passed that exam easily when he was more than a whole year younger than Sasuke was now. His more rational side tried to argue that still engaged in war and with very depleted forces Konha had lowered the bar for the chunin exam and that Itachi had profited from the invested nurturing of an entire clan that taught him all of its techniques. Techniques that he had no way of learning now. But rationality wasn't his forte when he was angry and he remember spending the hazy hours where he wasn't quite conscious or really unconscious oscillating between anger, resentment and self-admonishment. He wasn't able to share Sakura's and Naruto's joy. Certainly, now their victory in this task seemed likely. Likely not certain because if there was one thing these last few days had taught him it’s the dangers of over-confidence. But passing like this, only just, more by luck than by skill did not taste like victory. How could his teammates be so casual about it? They had avoided the strongest opponents, had cantered themselves to the weakest they could find, but that wouldn’t be the case later on in the exam. What if he couldn't beat his next opponent, what if he failed. Dammit he hadn't become strong enough, what was he lacking compared to his brother! He was willing to give everything to not feel helpless again. Like in the last few hours, like all these years ago in that dark room when his brother had turned around and doomed him by letting him live.

And these two idiots were even weaker than him. What would Naruto do if he was faced against someone who actually knew how to plan a fight. What would Sakura do if she had to fight someone
who had decided to truly harm her. Didn't they realize how vulnerable they were. How could they
laugh and look relieved and determined and strong?

Sakura seemed to realize that he wasn't sharing their good mood.

"Is anything troubling you Sasuke-kun?"

Did she truly not realize? How ignorant could she be. How Naive! It made him agry.

"You two are idiots. Even if we pass this task that means nothing. We are weak don' t you see! We
were beat or almost beat several times, by mere genin! And there are a lot of them out there who are
stronger than us. So, stop with your stupid grins and smiles."

Both his teammates were looking at him. Naruto seemed split between thoughtfulness and anger and
the pink-haired kunoichi didn't seem half as contrite as she would have been six month ago if he had
talked to her like that.

"That's not so terrible Sasuke-kun, we are genin and even rookie ones, of course we can't beat
everyone."

"Yeah, and after this exam we'll just have to train harder to become less weak."

Sasuke didn’t really know what to say. Their answers were so simplistic. How could he tell them that
he had to pass this exam because his brother had been a chunin for a year at his age. Saying that out
loud would sound ridiculous, like he was a jealous little brother envying his older sibling.

Something telling must have showed on his face or his female teammate began to know him way
more closely than he felt comfortable with because she smiled her sweet but honest smile and told
him firmly but gently.

"Not all heroes are precocious. The Sanin Jiraya repeated his last academy year."

"Reaaaalllyyy!" Naruto shrieked with enthusiasm.

"Yes, and Kushuro Juro who was the greatest swordman ever born in leaf was almost thirty when he
became famous. We still have a lot of time."

"Yosh! But we will still train very hard and they will call us the Sannin of the new generation. Or
find an even greater name. Like..."

"... stop, Naruto.” Sakura cut him of somewhat menacingly.” But I think we can really do it, the
three of us. We will become heroes of the leaf, the kind that academy students read about in the
books."

Naruto stuck his fist out expectantly with his strangely serious expression.

"Let’s swear we'll be heroes and that the entire leaf will look up to us. Let' s swear. On our life and
nindo."

Sakura seemed to hesitate for a second and looked at him as if she was afraid it would seem
ridiculous. But she also looked like she really wanted to do it and finally she struck her own paler
and more delicate fist out.

“I swear!”

Sasuke looked at his teammates still feeling somewhat incredulous. Why were things so easy for
them? Why did he feel that they lived in another world with brighter colors and a wider sky and that every time they looked at him with their smiles and determination it was as if they opened a door for him to join them there?

Finally, still hesitantly. A third fist joined the first two.

“Ok, I swear too.”

The last few hours of the test may have been the tensest for the three genin. At ten o'clock exactly on the third day the four entrances into the Hattori ruins were opened again and the genin had an hour to leave, after what whoever was still left in the exam place would be disqualified.

Several bloody battles took place in these last few hours. Many teams with a missing scroll were desperate enough to try anything to get one from the teams who were trying to leave the arena with the required scrolls. Some teams never reached the gates, slowed down by injuries. Others still, the strongest often felt inclined to start fights for no reasons and crushed those who dared approach them. Almost a third of those who had managed to steal the required scrolls were taken out during this last phase of the exam.

It wasn't however a fate that befell team 7. A well though-out strategy relaying on Naruto's ability to create shadow clones that looked like them allowed them to divert the attention of those who may have thought that a team of rookies were ideals preys. They managed to pass through the same gate they used to enter the exam in the first place within the first ten minutes after the opening of the Hattori ruins.

Outside, on the large road that had once led to the Hattori compound there was only a large wooden panel with a paper nailed on it.

With a mixture of excitement (Naruto) and mistrust (Sakura and Sasuke) they approached the panel. In red ink a short text had been noted down.

*If you miss Heaven*  
Enrich your knowledge and prepare for the chance  

*If Earth does not exist*  
run to the fields in search of an answer.  

*Open the door of Heaven and Earth*  
And the perilous way should be redressed.  

*For this is the secret of “the one that guides”.*

“Argh, what is this now. I thought we just had to leave the forest with the two-scrolls.”
Naruto’s face scrunched up with anger and frustration.

“It’s probably some kind of riddle. Let’s see, the missing words here may be the key. I mean heaven... and then these words, and the scrolls are called sky and earth scrolls. I think, no I'm pretty sure they want us to open both scrolls.”

Sasuke nodded having visibly come to the same conclusion.

Naruto frowned a second as if in deep concentration then a huge smile overtook his features and he announced loudly.

“Yosh. Let’s pass this exam already!”

With a large puff of white billowing smoke, a familiar figure appeared before them.

Chapter End Notes

point 1: do not believe that just because Sasuke was slightly more amiable in this chapter he will forget all about his revenge and angst... It would be to easy.
point 2: ”but there was no Orochimaru...” ....yet.
Kakashi had planned to wait for his genin-team at the exit of the Hattori ruins, in the wide field
where the Hokage had decided to hold a congratulatory speech. Seeming to eager would ruin his
reputation but he finally wanted to appease the urges that pushed him to make sure they were safe. If
Pakkun could see him now would laugh his ass off. The copy-nin was worrying about his pups.

Sadly, but not surprisingly he had been called urgently before reaching the arena. He had gotten used
over the years to the fact that he could be called on by the Hokage at any moment. Countless times
he had been disturbed in the middle of the night, or on his way to buy groceries, training or
performing any other activity because the Hokage had called for him for a reason or another. He was
one of Konoha’s greatest specialists in ninjutsu, an anbu veteran, possessed the last sharingan of
Konoha (until recently) and had several other unique and well sought-after skills.

In this case it was his nose and talent at analysis that were deemed useful. A small group of people
were waiting for him in one of the small thickets growing around the Naka river, on the eastern part
of the village. It was a peculiar kind of get-together: a young Inuzuka man, Tzume, the fearsome
Inuzuka clan-head, the Hokage, two anbus, two medics from Investigation and four bodies.

Ah. That must be the reason he had been called.
“Are these the grass genin-team that went missing?” He asked foregoing any greetings.
The Hokage nodded gravely.

“Aki-kun here found them less than an hour ago when he trained his dogs.”

“The pup told me, and I informed the Hokage.”, Tzume explained shortly in her usual brash voice.
Kakashi had learnt long ago not to dismiss the woman as a hotheaded and mindless brawler as to
many shinobi tended to do. The woman was a very experienced kunoichi, who had been a jonin for
more than twenty years and the head of one of Konoha’s rowdier clans for almost as long.

“Medic-san what have you found until now?”

A bald man with a crooked nose got up from where he had kneeled near one of the corpses.

“We don’t have any certain results yet but everything points to the fact that they died very shortly
before they were discovered. Maybe a few hours, maybe less, certainly not more than half a day.
Rigor mortis has only just begun to set in, self-digestion is still in its earlier stages and the amount of
microorganism working on decomposition is still limited.”

Kakashi frowned and saw that Tzume had caught his reaction. She threw him a long look and turned
to the Hokage.
“I have to disagree Sandaime. There’s something wrong with these bodies. I ain’t saying that they
don’t look fresh. I fucking know what a fresh body looks like. She snorted. But I know how a dead
body smells even better. And there's something about these guys smell that's strange. First you don't notice it but when you focus, the smell, it's the smell of a man killed days ago. And I think Hatake there agrees with me.”
Kakashi nodded.
“I'd say at least three days. Could be more.”

The Hokage frowned and tapped his chin distractedly.
“This is very strange indeed. Anything else?”

Tzume crunched up her nose. And lowered herself to the ground. She took a moment to dissect the smell.
“There is something else”, she added somewhat slowly. “But I ain't sure about this. There is something...clean about their smell.”
“Clean?”
“Yeah, the smell is just to...pure. I don't know, I don't understand how but they don't smell like the forest, they don't even smell like moisture or the smell of the ground.”
The Hokage turned to him.
“Kakashi do you have a similar impression.”
Kakashi shrugged then nodded hesitantly. It was quite elusive but there was a kind of artificiality in the corpses smell.

“Medic-san any ideas?”
The bald guy shook his head.

“There may be something”, the other medic said.

She hadn't gotten up from her position next to one of the corpses and gestured them to approach. The little group gathered around her. She looked up directly at the Hokage with dark intelligent eyes scrunched up in concentration.

“Here, look at that boy's arm. Not here, on the inner side of his arm, almost on the level of his armpit. See there. She had to turn the arm somewhat awkwardly, but they could now see a very small discoloration on a part of his arm.

“It could be a number of other things but it's the placement that makes me think I may be right. This is the kind of place a skilled medic would choose to inject something into a body in the most unnoticeable way possible. Needles are made of very pure steel but some of the very fine ones are sometimes made of other more resistant metals, some are even chakra reinforced. In some rare cases these metals cause a small allergic reaction. A medic-expert who would want to avoid anyone from discovering he had injected a body with something wouldn't be able to prepare for such a case as it is rare and leaves only the smallest trace: a light circular discoloration. Also for the allergic reaction to appear the bodies had to have been alive at the time of the injection.”

“Would you be able to find what they have been injected with?”
The medic sighed and rubbed at her face.

“Maybe, we haven't run any in depth tests yet but if Inuzuka-san and Hatake-san are right we are dealing with a medic-expert who is able to disguise a three-day-old body as a fresh body, so I wouldn't get my hopes up.”
Kakshi's mind was already working in overdrive trying to fit facts together that seemed to make little sense. A three-man cell of grass genin hadn't shown up at the beginning of the exam three days ago. The bodies were three days old. So, the three genin had been killed three days ago shortly before or after the beginning of the exam. Before their death they had been injected with something. Maybe it
was what killed them, maybe it was to incapacitate them. Afterward a skilled medic-nin had worked on them to make it look like their death was recent. Why?

“This has to do with the exam, right?”, Tzume muttered and an edge of worry crept into his voice. She had a son who took part in the exam, Kakashi remembered.

She was stating the obvious. The timing made it quite clear that all of this was tied to the exam. They couldn’t be entirely sure of course... but it seemed more than likely. But why hide their original time of death. What happened three days ago that led the responsible ones to kill the grass-team and they didn’t want them to know about. The beginning of the exam obviously, but what exactly. And then the strange smell and needle mark... Why abduct a genin team...

Probably to gain access to the exam as they had assumed. Orochimaru, or another enemy of them (but probably Orochimaru, his gut feeling told him) wanted to send a few high-level spies of his into the exam. Why abduct the grass team? Probably to impersonate them, which for someone like Orochimaru was easy. A high quality henge was the least effective jutsu of the many transforming jutsu’s the man possessed. He may have abducted them days before the exam, maybe even before they reached Konoha. Which could explain the needle mark: an injection with any kind of substance to keep them under while his spies impersonated them. Living originals were usually a requirement for a lot of high level impersonating jutsus. Kakashi knew a few himself.

Now, why kill them? The answer came easily. It was obvious really. They had unknowingly caused the grass shinobies’ death. Because of the seal they had placed on the Hattori ruins the infiltrators had never been able to enter the place! That made the still living grass-nins useless and they had been killed. To hide their failed attempt to enter the exam their time of death had been hidden.

Which meant...

The Hokage's grave voice rose in the clearing and he seemed to have come to the same conclusion. “We have to act quickly but I ask you to remain calm. Someone probably tried to impersonate the grass shinobi and enter the exam. He failed as we had already taken some precautions with a seal that blocks any transformation. However...”

Kakashi didn't listen to the end of the sentence and was already sprinting of towards the Hattori ruins. He was putting every ounce of chakra he had into his feet, sprinting forward as quickly as he could. He could hear trees and branches splintering in his wake. He ran quicker. He had to arrive on time. Because if the impersonator had failed to enter the exam before, he would probably try to ambush the genin again the moment they left the ruins. And if his gut feeling was correct, as, sadly, it often was, then it may be his team that was targeted.

Cold dread settled in his stomach. And he felt a terrible sense of déjà-vu. It wasn't the first time he rushed to save a teammate, knowing he may very well he may be too late. He usually was. Kakashi ran quicker.

He couldn't lose them too. He wouldn't add another three names to the list of people whose death he was responsible for. His fragile sanity had taken enough hits already and more times than not he felt like the guilt would choke him. What would happen if his genin team, for which he was responsible as their sensei, that he had sent into this exam died. They hadn't lived yet, not really, and he could picture their young and determined faces in his mind' s eye with the clarity only the sharingan allowed. How was it possible that he led them from one disaster to the next? First the debacle in Wave, now this. He couldn’t fail them to.

He stopped thinking and concentrated all of his chakra and strength on running as quickly as possible to his team.

He felt Orochimarus presence long before he barged onto the yellowing fields just outside the Hattori ruins. So, the situation was even worse that he had dreaded. The snake-sannin himself had ambushed
his team. When he arrived, he took in the body of the floor, the chunin, Iruka, bleeding out, Sakura near him, Sasuke before her, fear, no terror shining in red sharingan eyes, before all three of them: Naruto, blue eyes tinged red and rage etched onto his childish features. Orochimaru a few feet away, arms crossed, smiling lightly, several large snakes at his feet.

He saw the attack before he could reach them. A gigantic snake appeared around the Sanin and its tail wiped through the air and Naruto was thrown into a large tree and without a sound crumpled to the ground and laid motionless.

Desperation cursed through Kakashi’s veins and he fought to resist the instinct to rush to the boy’s side. Instead he sprang in front of his two remaining students and lifted his forehead protector.

“Sakumo’s brat and his nice gift. How good of you to join us. You have even more interesting pupils than I thought. They are foolish however, like their sensei I suppose. Do you honestly think you may beat me?”

He didn’t sound arrogant, his velvety voice seemed genuinely interested.

“But you still try anyway. You care for them. You share with them a feeling of companionship. Did you ever realize how weak and vulnerable such a feeling makes you?”

A second later he thrust a kunai into the grey-haired man’s throat. The bunshin disappeared. Three dogs buried their sharp teeth into Orochimaru’s summons. The snakes threw them of but in the flurry of movement the copy-nin was able to launch his own attacks. Several wind-blades struck the sanin's summons who was forced to send one back. When Orochimaru had to hurriedly duck under a well-aimed fire ball, thrown just after a water dragon he seemed to decide his opponent had to be taken more seriously. Other snakes were summoned. Thinner animals with very thin triangular faces.

“Nira, Shira, go after him.”

It was Kakashi’s turn to go on the defensive. The Sannin was keeping a distance, using powerful water jutsu’s but the snakes were constantly on his heels and evading both took all of his agility and speed. He was forced to constantly rely on bunshins and substitution and the sharingan was tugging at his limits.

He tried a bolder move and ducked under a snake to get near to Orochimaru but was stopped by an earth wall. A sharp pain made him look down to his thigh were one of the snakes had managed to catch him. He jumped back and was able to throw the animal off.

“You have twenty seconds left before the poison ends this fight, copy-nin.” Orochimaru's voice sounded bored or vaguely amused more than triumphant. He had never considered him a threat.

However, now Kakashi had nothing left to lose. One, the finger signs came naturally to him. Blinding white light in his right hand, the chirping sound of screeching birds. Three, the earth wall crumbled, two meters and he would strike, Orochimaru turned around. Five. Pain in his left side. Bitten. Two steps, pain in his shoulder. Six, another snake coiling around his arm. Ten, he was stopped before his right hand touched the Sannin. Orochimaru smirked, seeing the chidori flicker and disappear, a second later his eye widened. Kakshi’s other hand was buried in his lower left side, the weak chidori hadn't allowed him to pierce
more than the first few layers of skin after the protective armor the Sanin wore. After all, maintaining
two chidori, one in each hand, was draining.

For the first time Orochimaru seemed furious. He was clutching the wound and Kakashi could feel
his murderous intent like cold, acidic water on his skin. He really felt cold, it wasn’t just an illusion.
The poison was working, and he felt his head connecting with the ground without remembering how
he fell down.

Orochimaru sidestepped him and approached Sasuke.
“Noga, swallow the Ushiha, I prefer to do this somewhere else. Other bothersome people are
coming.”

Kakashi tried to sit-up but his body was only a distant source of burning pain. He could still see and
the scene he witnessed came straight from his nightmares. Orochimaru’s big summon was rushing
towards the Ushiha boy, who was rooted to the spot trying to protect the academy teacher and
Sakura. Orochimaru would capture the boy and do who-knew-what with him. He had to...

A blur of orange erupted on the scene.
At the last moment Naruto threw himself in front of the Ushiha-boy and stopped the snake a few feet
before he connected with his target. Blood was dripping heavily on the floor from where one of the
fangs had caught the boy in the shoulder. His expression was of complete determination and his eyes
were burning crimson.

“Snake-bastard I told you, you aren’t allowed to touch my sensei, that goes for both of them. And
neither are you allowed to touch my teammates, or you will regret it.”

Kakashi felt unconsciousness overcome him and fought against it desperately. Naruto was growling
at Orochimaru but the man was no longer playing around. He saw the snake-sannin about to attack,
then look up and swear, jump back and shunshin away. It’s only when he recognized the silhouette
of the Hokage that he let his eyes fall closed.

Chapter End Notes

I will try to update regularly again but I’m a little bit down lately. It’s probably the
weather. Where I live it’s getting cold and grey and it’s been a week since there was one
sunny day. Don’t hesitate to leave a comment, it really lifts my mood.
October I

Chapter Notes

Next part of the Chunin exam. Honestly, I remember that it was very difficult for me to decide how I wanted to do this part. A first draft skipped the preliminaries completely and just hinted at them having happened, but I felt that it left big holes in term of character development. On the other side, I did not know how and if I wanted to change the fights. Finally, in my ongoing effort to make it slightly more realistic, I decided to mix up some one on one fights that seemed to “destined” to me (Sakura vs Ino, Hinata vs. Neji…). I seriously choose pairs at random (yes, I even made little paper slips and everything. But honestly, I probably shouldn’t have invested that much effort into it. At the end of the day I think that unconsciously I left the fights I liked the most in the original manga and I changed those who enthused me less or when I had a good idea for the fight.
Btw, yes Kabuto makes an appearance.

I do not understand how to make part of the text bold so if there is a little*, it means it's directly from the manga.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kakashi woke up feeling pretty terrible. He was feeling exhausted but not the kind of deep, numb and aching numbness that came from chakra exhaustion but a more a painful and acute kind of fatigue that made his head pound. Poison then. The events that preceded his loss of consciousness came back to him all jumbled. There was Orochimaru, Naruto was hurt, the snakes, the Hokage had come.
He had to know if his team was safe. He dragged himself out of the bed, but his legs weren't ready to take the weight and he fell. He used the nightstand to prop himself up again and came face to face with a nice bouquet of flowers and a tasteful get-well card. He turned it around and recognized Sakura's neat penmanship.

Dear Kakashi sensei,

I hope you will get well very soon. The medics say that the wounds you sustained weren't extensive but that the poison was quite dangerous. They were able to find a cure but don't think you will regain consciousness before Monday.
We were all very scared for you.
I know you will worry but all three of us are mostly fine. Iruka will be ok too. Naruto had a nasty bite in the shoulder, but it wasn't poisoned. I don't understand how he could heal so quickly but they released him today. He isn't allowed to train for at least one and a half weeks and complains all the time.
Sasuke-kun was still injured from what happened during the exam. We will tell you later, but we were attacked by some very nasty Ame-genin and he was poisoned with a paralytic. Now everything is okay, but he should still take it easy for a few days, even if I doubt he will listen.
I'm fine and I promise that I will train very hard. We won't give up on winning the exam.
Thank you for protecting us. Get well.
Kakashi felt relief and a kind of warm affection for his students. God, and he could have lost them so easily. He would have to get stronger. These kinds of situations couldn't keep happening.

It took almost two days to convince the nurses to let him see his pupils. Finally, the head-nurse from his floor released him with a glare and a few terse words.

Kakashi knew very well that he wasn't healed yet. The short way from the hospital to the training ground 9 left him winded and frustrated and he was happy to settle down against a large tree and watch his students. Naruto was grumpily training his chakra control that was slowly (so, so slowly) going from abysmal to terrible. More surprisingly Sasuke seemed to be helping Sakura with her taijutsu stance.

He was demonstrating how to attack an opponent from the side with a kunai. His steps were sure and precise. Sakura followed a little more slowly.

After some time. Sasuke and Sakura stopped, grabbed their water bottles and called their last teammate. All three of them walked towards him. Ah, so they had noticed him. Well, he hadn't tried to hide.

Naruto's smile was somewhat sheepish when he looked and beamed at him.

“Thank you, sensei for saving us!”

Kakashi didn't really know how to answer him. He should tell him that protecting them was his duty and that he was doing a pretty poor job of it. He didn't really know how to formulate his gratitude towards them for managing to remain alive, so he did not say anything at all.

Quickly, all three of them launched into a recollection of their adventures during the third task. Their different perspectives and styles made for an interesting tale. When they finished Kakashi made them go over each of the fights, made them analyze their mistakes or that of their opponents. They still had much to learn and terribly little time to do so.

In the next few days, the training intensified. Kakashi tried almost despairingly to pass on decades of fighting experience to them. How the first few seconds of a fight were almost always the most decisive, how a keen eye could guess an opponent’s strength and a quick mind could decipher his weaknesses.

The day of the next task came to quickly in his mind. He had been informed that this year the exam would include preliminaries for the last task. Too many genins had made it through the second one and the last exam was to be a public event and the audience (ninja's but also, mainly, civilians, nobles and high-ranking diplomats and court members) had a short attention span.

It made Kakashi want to bristle in irritation. For them, it was nothing more than an exciting show. It was hard for a shinobi like Kakashi who had been thrown so young into the chaos of war to not resent the civilians’ ignorance and naivety.

For his three genins, learning that an additional task had been added must have been absolutely frustrating.

They entered the wide stone arena with a feeling of foreboding. The amount of tension and ambient
chakra in the room made the hairs at the back of Kakashi's neck stand on end. Damn these rookies who hadn't yet learned that masking one's chakra and keeping a lid on the killing intent was a) polite inside a ninja village, b) an intelligent way to not give away potentially crucial information about abilities and powers.

Hayate, a tokubetzu jonin which he had met a few times through common acquaintances was leaning against a side pillar. He looked ill but Kakashi had come to expect that from him. The genins were less impressed. Sasuke and Sakura were throwing him dubious glances.

The genins were told to line up squad by squad in the middle of the arena while their senseis, the previous examiners accompanied by a few chunin and the Hokage were standing in front of the massive statue that covered the entirety of the front wall. It gave the whole event an air of ceremony. Other's would have called such dramatics excessive but Kakashi remembered how important it had seemed to him at the time of his own graduation. Even in the middle of the war, the Hokage had taken the time to encourage them for their last task. There had been no preliminaries, the village was undermanned and made no effort at all to lessen the number of graduates. He had been the youngest but maybe also the most conscious of the responsibility that would befall to him if he succeeded. Back then the Hokage hadn't looked quite as old and wasn't yet shrouding himself in a soft air of harmlessness. His sharp gaze had traveled over all of them but Kakashi had thought that it lingered on him for a second longer. The Hokage had spoken a few terse words about the reality of war and a shinobi's duty. Kakashi hadn't looked away, not once had his gaze left the old man. He hadn't spared a glance for the many among the ones allowed to watch who were against his very presence among his Leaf-comrades. His fights were over quickly. He was the youngest but that only meant that he had learned to compensate for his lack of height and strength in speed, perfect execution, and ruthlessness.

This time the Hokage seemed more serene and among the jonin, there was a sense of febrile excitement and not of morbid resignation. Still, the chunin exam could be dangerous for unprepared genin and Kakashi knew that.

"First off", the Hokage began, "for passing the second test, congratulations!"

A pregnant pose settled in the room.

The rookies were looking at each other with calculating gazes. The jonin were slightly more discreet in their rivalry. Except for Gai of course. Discretion and Gai weren't well acquainted. The man half-turned his face to him.

"Your team isn't too bad or maybe they were lucky. But as soon as my team is around getting any further is impossible since from now on it's all about real ability. Well, youth brings sweet and sour times..."*

Kakashi ignored him with familiar ease to Guys annoyance.

The man wasn't completely wrong though. The last tasks were almost always one on one matches and depending on the one they'd be paired with his genin could find themselves in a really tight spot. More than most of the other genin, they lacked real battle experience and practice of their skills.

"Hokage-sama will now explain the third test, listen carefully". Anko exclaimed.*

"Yes...for the coming third task...but first there is something I'd like to explain to you. It concerns the true reason for this exam...why do we have all the allied countries taking the exam together."*

The Hokage's deep voice was rumbling through the complete silence of the room.

"To promote friendship among the countries? To raise the level of shinobi? I don't want you to be confused about the true meaning of it. It is a replacement for war among the allied countries."*

The old man went straight to the point. Kakashi had always preferred it that way with him. The
Hokage knew how to spin lies and sweet illusions and was better than most realized at manipulating enemies and allies. Kakashi had always wondered why everyone always talked about his gentle and merciful ways when he knew him to be a harsh and ruthless commander.

Right now, the Hokage was looking at the next generation with a cold, incisive gaze. Almost two decades ago he had handed a newly promoted 9-year-old grey-haired chunin his first assassination mission looking down at him with the very same gaze. Kakashi imagined it meant something like "I will at least have the honesty to not baby you. This is how things are and you and I know there is no other way".

“If you look back, the shinobies that stand together as allies were once enemies who fought each other over who would rule. Now that the wars have stilled this exam is a stage to vent the hate and the aggression, to reenact the battles of the past.”

That was Naruto’s cue to blow up. Kakashi was too used to it to really feel frustrated and stoically resisted the urge to facepalm.

“What the hell is that crap, aren’t we fighting to decide who’ll become a chunin.”

“Certainly, the exam serves to decide which genins have what it takes to become chunin but the other, hidden purpose is for the shinobies to battle, sometimes to death for their village’s prestige.”

“Prestige?”

“Watching the final task will be leaders and influential individuals of many countries who make up the clientele of the shinobi villages. If you prove your strength, you prove your village’s strength which will, in turn, bring that village more clients, more wealth, more power, more respect, more success, more safety.
At the same time... the strength and safety of the village is the strength of its shinobi and that strength is born through life-risking battles.
This very exam only has a sense if you are willing to risk your life.”

“But then why say stuff about friendship. Is that only a lie?” An average looking, brown-haired girl interrupted. One of Guy's students as she stood behind the boy with the infamous green jumpsuit. Well, at least she was a bright one, it seemed.

“This fragile balance of power, this game of intimidation, that is friendship between the shinobi countries.”

His genin looked strangely thoughtful, Naruto was frowning, and Sakura was looking uncomfortable.

“Do not forget from now on you are fighting with your life for the prestige and safety of your country;* you aren't children anymore, you are shinobi.”

"That's where things go wrong" Kakashi added mentally "they are shinobi and children and we as adults should have the duty to fight for them to remain children as long as possible".
He saw in Gai's tense form and Asuma's clenched jaw that they agreed with him.

For a moment no one spoke. Then Hayate cleared his throat and looked over a paper he was holding.

“Good now that you are ready, I will explain the next task. I, Hayate Gekko, am the referee for the preliminaries and for the third test in general. This next task will be about...cough, one on one matches. 30 genin managed to advance to the third task. Only half of you will be allowed to go on. Remember from now on your life will be in danger so, cough...Does anyone want to quit?"*"
“I'm sorry but I'm still all bet up and I still can't hear well because of an injury I sustained in the second task. I don't think I will be able to fight on. And now that our life is on the line...”

Naruto seemed to be about to open his mouth again to share his opinion with everyone, but Sakura put his hand on his shoulder and shook her head. The blond began to pout.

Kakashi smiled. Cowardice was something that Naruto could probably hardly understand. Well, it was unimportant. They should concentrate on their tasks.

“Good, now we are ready to begin. There really are no rules, not really. You win if the other is dead, unconscious or admits defeat. So, better admit defeat than die, ok. If I have the feeling that the winner is clearly defined I am also allowed to stop the match and announce the winner. Good. The first match...hum... will be Dozu against Tzurugi...euh, the other you should leave the arena and wait upstairs, you are not allowed to enter the arena.”

Kakashi climbed the stairs slowly. His genins were looking around the room, probably wondering who would be their opponent.

Meanwhile, the two first opponents positioned them self on opposite sides of the arena and glared at each other. The signal to begin was given.

At first, the battle offered little entertainment. Both adversaries were average in taijutsu and mostly focused on defense. They would launch an attack and if it was deflected step back and wait. In any real fight with a somewhat decent opponent, such tactics would have been mediocre as few would be kind enough to give them time for respite.

Most Jonin from Konoha were looking at the sound boy expectantly. If sound really was allied with Orochimaru, then there was no telling what would come out of this. Everyone waited for some kind of trick. However, it’s the Konoha-genin that first revealed to have a secret up his sleeve.

The sound-guy had managed to land a hit and had grabbed him around the shoulder and arm in a basic hold. The next second an ominous cracking was heard and the Konoha-nin’s hand extended unnaturally. It folded back on itself as if all bones had disappeared in his wrist. He gripped the other nin’s hands and the next second his other hand, extended in just the same way crept around the sound-nin's throat, blocking him effectively.

Slowly each limp wrapped itself snakelike around his opponents.

Kakashi was musing about the strangeness of the technique when, in a desperate effort, the sound-nin freed his left hand. Before he could reach for a kunai it was snatched again by an elongated hand. He was now completely restrained. One hand twisted in his back, the other held above his head and the Konoha-nin standing behind him taunting him. The next second an unbearable shrill sound resonated around the arena. Kakashi directed chakra to his ears in a split second but still felt a sharp pain take hold of his brain. Acute hearing came with downsides.

If it affected him so much he could understand that the Konoha-nin, whose head had been centimeters away from his opponent’s arm, obviously the source of the sound, had crumpled.

Hayate bent over him.

“Euh, Tzurugi is unconscious as such the winner...cough...is Dozu.”

The young man was grinning darkly, looking up at the jonin and genin his arm, half flesh, half mechanics held up in victory. Yeah, he really may be one of Orochimaru’s.

A lot of flashy abilities for a pretty mediocre fight. Kakashi dismissed but something at the back of his mind told him that he had overlooked an important detail.

Before he could think more about it the next match was announced:

“Sasuke vs Ino.”

He looked at his student and saw the dark look on his face. Sakura was beaming uneasily.

Understandable, who should she cheer for: her crush or her best friend? She seemed to decide that
her loyalty was for her team.

“Hey Sasuke, that is great. You will beat her easily.”

“That's bullshit. The boy interrupted her. I'm not looking for an easy fight. This isn’t just a test for me. I don’t care about chunin or whatever. Am I strong? I just want an answer to that. I need to fight strong guys, and they are here.* I don’t care about Ino, she is weak, so she is useless to me.”

Kakashi cringed mentally. The girl wasn't two meters away and Sasuke had made no effort to speak quietly. Ino had straightened slightly and while her face remained expressionless there was something wounded in her eyes. Asuma was looking at the Uchiha with scorn. He had just humiliated his student in public. Kakashi tried to send him an apologetic look. He really was trying to work on Sasuke's arrogance and selfishness. Asuma just moved that burning glare onto him. He would hear about this later.

Ino brushed past Sasuke and an uncomfortable looking Sakura. Sasuke followed her a second later, still scowling.

They stood on opposite part of the arena. Hayate looked from one to the other.

“Ready? The fight begins, now.”

Chapter End Notes

I really, really appreciated your comments. I came back from uni feeling overworked and seeing them made me happy. Don’t hesitate, tell me what you think!
Hello and again, a little bit late but this time you get a pretty long chapter.

To help you understand: remember Yoroi, his power was to suck up chakra.
Also I refer to the genin from sound with the arm that could emit high-pressure air.

A few unnecessary comments: 1. Yes Sasuke is not shown in his best light in this chapter but I believe it his true to his character at the beginning and I need to make this clear before he begins to change (sloooowly)! 2. I forgot how annoying Neji could be at the beginning. 3. Again I wanted to give the impression that even though they have great potential the rookies really aren’t that strong compared to a few older genin so I added a fight or two with two older contestants.

Sakura looked at Ino uneasily. She looked at best friend’s slightly trembling hands and the tension in her frame. She cursed her luck and balled her fists. She was afraid for her friend, thinking of all the ways Sasuke could hurt her. At the same time, she felt almost angry at the girl for taking the opportunity from her to root wholeheartedly for her teammate.

With Ino it had never been easy. They knew each other inside out which made it so much easier to hurt the other when they wanted to. And they did. Sakura loved Ino and hated her just as often and envied her even more. Ino was smart, Ino was loved, Ino was confident. And Ino had been willing to help little slow-blooming Sakura. It was a dept that always hangs unsaid between them and Sakura resented it more than anything. She had hoped badly that now that they had both made genin she would finally get the chance to settle that dept. Instead she would have to see her best friend be crushed by her teammate.

What would Ino do now? She had been the first girl to lay claim on the Uchiha boy. On endless afternoons after the academy, laying side by side they had painted an imaginary future with the boy, imagined a life of happiness and success. Sasuke had come to crystallize all their goals and ideals.

Now Ino had to fight against that old dream on top of the best rookie of their year. Sakura could see the tension coiling in her best friend.
“I’ll fight you Sasuke”, her friend began, “and I won’t hold back.”
Her voice didn’t quite manage to sound convinced and Sasuke only snarled. In a fluid movement, he flicked a few shurikens at her and charged. The girl barely ducked and had to jump back.
A high kick. Three stumbling steps backward. A lurch. A shriek and an awkward dodge. Sakura's fist was balled, and she wanted to look away.
A kunai swirled past Ino missing its mark but leaving a crimson line on her shoulder. The girl jumped back stumbled again and fell to her knees. She tried to form the hand signs for her family's jutsu but Sasuke wasn't stupid and jumped at her. She evaded again.

The match became a pretty pathetic game of chase. Sasuke wasn't putting any real effort into it but was still largely superior and getting more and more angry. His eyes were pitch black, Ino didn't earn the Sharingan it seemed. Again, she had to hastily evade a sweeping kunai in Sasuke's right hand.
This time she jumped back a few meters and was left back to the wall, cornered. Before Sasuke could attack her again she cried out.

“Wait Sasuke. I don’t want to fight you. I know that you think I’m ridiculous.” Her head was bowed, long blond hair hanging in front of her face not quite hiding her tears. “I love you Sasuke, so if you want I can let you win. Do you want that?”

Sakura looked from her friend to her teammate. In his narrow eyes and the almost ugly snarl he wore she read anger. The last time she had seen Sasuke this angry was during the Wave-mission. His voice was low when he spoke.

“You are scum that's not worthy of being called a ninja.”
Ino’s head snapped up, her watery eyes wide with hurt and horror. Then Sasuke charged at her. Ino tried to do the hand signs for her family jutsu but the movements were to slow, to unsure. Sasuke's foot connected with her head.
The clone disappeared.

For a second Sasuke couldn't hide his utter bewilderment. Then he understood his mistake and quickly began to move aware that without locating the girl he was at the mercy of her jutsu, having to move constantly to avoid it. He looked around, where could she be. There was no place to hide inside the arena... then he noticed the obvious. There were two identical exterminators in the arena. One leaning against a shadowy corner of the wall, the other standing on the other side, in broad daylight.

In a second his black eyes were red, and he scanned the arena. There, the one in the shadow was the real one. A second later he threw a kunai at the second one. He side-stepped easily and dropped the henge. Ino was smirking at him.

“There really is no hiding from the Sharingan. A few more seconds and I would have got you.”

Sasuke didn't let her finish her sentence and attacked her. This time she evaded easily. Her movements were smooth if not powerful. She wasn't his equal but she was cunning. More than once Sasuke had to jump back from an exploding tag she had left while jumping back.

However, Ino's only real chance had been her masterful deceiving act. Finally, she was cornered and lifted her hands in surrender. It wasn’t a shameful defeat, Sasuke looked rougher than she did: His clothing singed, an angry bruise on his cheekbone.

He was declared victor but seemed even angrier than before. He climbed the stairs and Sakura stepped back, not wishing to earn his ire if she tried to compliment him. Wisely if surprisingly Naruto remained silent as well. Kakashi-sensei, however, stepped forwards.

“Sasuke, remember this and let it be a lesson for you. There is not one jonin or chunin in this room who did not notice she was deceiving you. Stop thinking so much of yourself and so little of others.”

Sasuke threw him a look of pure hatred and muttered something before sitting down a few meters away, radiating anger.

Sakura winced and choose to look at her female friend instead. Ino was standing with her team. Asuma had a hand on her shoulder and was saying something that made the girl smile softly. Shikamaru was looking at her smiling.

Ino had grown Sakura noticed. She could see so much farther than her own selfish goals. While Sakura was still clamoring to childish fantasies Ino was walking the path of a kunoichi. Sakura closed her eyes willing envy and jealousy to leave her. It was her own damned fault. And she was the only one who could make her own path. Had she not promised to her teammates (her teammates, not her crush) that she would be stronger. It was now up to her to prove that she was serious about it.
The next fight was one guy from the Suna team with which they had done the exchange and the teammate of the strange Konoha nin who could extend his hands so strangely. A certain Yoroi apparently.

Secretly Sakura was rooting for the Suna-boy, Kataki, he had been the one who proposed the exchange and without him who knew if they would have succeeded in that task. That and the other boy looked creepy. If his abilities resembled the ones of his teammate then he was super-creepy.

He was. Cornered by the grey-haired Suna-boy who had a wicked way with most projectiles and a good situational awareness the Yoroi-guy suddenly switched from evading to attacking. He took a kunai to the shoulder but that did not seem to be enough to stop him. He got hold of the Suna-nin and everyone quickly saw that something strange was happening. The attack left the Suna-nin completely weak. Sakura looked around and noticed that both Hyuga of their generation had their Byakugans trained on the Konoha-nin and were frowning.

Anyway, and to Sakura’s disappointment the Suna-boy lost when he fell unconscious a few seconds later.

If they won their fights and got to the next round they would have to find out what the deal was with that boy. Maybe Sasuke knew with his Sharingan. But he still looked murderous, so she refrained from asking.

The fourth fight was gross. And she didn't think that because she was delicate. A lot of people were looking somewhat green around the edges when the sound-boys arms exploded. Like his teammate, he had a special mechanical arm which in his case could release a stream of air under a lot of pressure. Shino, his opponent, was a clever shinobi Sakura knew from their academy days. He demonstrated his cunning and the dangerous power of his clan when his insects invaded the Suna-boy’s body and let the very same pressure that was the boy's main defense destroy him.

Okay, Shino was intelligent and dangerous, and sympathy probably wasn't his strongest trait. If she was ever to fight him she would have to be very, very, very careful.

The fifth fight was between another Suna boy and a Konoha-nin. The Sand shinobi was tall, probably a year or two older than her with strange purple paintings adorning his face and a strange bandaged-wrapped packet loaded onto his back. He seemed to emanate confidence. His steps were measured and regular, sure and strong.

The Konoha boy was his opposite. He was slightly hunched forward; his steps were light and he approached his opponent with an almost self-deprecating smile.

It was the genjutsu boy from the second task. The one who had tricked them so easily at the beginning of the test.

Just a second before she had been sure that the Suna-boy had the advantage, now she wasn't so certain. Once again, she realized that in the ninja world nothing could be taken at face value.

On her right, Naruto had loudly pointed out to Kakashi that the Konoha boy was "the bastard who tricked us is the last test". Her sensei had refocused his gaze on the arena and while he still looked bored Sakura had the feeling that he was interested in this fight.

"The sixth fight...begins!"

For a long time, both boys looked at each other. Then suddenly the fight began. Shuriken on one side, senbon on the other. Dodge, both opponents jumped back untouched. The attack was repeated
a few times, then the Suna boy got creative and a jutsu was thrown the other boy's way, a thin stream of obviously poisonous gas, accompanied by a few sharp projectiles. Again, a miss.
The Konoha-boy was moving quickly, while his attacks were unimaginative his evasion skills were good. He switched up his game with a few replacement jutsus when the Suna-nin's attacks got more pressing. At one point he managed to appear a few meters behind the Suna-nin and began a series of high-speed finger-signs. Probably a genjutsu Sakura reasoned. However, either he didn't get the time to finish or something missed because the Suna-nin threw another attack at him. For a second the Konoha-nin forgot to reign in his surprise and one of the senbon found its mark in his shoulder.

The Suna-boy on the other side tsked.
“This is getting annoying, if you're not able to attack me, then I will be the one to launch the offensive.”

A second later Sakura revised her opinion again about the likely winner of the fight. The Konoha-nin was experienced and careful, certainly, but the Suna boy was something else. His speed and precision when throwing senbon was almost inhuman. The Konoha-nin was hard-pressed to avoid them, the sheer number of projectiles was impressive. Still the boy managed to evade, he began to retreat, always remaining in motion. Sometimes he dared a riskier move, took a few steps in the direction of the Suna-nin but it never payed of. Another senbon found its mark. It wasn't enough yet to really be a bother but it made clear that the odds weren't in their fellow nin's favor. Again, he was trying to put distance between himself and his opponent, but the Sand-shinobi was following step for step. Suddenly the Konoha-boy stopped. At this point they had almost circled the whole arena and senbons were littering the ground. The Sand-boy stopped too. He was confident, yes, but warry, intelligent enough to notice that his opponent was still dangerous.

“You did not notice, did you?”

The Suna nin frowned.

“Look around.”

His opponent didn’t take his eyes off him and tensed when the Konoha nin did a few hand signs. There was a strange glowing light on the ground and suddenly Sakura did notice. The numerous senbon on the ground took on a vague shape. The Konoha-nin hadn't dodged at random, he had planned this. All around the Suna-boy there was a strange kind of swirl. Genjutsu, Sakura remembered. It was the shape on the boy’s hand. Suddenly the Suna-boy collapsed but in a very strange way. He formed an unnatural looking heap on the ground. At the same times the bandages covering the strange shape he always carried fell away and revealed... a double of the boy. For a second the double just laid there. The Konoha-nin leaped at him but his movements were somewhat slow. The double's hands shot up suddenly doing the "kay" hand signs and the glowing subsided. At the last moment he dodged the Konoha-nin's attack and jumped back. At his feet, what they had all thought to be the "real" Suna-nin was only a puppet.

On the other side of the arena, the Konoha-nin fell to one knee his hand covering one of the puncture wounds from the senbon.

The Suna-boy wasn't smirking anymore, but he didn't look especially angered either. He looked... excited, in a malevolent kind of way.

“Heu. Not bad for a Konoha brat. How did you know it was a puppet?”

The Konoha nin smiled a little even though his eyes were squinted because of the pain.

“My genjutsu should have succeeded, the only way it wouldn’t have was... if the one I was projecting it on wasn't human. The rest was only guesswork.”
“And the strange sign?”

“A large range genjutsu. I didn’t know if you were hiding with some kind of kekkai genkai or jutsu but you had to be inside the arena. The only thing I didn’t take into account was the senbon. The second batch was poisoned isn’t it?”

“Sure. If I were you. I’d ask for a medic pretty quickly. They are lethal if they aren’t treated in the first ten minutes.”

The Konoha-nin nodded and the exam proctor immediately ended the fight.

“Mmm”. Kakashi mused next to her. “An interesting fight.”

"True," Sakura thought, "but I’m getting more and more worried about the strength of our competition, both of these guys could have beat me easily”.

The next fight was quick. Shikamaru demonstrated again how cunning he was and only a handful minutes passed between a moment he entered the arena and the moment he climbed the stairs back up to join his team. He really was a strange guy looking just as bored even at the moment of his victory.

Then it was a fight between the girl from the Hyuga’s team and the girl from Sand. She winced when she saw how the girl was taken out brutally by her opponent and felt somewhat sad. She had felt an instantaneous kind of fellowship with her when she had met her before the first exam. They shared the same kind of wariness about their male teammate’s constant arguing and overly loud rivalry.

Also, she felt even tenser. That girl from Sand was probably another opponent she wouldn’t have been able to beat.

The ill-looking Jonin announced the next match between two fits of cough.

“Next match: Uzumaki Naruto against Inuzuka Kiba.”

Naruto felt his blood boil the second he heard his name. A wide grin appeared on his face. His time had come. He heard Sakura wish him good luck and he almost missed it over the rush of his blood in his ears. He answered something loud and cheerful. Just before he turned away he met his sensei’s gaze, the single dark eye starring into him. He used it to focus himself. "Be discreet" Kakashi had said. "Be careful". "You’re not stupid, you only forget that you have a brain sometimes". He walked down the stairs, trying not to rush. Kiba jumped down from the balustrade.

"Think" Naruto urged himself. "Analyze" a cold voice whispered in his ear, a voice that sounded like Sasuke.

Kiba was a good shinobi. One of the best in Taijutzu at the academy, he had his clan techniques and Akamaru. But in a way, him and Kiba, they were cut of the same fabric. They were brawlers, they were hot-heads, they were pranksters. However, regarding the later, if there was one thing all of Konoha would gladly agree on, was that he was unmistakably the master of that art.

“So dead-last ready to get your ass handed" the boy shouted across the arena. "I mean, this is so cool, it's like we've already won, right Akamaru!”*

“Shut the hell up mutt. And why the hell are you bringing a puppy, is that even allowed?”*

“Idiot, he’s fighting with me. For an Inuzuka there is no fight without your companion dog.”
The jonin confirmed Kiba's claim and both readied themselves. He could feel Kiba's eagerness like a current under his skin. He would not lose his fight. "Think" he repeated in his head.

"I will end you in one punch."* He heard Kiba say.

Naruto gritted his teeth and forced his heartbeat to slow down. "Don't get angry, that's always how Sasuke gets the upper hand", he thought.

Kiba was preparing a technique, some kind of henge. And then he came up to him, all sharp nails and feral grin, quick in a way he hadn't been a few months ago. But Naruto had had months to change too. The one technique Kakashi had hammered into him before the second task came to him without thinking. Building chakra up in his hands, wait for the perfect moment and just before the collision, release.

They were both thrown back by the momentum, Naruto without sustaining a scratch. Kiba was fixing a suspicious gaze on him.

The Inuzuka threw a smoke bomb and jumped away. Amidst the blinding fumes, Naruto swore silently. This could be dangerous. Kiba was playing his strengths perfectly: Naruto couldn't see anything, Kiba didn't need to see anything.

"But I can still sense chakra", Naruto thought, and he was still terrible at it Kakashi said but that was better than nothing.

A second later he felt a presence jump at him and it didn’t have any kind of human chakra. He caught Akamaru easily. "Think", "Press your advantage", "decipher the flow of the battle, what does your opponent expect". Certainly not what Naruto planned to throw at him. One henge and two clones. He would attack Kiba while taking his dog's appearance, the first clone was to hold the real dog.

He ran up to Kiba on four legs. The boy had already noticed the slumped form of his opponent and welcomed his dog with open arms. He got a punch in the face instead and a second later an arm was holding him into a choking grip.

What Naruto had not anticipated was that Akamaru; sweet, cute Akamaru, could grow into a wolfish-looking beast. In three leaps it was on him and he felt fangs ripping his jumpsuit. Kiba escaped and Naruto felt his disadvantage acutely. There was no more time to think. Only reaction. A paw to the face. He dodged low on all four, jumped back, rolled, went up again, used a clone as a shield, felt more than saw a kick flying his way. He let himself fall forward, rolled, jumped again in a backward backflip. Used all the tricks of his mismatched fighting style that his teacher was no longer trying to correct but encouraged instead. Kiba was seething.

At one point he realized that just dodging Kiba's attack would not work long enough. He slapped an explosive tag onto the ground. It bought him only a second, Kiba’s sharp nose picked the scent of fire, powder and ink the second he activated it and Akamaru's animal senses made him flee it. Not a solution. He was condemned to run. Shit, hadn't he said that he wouldn't run. That he would be the shield, the unmovable force on which the enemy crashed and behind which the allies were protected.

Kiba meanwhile must have thought enough was enough and activated a strange kind of transformation that let both him and Akamaru share some traits and now he had two feral creatures barreling at him in a rotating motion.

He should dodge.
Kakashi would probably tell him to dodge.
He should definitively dodge.
He concentrated all his chakra into his hands, let it build. Like tons of water pressing against a dam. Materialized three clones before him, nothing more than cannon fodder, and three behind as damper
and waited for the impact. He felt the explosive output of energy, felt himself be thrown back violently and roll into the dust.

Both of his arms hurt, he had felt the sheer strength of the impact down to his bones. Long, bleeding gashes ran down his arms from Kiba's claws and his entire left side throbbed from where it had crashed into the dirt. He saw Kiba's form lying at the bottom of the wall against which he had been projected.

Both had suffered from the collision. Naruto was still conscious, Kiba was not. Which meant...he had won. In one move he was back up on his feet and let out a loud shout, both arms thrown over his head. His legs almost buckled under him but he didn't care. He had made it. In front of all these people who had to recognize him as the winner. This right know was the first step to becoming the legend he dreamt to be. His eyes met the Hokage's and the old man's dark eyes were twinkling with mirth. He inclined his head lightly and Naruto smiled even wider. The Sandaime better watch out, soon enough he would have to find a new job.

Naruto, once officially declared the victor, limped up the stairs more than he climbed them up. Sakura awaited him with a warm smile. Kakashi ruffled his hair. "We will have to teach you some other defensive jutsus, you seem to like them."

Sasuke only looked at him with his dark, angry eyes but just for once Naruto decided to ignore him and instead collapsed against the wall a few meters away from him.

Kakashi looks warmly at his student, his mask hiding a small smile. He was proud of Naruto and it was a truly strange and alien feeling for him. Pride for himself is something he hasn't felt since he was his genins’ age. It was quickly washed down by regret and old guilt. When he looks at them however he sees all the ways in which they have grown and thinks, hopes, that at least a little bit of it was thanks to him. He is more than aware of his many lackings as a teacher, but he just may get some of his hopes back up if he is exposed too long to these three insufferable children.

He sees the young boy beam at the crowd of people who have been underestimating him for so long. Kakashi knows that most jonins are taking note of his development, that the strongest genins are learning to see him as a worthy opponent. In the next few days a few seasoned shinobies will come to see him and will say, in their shinobi-typical roundabout kind of way, that the boy, the blond one, well, you know that one. They said he was hopeless, guess people were wrong.

He thinks he should tell the boy that but he doesn't know how to so he remains silent. He will buy Naruto ramen later.

He concentrates back onto the arena. The next match is about to begin. When he sees who will fight he feels an entirely different kind of tension fill him. He looks around the room and sees that most jonin are settling a worried gaze onto the opponents: The Hyuga boy on one side, long brown hair and unnerving clear eyes, a prodigy they say, the epitome of Konoha’s military power. On the other side, a boy in a large black coat with hood was looking fixedly at his adversary. His dark gaze had something old and wary that spoke of difficult times past. Around his forehead, almost unnoticeable under his hood was the Ame-headband.

Konoha had never had good relationships with Rain. The country these days was completely isolated from the rest of the world. The civil war had stopped seven years ago and since then Ame's elusive leader served as both its Kage and Daymo. Several minor skirmishes these last few years had raised tensions and when the Hokage had asked for a meeting with Ame’s leader he had declined but offered to send a few participants to the genin exams. That had been two years ago in Konoha. Last year all genin from Ame had made it past the 2nd task, in the 3rd all of their opponents had been
gravely injured, two of them had made chunin.
It had prompted a lot of talks. All Konoha shinobis had learned to be warry of Ame-nin's during the last wars.

Today again the two countries’ history hung like a third presence at the two opponents side. A history older than these two boys, older than Kakashi even. Hate and fear born at the time of his own father's youth. The second great shinobi war with Konoha and Uzugakure on one side and Suna and Iwa on the other had been fought mostly on Ame's territory and the local population had been the innocent collateral damage of a war between greater nations. It had been a strategic choice by the 2nd Hokage to avoid damage to the fire country's civilian population. Ame's civilians had been an afterthought. When twenty years later Ame joined Iwa and Kiri to fight Konoha it had surprised no one. One could argue, Kakashi mused, that it served Konoha right. Kakashi remembered fighting Ame shinobies, remembers blind attacks in dark forests, smelling the acrid gasses that they were so found of, killing children younger than even he was after they threw themselves at him in a suicide attack.

He had to remind himself that that time was long past. These Ame-children maybe would lead different lives.
The fight was bloody. The Ame kid could summon leeches but against the Byakugan it was hard to employ tactics based on distraction. The Hyuga quickly found the other boys weakness and killed the one leach that mothered the others and after that, it was superior taijutsu skill against sheer determination and sense of duty. Every time the Hyuga landed a hit the Ame-nin stood up and attacked again. Blood was dripping from his lips and almost black bruises were blossoming all over his skin. Finally, the proctor had to end the fight and the Ame-boy fell to the ground. Kakashi resented the dismissive words the Hyuga threw his opponent before leaving the arena and looked away when the Ame-boy tried to stand up again futilely to defend his country's honor even at the cost of his own life.
God, they were messed up. The whole business was messed up and Ame especially.

An uncomfortable mood took hold of most older shinobies. The next fight was a sand boy against a slightly older Ame-nin. Again, the rain-boy lost against a stronger enemy. Again, he persevered, driving himself to the limit, a mad glint in his eyes.
Hayate ended the fight again.

Chapter End Notes

Voilà!
I’m aware that I’m late, sorry. I could explain to you why but I’d just waste time so sorry and here’s the next chapter.

1. This is a gen fic and romantic relationship will only appear as very background elements so I’m quite open to what pairings you may like. Write me in the comments what pairings you’d like to see.
2. TRIGGER WARNING for this chapter. There will be talk that reflects ableism. This will not be addressed in this chapter but only later.

Hinata often mused that had been brought up in an immaculate cage. It was hard not to resent the cold formality, the constant need for discipline and lack of freedom. Sometimes Hinata wished to just stand up and go even though she despised herself a second later for thinking like that.

When they received valued guests, her mother would always make her wear one of her expensive Kimonos. The silk was beautifully woven and silver and golden threads were running through it painting pictures of birds and trees. The Obi was plum colored covered in subtle patterns. It had been made only for her by renown artisans and Hinata was fully aware of the honor she was given for wearing such a piece of art.

It didn't make it any less restricting, any less heavy and bothersome. Each step she took had to be small and careful, the heavy drape did not allow for much freedom of movement.

She often thought sitting on her heels listening to the guests discussing with her father that her traditional dress was a striking allegory for her whole existence. Every time she took a breath she could feel the heavy mantle of her clan duty. She was born fully dressed in it and it insulated her from others, created a distance between herself and the world, between herself and happiness.

She walked through life with tiny steps, measured and weighed, her eyes downcast because of the burden of duty. Over her, her father was watching with all his expectations. She stumbled when the weight was too heavy, stumbled and stumbled again under his disapproving glare. She felt so terribly inadequate. She wasn't as cold and efficient as her mother, as determined and focused as her sister, as brilliant and as certain as her cousin.

She couldn't remember a single day since she became seven and was officially declared clan heiress when her father had said that he was proud of her. It was maybe the gravest injury to her self-esteem. It eroded her self-worth one disappointed glare at a time.

She was entirely aware that, faced against this wall of cold formality and hard honor that her family had become to her, she had looked for an escape. She had found it in Naruto. It had been years ago soon after she became the heiress and she had only wanted to play with the other at the playground. However, the Hyuga name had already begun to isolate her from others. Her father rarely let her play outside the clan grounds and most children were either cowed or insulted by the Hyuga fame. They accused her of being stuck up when she was only timid. And that one autumn day, five years ago some boys, more daring than others, or more stupid as they didn't even think of the retributions the clan would unleash on them for harming her, had decided to really bring her down, to make her feel that she was nothing. They wanted to inflict a fatal wound onto her rumored arrogance. Hinata had only felt fear and pain.

And then Naruto swept in and saved her, with no skill, no honor but with all the confidence and
energy Hinata lacked. That day she had chosen him as her hero, her sun and her goal and in the dark nights where she had to bear her father's anger and disappointment her mind turned to him and she basked in the knowledge that he was out there. She liked to imagine that he was thinking of her, encouraging her from a distance. Hinata learned to draw courage from these thoughts.

In this arena, she felt herself tremble from the weight of expectations: her father had informed her that it would be unworthy of the Hyuga heiress to not at least advance to the finals. She was late-blooming enough, it was time now that she was seen by the nobles and rich of the country. Worse maybe than that weight, was the knowledge that Naruto was watching. For the first time in her entire life he would be watching only her. Her resolve strengthened: she had to win.

Her opponent was a year or two older and she had to force herself to look into blue, confident eyes that weren't Naruto's. There was a moment were neither of them moved. Then shuriken were thrown at her and she dodged smoothly.

Contrary to what her father thought she wasn't bad at Taijutzu. Her teachers had stressed time and time again that she was good, probably the third-best of her class. Her ninjutzu was average but certainly sufficient and yes, her genjutzu was quite mediocre but she was allowed a weakness. They never managed to convince her father.

Her opponent was keeping her distance and as such Hinata had to remain in the defensive. It was easy enough dodging the projectiles thrown at her. Suddenly after another salve of kunai the other girl rushed as her, fainted, dropped low, threw a kick at her. Hinata saw every movement but her body wasn't quite quick enough. Her sister would have touched the chakra pathways of her leg without fail and the fight would have ended right now. She only grazed the leg.

The girl jumped back wide-eyed. She wasn't putting weight on her leg and Hinata guessed she had managed to inflict enough damage that the girl would be weakened by it. She heard a few encouraging shouts from behind her: her team and mixed with them Naruto's voice, her heart fluttered.

The girl slowly circled her but Hinata didn't move, she didn't need to. Her Byakugan never lost her opponent.

"I'm quite unlucky, the other began, I'm a taijutzu expert. I'm quite good if I may say so but against the Byakugan I'm at quite a disadvantage."

Hinata remained silent. Hope was beginning to bloom inside of her. Maybe she would be lucky, maybe she had been paired against an opponent which weaknesses aligned with her strengths. Maybe she would win.

"Hyuga-san. I won't give up."

The next moment she had disappeared. Or almost, Hinata's Byakugan could track her movements. She was jumping from one part of the arena to another. Her leg wasn't bothering her enough to slow her down. Every jump was a burst of chakra that was like a beacon to her dojutzu. If the girl intended to confuse her with her erratic movements to suddenly attack her, her strategy was flawed. Her opponent was feeling bolder and was approaching more and more, still outside of Hinata's range but closer, closer.

All of Hinata's concentration was fixated on her chakra. Soon, she would strike. Her breath was even. "Father, she thought, Naruto, watch me, I'm fighting for you". Fear was still making her shake slightly. She could not fail this.

And suddenly a blue streak of chakra was in her range. Her hand shot out. Pain on her wrist, around her fingers, on her arm.
The girl had jumped back in time her hand was gripping something that Hinata could barely see. No chakra, her Byakugan was of no help. The girl wasn't grinning anymore, she was serious. Ninja-wire Hinata finally guessed. Thin and almost invisible, she only saw the light reflection of the light on the thin steel. It was everywhere. She had spun it all around her and she had seen nothing, to concentrated on her chakra. She began to panic. The metal was biting into her skin. She tried to whirl around with chakra in her palms hoping to cut the thread, but it was wound to tightly around her. She only managed to wrap herself into it further. She felt an irrational sense of panic enter her. Failure was bitter in her throat and tears were trying to gather in her eyes. She tried to think a way out of it, but she was trapped. She looked around. Everyone was looking down at her. God, she must look ridiculous. She wanted to cry out. What must Naruto be thinking of her. She was like an ugly fly in a spider's net. How pathetic.

“Do you give up?”

“No.”

Her voice was coming out weakly and she felt even more ashamed.

The girl was looking at her somewhat sadly. How miserable did she look if even her opponent felt sorry for her.

“Sorry” she heard before she felt blinding pain all around her. For a second, she saw the bright light of electricity dancing on the wire. Then only blackness.

She regained consciousness on a cot in some kind of infirmary. She heard beeps from a bed a few feet away.
She looked straight ahead to the white ceiling and contemplated the failure that she was. She felt a hot tear travel down her face and fall into her hair. She felt too tired to sob and only cried silently.
She heard a rustle on her left and saw her father enter. She tried to stop her tears, but he had probably noticed them already. She tried to sit up. She had learnt long ago that with her father one was better off not showing to much weakness.

“Your injuries are minor. You were unconscious for only half an hour. Your opponent was magnanimous.”

Hinata nodded.

“You fell short of all our expectations, once more.”

Hinata closed her eyes for a second and willed the tears away. She felt sick.
Her father seemed to hesitate.

“Hinata, you are my daughter. As a clan head I will always have to put my duty to the clan before all manners of personal consideration. However, I have to wonder for the good of the clan just as much as for yours if you really think you are able to remain the heiress and fulfill the requirements tied to such a title.”

“I thought there was no other choice. I thought tradition says that the first-born of the former head must be the heir and no other can take his place. There is no bending traditions you told me.”

Her father looked absently at the door and without turning back to her went on.

“There are ways. There have been some cases. If we can prove that you suffer from some illness, or that you have a dysfunction as far as chakra goes or some other deformities... There are laws in place to guarantee the heir will not be a burden for the clan.”

He had said that with such a calm voice Hinata mused.
This time she couldn't stop the tears and the weak sobs that escaped her. Was it true, was she just as much a burden as an infirm would be.
Her father lifted a hand to her shoulder, but she shrugged it off with something akin to disgust.
He seemed to want to say something, opened his mouth closed it. Sat up and walked to the door. He finally turned back to her.

“I will give you a few days to think about it.”
The door closed.
Finally, she could cry as much as she wanted. Cry and cry until all her disgust, that sick feeling in her stomach disappeared. Her sobs were hiccupping, and she could barely draw a breath through her tears.
She heard the door open again but she felt too sick to look up. A hand fell on her shoulder, smaller and warmer than her father’s. Blue eyes were looking at her and for a second, she thought it was Naruto and felt even worse but then the hair was a shade to dark and the girl was too tall.
Strangely enough the fact that the opponent that just defeated her was seeing her break down felt less revolting. She was only a stranger. In her distress she couldn’t muster the self-awareness to care about what that girl thought of her.
She felt a warm voice speak to her without understanding the words, her upper body was pressed against somebody else’s. She only cried harder. It took her almost ten minutes to bring herself under control once again. When she looked up again she saw the girl looking at her kindly.
“I’m sorry that you had to witness this. What can I do for you?” She uttered between the last few sobs
“Nothing. I just wanted to check up on you. I felt somewhat bad about how our fight ended.”
“Why?”
“I tricked you and I really didn’t give you any chance to fight back. That wasn’t very chivalrous.”
“A ninja isn’t supposed to be chivalrous.”
“I suppose so.”
They both remained silent for a moment. Hinata felt her usual shyness and didn’t dare initiate conversation. She should be more mortified about the pathetic sigh she must have made but the shock of her defeat and her father’s word were numbing her.
“So, what was all of this about? I understand being upset about losing a fight but you’re a rookie, you can try again in six months, no problem.”
“That's not what this is about.”
The girl looked at her expectantly.
“I'm from the Hyuga clan as you know. I'm Hizachi-sama's daughter. In the Hyuga clan the law says that the first born from the clan head is destined to become heir. At seven I was officially nominated as the heir of the Hyuga. I've been trained by the best instructors ever since. As the clan head I ought to be the strongest, the most able in the use of our clan- doujutzu. The heir should be the paramount of everything the clan stands for.
The clan is known for its focus, its pride and its talent. I'm neither determined, nor prideful, nor talented. I've only ever been a disappointment to my father and my family. My ten-year-old sister beats me at every fight. I know that when he watches my father is thinking that he wishes I wasn't born so that my sister could inherit his position.”
She felt the burn of tears again, but she had truly cried enough today. She closed her eyes and went on.
“Today, as I showed once again how much of a disappointment I am he offered me... an alternative. There is a way for me to be demoted. He could proclaim that I am physically unable to bear the responsibility. To sick, to frail.”

The girl was still silent at her side and Hinata felt the need to justify what she was saying. She felt afraid suddenly that the other girl's silence was a condemnation.
“I know that he is right. I’m weak and fragile. But I'm not sick. I don't want to be the shame of the family and lose my honor. I don't care for the title of heiress, but it is my duty.”
“So, you will refuse?”
Hinata dropped her head.
“If my father wants me to I have to obey.”
The other girl hummed contemplatively.
“I'm quite at a loss here. I grew up as a civilian so all of these traditions clan's are so adamant in following are difficult to understand for me. However, if I were you...I’d probably accept to step
down. Not for them but for me. Give yourself some freedom for a few years. Learn to grow for yourself without trying to impress someone. Maybe you will discover that it really isn’t your thing, maybe you will discover your own strength.”

“That’s easy for you to say.” Hinata whispered angrily. A second later she reddened.

“Sorry, I’m rude.”

“No, you’re completely right. It really is easy for me to say, I never had to live in your shoes.”

“I often wished I were born in a family of civilians.” Hinata admitted.

“I often wished I were born in a clan.” The girl smiled. “My father is a pretty rich man. He owns a lot of ships and transports goods between Konoha and the countries around. When I was young he began to take me with him on his travels. I’ve never known anything except freedom. For months on end I was free to roam around the ships and the harbors. As long as I did my part of the job I had no one to answer to. I was very happy but also a little bit lonely.

When I turned eight my father said I should go to school. I tried for half a year in a private boarding school in tea country. It wasn’t for me, they wanted to make a good bride out of me and I... wasn’t good at it. My father came for me and brought me back to the ships. He asked me what I wanted to do. I didn’t want to remain on the ships and I didn’t want to inherit his company. My father listened to me. He told me he sees himself in me and he thinks that I will succeed if I find what I am made for.

He left me in Konoha, asked an old friend of his to watch over me and told me I had six months to find what I like. I enrolled in the academy soon after.”

“I would have been afraid all alone.”

The girl snorted.

“He forgot me on an island one time, all alone and without food. I was terrified. So Konoha...In the academy I always felt alone. They placed me in a class that had already completed more than a whole year at the academy. I could barely concentrate chakra and they could already mold it into their hands and feet. Most of them were already touching the pressure points on the dummy when they practiced kunai throwing, I couldn't even touch the dummy. I knew no one in my class and the village was completely foreign to me.

I used to envy the clan-children who had a whole family that took care of them and helped them for training. The clan-children were battling to earn the first spot and I was struggling to just get the minimum marks. It got better with time, I made friends and got stronger. I realize now that I may have overlooked the pressure these kids I used to be jealous of were under, just like you overlooked how hard it may be for the civilian children to advance in the shinobi word without having anyone who guides them.”

Hinata nodded.

“I still think you should try to find a way to grow outside of your clan's influence. And maybe you should also try to talk with your father again without the relationship of clan-head and heir between you. Still, it's your life and it's your choices to make.”

The girl stood up and stretched her arms.

“Well, I think we talked enough, my team must be waiting for me. Aoi also won against some guy from Suna and sensei invited us to a restaurant to celebrate. That’s a rare enough occasion that I don't want to pass up on it. If you want to find me we usually train on the ground 10 or 12, where the Naka rivers enters into the perimeter of Konoha.”

The girl was about to leave the room when she turned back around.

“By the way two boys from your team are waiting in front of the room.”

Hinata smiled weakly at that and nodded. The disgust and hopelessness in her had receded somewhat and instead she was left with questions and the feelings that things were about to change and that matters were in her hands now.
The second-last match (a Suna boy against Rock Lee) was heartbreaking but for Kakashi, it was overshadowed by the last one. Certainly, he felt uneasy and almost angry when Gai revealed he had taught Lee to open the first five gates and the boy showed that he was more than ready to use that knowledge to sacrifice his body on the altar of his nindo. Certainly, he was set off by the unmistakable feel of a bijou’s chakra and the Suna's boy childish, bloody madness.

But for all the respect and sympathy he had for Gai (for all the debts he owed him) and all the empathy that respect earned his student, Lee wasn’t his. Not his student, his charge, his teammate, his responsibility, his precious person.

Sweet young Sakura.

It had been a double match. The number of attendants was uneven, the last fight would be held in two phases: First Choza's son against the last girl from rain, then the winner against Sakura. Observing how the first two opponents entered the arena Kakashi already felt a kind of apprehension creep into the back of his mind. The Ame girl had an air of dark concentration, of almost manic determination surrounding her. She was tall for a girl her age, probably 15 or maybe 16. She was lanky in an androgynous way and moved in long careful strides. Her lower face was covered by a high collar and her long lanky hair obscured her face even more.

Her expression however was striking. Her eyes had a vicious, hurt gleam to them and her eyebrows were drawn up in what could be both extreme anger and extreme fear. It gave her a feral air, something primal and base.

Kakashi looked down, it was understandable really. He wouldn’t want to be in her shoes. The Ame-nin had fought with a new-found vigor after the years of civil war that had almost annihilated them. Under Hanzo it was known that a ninja who had failed a mission would be judged for treason when coming back. Death was the likely outcome. It was hard to know if under their new mysterious ruler things were any different. There had been whispered rumors of "reeducation camps" where those who were not appropriately useful for their nation were sent.

The three genins must have been cherry-picked to represent the strength of their nation, and until now had failed their mission: the first one by being defeated by a Konoha-nin, the second by a Suna-nin. All the weight of that responsibility was now resting on her shoulders.

Choza’s boy looked way less tense. He looked...worryingly unperturbed. Kakashi threw Asuma a look and saw that the jonin was watching his pupil with a mixture of worry, exasperation, and hope.

It was a complete massacre. Choji certainly demonstrated that he knew his family jutsu well he even tried a few interesting moves but lacked all the finesse and intelligence his father had demonstrated during his long career. Well, it seemed that the boy just wasn't ready yet. His teacher picked him up and his team gathered around him.

Kakashi looked to Sakura. The girl had not let her opponent out of her sight, but the Ame-girl had revealed very little: she was quick, very good at evading, frighteningly efficient with senbon.

Nothing Sakura hadn't already known from her first encounter with the Ame-nin in the Hattori ruins during the second task.

Naruto was encouraging her loudly, but Sakura seemed entirely concentrated on her fight. The exam proctor had announced a five-minute break to let the Ame girl recuperate. Said girl had only offered a sneer.

Sakura was looking fixedly at the arena her two hands clamped around the raillery. Kakashi tried to think of some words of encouragement. He came up blank.
“I’m scared...”, the girl muttered without moving her gaze away” ... but I’m excited also, to fight.”

Finally, she looked up from to pierce him with large, pale green eyes.

“I have to do this.” Her voice was steely. She sounded very mature but at the same very much like the young frightened girl she was. Her resolve made her look less the little enamored girl she usually acted like and more the grown shinobi she may one day become.

She walked down the stairs slowly, one step at a time and stood against her opponent, her back straight.

“We met before, the other girl chuckled. You won’t be able to run this time. Are you sure you shouldn't forfeit?”

Sakura shook her head and her long mane swirled with the movement.

“Well, then!”

The Ame-girl barely waited for the proctor's signal and threw herself at Sakura.

One fist to his student’s head. The girl threw herself backwards, rolled, jumped to avoid kunai. A shadow behind her. The Ame-nin was aiming for her neck: a “pop” and a small rock fell to the ground: substitution jutsu. Sakura was breathing heavily on the other part of the training ground.

The next minute the girl from rain was close to her again. Sakura was holding her own, more or less. Taijutsu really wasn’t her forte. However, in the next few minutes her movement became more fluid, more measured. She even tried a few faints of her own.

That’s when the girl from rain launched into a series of hand signs. Kakashi lifted his headband quickly and swore. He knew that jutsu: it was somewhat popular in water and rain. A water-jutsu with a very nasty side-effect: the water was corrosive.

The first attack was evaded easily but from then on, the fight became more and more perilous. Sakura evaded every attack but only just. She seemed more hesitant, she must realize that each attack could mean death or at least a grave injury.

The water was moving like an independent being, soaking the sand, rising again, singing the back of Sakura’s dress. Already a few patches of skin had been harmed by splashes. Suddenly the water split into two distinct masses that formed long skeletal hands. They moved in tandem with the Ame-girl’s real hands giving the girl the appearance of some sort of deity or witch.

Sakura was quickly overwhelmed. One wrong move and the watery hands had closed down on her ankle. The pink girl cried out and Kakashi tensed.

“So, I hope this has taught you a lesson.” The girl smirked while moving Sakura like a ragdoll, the yellowish water slowly eating away at her skin. She threw her headfirst a few meters away, discarding her with a calculated disinterest and looking up at the Konoha ninja watching the fight.

“This is the skill of Konoha genin. I’m not impressed. Forfeit, little girl, this isn't a playground.”

Sakura was laying despondently. The Ame-girl approached and opened her mouth to say something. She never got to. Sakura rolled around and flicked two kunai at the girl. At such a short range the Ame-girl only managed to evade one, the other found its mark on her lower thigh and she almost buckled. She made the hand signs and her watery hands appeared again, however they didn't catch his student. Sakura had rolled out of their path, jumped close to the girl, evading each movement with a new-found energy. When kicked she rolled away, never stopped moving, shadowing her opponent, never giving her enough space to direct her dangerous attack, playing with substitution jutsus with a kind of desperate genius. Finally, she took advantage of the girls weakened left leg and
managed to trip her up. She grabbed the Ame-nin's throat but a second later the watery hand was holding her skull pushing her away, there was a sizzling sound then a thump when the Ame-girl kicked her unconscious form away. Her opponent was enraged and threw the other watery hand towards Sakura.

Everything happened very quickly. Kakashi felt a strong spike of fear and hate. He was in the arena before he had time to realize what he had done. With one hand he had the younger girl safely tucked against him and moved out of the trajectory of the lethal attack, with the other he had a kunai at the Ame-nin's throat. For a moment he saw himself cutting the kids throat and almost felt her warm blood on his hands. He was peripherally aware that Asuma was also behind the Ame-nin a hand at her neck. Kurenai held her wrist, Gai was on her other side, others were around. He was still fully concentrated on his instincts, the mindset of countless missions kicking in. With one hand he lifted his headband looked into the threat's eyes and eliminated it. The Ame-girl fell to the ground. In the same movement he checked Sakura's pulse, present, if quick. He looked at the injury. Her scalp was a mixture of blood, scorched hair and sizzling water. He felt an unconscious whine escape his throat at the sight and felt something inside twist. A bead of the acid was running towards her eye and with trembling hands he brushed it away, feeling it eat at his gloves and skin. He suddenly realized that someone was talking to him. Asuma. His head snapped up.

"Kakashi?... Come on Kakashi...listen to me. You have to give her over to the medics, quickly."

That's when he realized that he was gripping Sakura's body tightly and killing intent was rolling off of him. The other jonins were looking at him warily. Gai was restraining a panicked looking Naruto and Kurenai had a firm grip on a growling Sasuke.

He looked around. Medic's hands lifted Sakura out of his grasp and quickly began their work. He stood up numbly and suddenly his boys were around him looking at the medics and Kakashi could do nothing except watch them too, mutely, wishing he had known before he had signed her up for the exam.

Sakura would live, they weren't sure if her hair would ever grow back. She had regained consciousness a day ago. The boys had remained with her the whole time she was unconscious, almost an entire day. Kakashi hadn't dared and had remained in the hallway looking fixedly at his cramped hands. On the left one the acid had left a pink wound and he couldn't help worrying it.

He had only left for a few hours the day before when the Hokage had called for him. He had received an official reprimand for slapping a dangerous genjutsu on a foreign participant but the Ame-girl’s jonin hadn't dared to press for more punishment. Attacking an unconscious opponent with the intent to kill was a fault that was far graver.

He had nodded absently at the announcement that his pay would be withheld for the next month and rushed back to the hospital when he was allowed.

Sasuke and Naruto had just left Sakura's side to go get some sleep. "She was very upset about the hair thing," Naruto said quietly before leaving.

When he entered Sakura's room the girl was indeed sniffling quietly. A drip was hanging near the side of the bed.

He approached wondering what he could say. "I'm sorry" didn't really cover it. God, he was terrible at being sympathetic.
“How are you?” He blurted out and immediately wanted to hit himself. How obtuse could he be, was there any way to be more helpless.

“I'm alright. My mom is really pissed though.” The girl said between quiet sobs. She sniffed and wiped at her tear streaked face.

“I think she is convinced I'll never be able to marry now.”

The girl smiled weakly at him and Kakashi felt even more helpless. He often forgot that Sakura hadn't been raised like them and went home every evening to a different world with a completely different set of expectations. She hadn't grown up around women with missing limbs and ugly wounds and scars across the face who didn't care one bit about that because at least they were the ones to come back home.”

“It’s... it really is ok. At the academy the boys, they never cared about that. Kiba has a big bite scar on the arm from when a dog of his uncle bit him. And Daiki hurt himself on the finger quite bad while training with shuriken and Akio got a scar on the forehead from the time he got into a fight with an older genin. The boys they would always brag about it and show them around. They called them battle scars. I know it was kind of stupid. All the girls would laugh about them, but we thought they were kind of cool. We were really silly. Anyway, I suppose now, I have my very own battle scar, maybe it’s also kind of cool.”

She smiled a little wobbly smile and he only nodded.

He tried to think of something and extended his hand somewhat awkwardly. He had thought of patting her hair but remembered half way there that it wasn’t advisable, her head was still wrapped in bandages. His hand hovered uselessly but was snagged by two smaller hands. Delicate fingers slipped under his sleeve and pushed it up a few inches and traced a white scar that run from his wrist to his hand.

“It's ok sensei.” The girl's voice was somewhat slurred by tiredness and pain medication and her grip was weak.

“I am almost happy because even though I was very scared I did not back down. I want to be as fearless as the boys. I don’t want them to leave me behind.”

Kakashi gave her his usual smile and pushed her back gently.

“They won’t. You proved to them time and time again that you earned your place in the team. Don’t worry and sleep well Sakura, get better.”

The next few days were filled with rather trivial matters. The boys were training, the finals would be held in two weeks, the jonins were still occupied with security measures and a good chunk of the population was very involved in betting pools. Various rumors began to circulate and everyone from the old women at the tea houses to the young boys hiding from their parents in nooks and crannies were adding their own theories. Only one event stood out in Kakashi's mind. At least one member of team 7 was visiting Sakura at any point in the day. Soon after she first woke up he had the dubious pleasure of meeting her mother.

The woman definitively shared some resemblance with her daughter. The same pointed nose and clear green eyes. The striking hair, however, Sakura must have inherited from someone else. She was certainly pretty, just like her daughter but on her the same features had something cold and restrained. Her hair was bound back in a knot and her whole demeanor pointed towards an air of formality. Her eyes when she lifted them toward Kakashi were angry.
“So, this is your teacher.”

The last words had been formulated with an insulting kind of hesitation. Kakashi only hummed. Sakura was obviously uncomfortable and was throwing glances from one to the other.

“Mom, this is Kakashi sensei, sensei this is my mother Haruno Haiko.”

The woman looked down at her folded hands for a second then looked back up to him.

“I don’t know how you dare call yourself her teacher after what happened to my daughter. As far as I can tell she is a child who was dragged into an inhuman competition. She is my daughter, my flesh and blood, and I will not let someone take advantage of her and ruin her life even if he is one of the so-called elite of the village.”

Her noses-trills were flaring, and life had entered her cold expression. "She loves Sakura deeply" Kakashi realized and felt something drop inside of him. She was essentially right. She did overlook something fundamental, however: Sakura loved being a ninja, more and more she proved that she was cut out for it. In a lot of ways, it was too late, he doubted Sakura could be happy if she had to quit everything she had learnt to love, the strength and independence only a shinobi carrier could grant her. Once one had a taste for it...

Her mother didn't wait for an answer and after a last cold look, she left the room. Sakura was looking down at her hands.

“What do you think Sakura.”

“I... I'm not sure. I don't want to stop being a ninja. I asked. My mother said that maybe if I am a medic and only work in the hospital she would allow it.”

“Do you want to work in the hospital.”

“I'm not sure. I...I don’t think so.”

Kakashi ruminated for a second.

“I will try to talk to her again. I will do my best to change her mind.”

A few days later he made his way to the civilian district with the only civilian clothing he owned. The experience was almost bizarre, all of it was so far outside of what he was used to, he felt uneasy. Sakura's mother opened when he rang. In her defense she greeted him politely if coldly and invited him in. Sakura's father joined them soon later. He was a tall man, broad in a way that was neither muscular nor adipose. His hair was pink, albeit a deeper shade and Kakashi wondered for a second if Sakura's hair would become like that when she was older and if it ever grew back.

“I should apologize for our encounter on Monday. You must know shinobi-san”, Sakura's mother began, “that I am aware that we owe our safety to you. However, I am a mother and as such my responsibility will always be first and foremost for my child.”

Kakashi nodded. He understood that. He wanted to approve even.

“Sakura is a very intelligent young girl, you must both know that. She is also very ambitious and incredibly focused. To go so far as a civilian shows her force of will."
I can see why you may think that a shinobi’s life could harm her. But can you tell me, in all honesty, that she would be satisfied by a civilian's life?"

The woman looked away for a second and almost to quickly answered.

“She would get used to it.”

Kakashi stared at her. The woman sighed and let herself slump back in her seat.

“You may be right. I don’t know anymore what to do for her. We weren’t even allowed to that exam. I can neither help her, nor guide her. She is surrounded by people from clans who are stronger than her. What will her future be?”

“She will get stronger, without a doubt. She has a team that loves her and will always be at her side.”

“And what if she fails, what if she makes a mistake, what if ...she dies. I would not be able to bear it.”

Kakashi gulped. Sakura’s mother was obviously upset. He wondered why he had thought she was cold. Now her eyes were shining with affection and fear. She seemed lost.

“We know so little about your world, but I don’t want my daughter to have to bear all of the pain and suffering that is going on. Here she would be safe.”

“And she wants to help protect this very safety.”

For the first time, Sakura’s father spoke up.

“She is our daughter and we are proud of her. I trust her and know her. I believe that she can match any of the clans’ children one day. She’s not there yet however. Can you promise, on your honor or whatever you hold dear that you can protect her until she is ready.”

Brown eyes were looking at his with absolutely no fear, only a fierce determination. He would not lie under that gaze.

“I swear I will keep her safe, whatever the cost to myself or the village. Until she is able to stand on her own two feet in our world I will watch over her.”

He left feeling strangely at peace. It had been an easy promise to make. A promise he had made to himself and to people long gone. These three kids were his responsibility. He would not fail them.
When Sakura was finally released from the hospital it was almost time for the final test. Summer had been replaced by fall and the lingering heat had abated leaving a clear atmosphere that made the sky take a light hue of blue. The trees were still green, only a few, lone leaves here and there had taken on their golden color. It was only a matter of weeks before the whole forests surrounding Konoha were tainted red and orange.

Kakashi had heard that fire country owed its name to the color its large forests took on during fall. The elemental nations had emerged at the same time as the hidden villages and the first five Daymos had taken reign at the same time as the Kages. However, the present outlines of the countries were shaped by the countries that existed before. At the time of the clan wars, the borders changed constantly. A plethora of very small states were constantly at war with each other perpetually, allying themselves to the different clans. At that time fire country existed already albeit as a smaller version of itself. It stretched through the valley in which modern Konoha was built, the forest south of it but stopped just before the beginnings of the wide plains that made up the south-western part of the present fire country. It was the home ground of the Nara's and the Inuzuka's and not as some assumed of the Uchiha and the Senju. The former had lived in the northern part, close to the eastern coast.

His father had told him that at that time the Hatake clan had dwelled farther in the west. The Inuzuka and the Hatake probably had common ancestors, the Inuzuka were the ones who had chosen to settle in the forests while the Hatake had remained nomads in the plains of the modern western Fire country, Rivers country and Wind country.

Fire-country had grown: it was only the third-biggest nation in term of physical size, but it held the biggest population and had the largest hidden-village. The capital city was even bigger than the hidden village and had accumulated riches from the prosper trade it maintained with neighboring countries. The prosperous higher class from the capital would make up most of the audience on the day of the exam.

Before that, however, another cause for celebration was driving citizens of the capital to Konoha, especially traders and merchants of all kinds. The Founder festival was approaching, and it would be the occasion for all of Konoha to celebrate and amuse itself. While Sasuke had only scoffed about the frivolity of it Naruto was literally buzzing with excitement and Sakura had been kept in check all week by the medics thanks to the threat of not letting her out before the beginning of the festival. Kakashi had already decided to spend the week huddled in his small apartment or maybe he would volunteer for guard duty. Few shinobi felt very dutiful these few days. Kakashi honestly didn't mind missing it. The noise and the large number of people made him antsy, the general good mood left him indifferent and he had never quite gotten why celebrating lifted everyone's spirit. All in all, it held very little appeal for him.

Kakashi had insisted his genin train at least until the first day of the festival even though Sakura had almost been dragged away by the young Yamanaka to a "pre-festival shopping trip". It had sounded like something dangerous he would like to save his young charge from. Sakura's hair had been cut very short so that it looked even. The left side of her scalp was still red but slowly fine hairs were
beginning to grow again. She had happily showed them off to Naruto who had shared her joy. Neither of the boys was acting any different around her and that, more than anything else, must be helping her.

They had gone over the basics again to all three of his genin's displeasure. They didn't quite seem to realize that reflexes would save their life way more often than high-class jutsus. Sakura's taijutsu skills were finally acceptable. She had learned to jump away and duck when attacked, her genjutsu skills were coming along nicely and she was steadily becoming better when it came to the aim of her throws.

Sasuke was still the best of the three. His taijutsu was flawless in its execution and he was getting stronger. His chakra control was getting better and Kakashi had decided to teach him another Katon jutsu.

The biggest changes though came from Naruto. The boy was challenging the Uchiha more and more to the dark-haired boy's displeasure. His taijutsu remained absolutely eclectic but he was picking up some moves Kakashi showed him. He seemed to favor a style with jumps and feints, remaining in motion perpetually. It worked in perfect synchronization with Sasuke's more offensive style made of quick, fluid movement, hits, darts, and retreats. It was becoming quite entertaining to watch them.

Finally, the festival was launched the 2nd day of November, 83 years after the founding of Konoha. Kakashi had been called to a meeting about security and left his students with a last word of advice: "have fun but don't create a mess I will have to take care of".

That left the three young shinobi alone to decide what to do. Sakura had to go home quickly lest she had to suffer her mother's anger.

Only the boys remained. Naruto made some kind of joke about how they were lucky no one could order them around, but the joke fell terribly flat. Both of them felt their loneliness way to deeply to laugh about these things. Sasuke was about to leave. He wanted to reach the Uchiha compound before the festivities really started. He hated them. Before it was the one time his parents accepted to do what he wanted and followed him from one stand to the other. The whole Uchiha compound forgot about its self-imposed isolation and mingled with the rest of the village. As a kid, he would try all the shinobi games like the one with the tiny kunai or the one with the fake harpoons. He would often win and when he didn't Itachi would play and win the prize for him even though ninja were charged extra.

Now the festival only brought forth regret and pain.

He was about to turn away when Naruto gripped his elbow. He would have thrown some harsh words at the idiot when he met blue, uncertain eyes. There was a vulnerability in Naruto's stance and voice when he asked Sasuke if he wanted to go to the festival with him. That surely it was more fun when one didn't go alone. Sasuke should say no. A month or two ago he wouldn't have cared but it mattered to Naruto and even though he would never admit it Naruto mattered to him. There was a kinship between them. It had taken him a long time to realize because everyone had insisted they were so different. What could the dead-last and the prodigy, the loud-mouth, and the somber kid have in common? But they both knew the aching pain that came from going home to an empty apartment, from looking at families and friends with longing and still stubbornly advance on the lonely path they had been set upon.

So, he accepted his offer.

He went only for Naruto and was wary at first of the colorful lights, upbeat music, and carefree atmosphere but Naruto's awe and excitement chipped away at his reservation. He found himself rooting loudly for a wrestler in a small arena, people screaming everywhere. Later he found himself entranced by a strange animal half-octopus, half-cat, that supposedly came from Kiri. He laughed at
Naruto's antics when he insisted that he needed to try a shooting game because the reward was a fake Hokage hat. He noted that the blond had absolutely no trouble in shooting down the quickly moving target. A few months ago, that would have been different.

They sat down at a stall and ate Takiyaki and strangely shaped rice cakes from the capital. A little later Sasuke spotted a mask vendor. When he was small his father had always forbidden him from buying one because they looked too much like Anbu masks and that was something one didn't joke about. Itachi had always nodded gravely. Sasuke approached quickly, excited and certain that he would buy one this time. He chose a black one with red markings and horns. "A fire demon", the vendor told him. When he looked back he saw that Naruto hadn't followed him. He was still on the other side of the street. When he looked up, he saw why. The vendor was looking at him with barely disguised hatred. Sasuke felt somewhat dumbfounded. He knew some people didn't like Naruto and he knew now why, but was it really that blatant? He threw the man a withering look and threw all of his intent at him. The man was only a civilian, he paled, hissed and walked into the back of his stand.

He gestured at Naruto to come closer and the other boy did so but hesitantly. He smiled an awkward smile at Sasuke but was quickly captivated by the masks. Sasuke chuckled when Naruto tried on a sad looking dog mask. The eyes were droopy, and the mouth was downturned. It clashed with the mirth dancing in Naruto's eyes. He tried on a few others but Sasuke's eyes had landed on a fox mask painted a rusty orange color with red whisker marks. The thing was just flashy enough that he thought it would be perfect for Naruto. He stretched to take it down and handed it to Naruto. Naruto didn't take it, he was looking around as if to make sure no one was watching.

“Euh, Sasuke it's probably better if I don't try this one.”

It made Sasuke angry in a way to see Naruto act so different.

"Don't you like it?"

"I do, it's orange."

"Then take it. I thought you didn't give a shit about what other people thought."

"That's true but I just better not do!"

Sasuke thought about that for a second

"You really like it?"

"Yes, I do."

Sasuke turned back to the vendor and in the most authoritative voice he could muster he announced:

"We will take this one."

The man didn't even turn from where he was scribbling something on a paper.

"Hey, old man. We want to buy this."

"I'm not selling this one."

"Really, even if we were willing to pay a lot for it."
“It’s too expensive for you.”

“How much?”

“Too much.”

“I said how much?”

“2000 Ryo.”

Sasuke growled. That was crazy. The thing wasn’t worth more than 300 Ryo maybe 400. 2000 that was almost enough to rent a small room for a month.

It was nothing of course compared to the amount of money, he, as the sole heir of the Uchiha clan possessed.

He dropped the coins and the notes onto the counter. The owner wasn’t quite able to hide his surprise, with a last hateful glare in Naruto’s direction and a growl at Sasuke he took the fox mask down from where it was hanging. Sasuke snatched it from his hand and walked away lazily. While still in earshot of the man he said loudly “my father used to tell me that some men would do anything for money, he must be one of them”.

He didn’t turn around to see how his jibe had been received.

It was almost time to go home they both realized but they still lingered in the streets that were slowly emptied from most children their age.

At a turn, Naruto suddenly put on his mask, snatched Sasuke’s and climbed to the roofs. That was excuse enough to begin a game of chase.

They stopped breathlessly at a park near the Naka river. Naruto complained that he was thirsty. Sasuke hesitated a second but decided that he had already gone this far that evening, one more transgression of his vows of isolation wouldn’t matter and told Naruto that they could drop by at his house that was close by.

He almost regretted it when Naruto laid his eyes on the deserted Uchiha compound. The boy was in awe and had a thousand questions that Sasuke had no interest in answering. But Naruto was perseverant if nothing else and he finally relented and quelled the blonde’s curiosity.
Interlude: Of gods and children

Chapter Notes

You don’t need to read this, it is more of a bonus chapter but it does offer some hints for ways in which Sasuke will grow

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Interlude 3: Of gods and children

The Uchiha had always cultivated a certain fondness for tales and legends. Sasuke had grown up shrouded in stories about distant ancestors and for a long time he had perceived the world as a complex system of divine powers and mystical clues. This sense of wonder was one more thing that had been violently taken away from him that fateful night four years ago.

A part of him, one he had carefully buried with the rest of his childish memories, was still fascinated by these old dreams. It was taken quite seriously in the Uchiha clan. As a little kid, no more than 2 or three-year-old at that time his mother had begun to tell him about the way the sun shone for the Uchiha and how their eyes were dark as was their hair only as a contrast to make her shine brighter. Amateraszu, the blinding sun would look over him. A few years later Shisui began to recount the ancient battles of the warring clans for him. They would sit in the tallest tree of the Uchiha compound, Shisui leaning against a big branch and him sitting against Itachi. He would tell him about Yuryaku, Madara Ushiha's grandfather who battled the thunder-wielding ninja-clans from the north and rekindled the alliance between the Uchiha and the gods. About Kusahahahati his wife and consort who could look at an army and see where it was headed. About his father Ingyo who had lost one of his sharingan in battle in his youth and who, old and crippled died honorably on a last battlefield, throwing himself from a mountain to keep the other Sharingan safe.

Sasuke remembered the ritual ceremonies where the elders would always read the same sacred legends from the family scrolls. As much as he had hated the pompous ceremonies as a boy he had looked forward to that part when the old, deep voices of Sushun-san or Hatsusebe-san would read the old texts and Itachi would whisper some comments when he did not understand a difficult word.

One of these ceremonies was held on Founder’s Day. The morning there was the tale about how Madara had been evicted from his rightful place as Konoha's ruler. He didn't really like that story. Itachi never explained anything only looked straight ahead looking tense and exchanging a glance with Shisui from time to time. Also, his favorite elder, the old Hatsuebe-san always refused to read that story. Her deep, warm, calm voice was his favorite.

In the evening however, when the autumn sun, red and glowing was about to go down all the children and young people of the clan, even the civilians would sit down outside and an elder would tell them the story of the three Gods of the Uchiha.

They would tell them that long ago the god of life, of flowers and of the wind had gone down to the underworld to find his wife that had passed away. That he had walked for days in absolute darkness. They would tell him that he managed to find her and convince her to come back to the living but when he finally saw her rotten features that had once been so beautiful he couldn't hide his fear. They told him that he had to flee from her rage and leave the underworld forever. Washing himself in a nearby river three deities were born from the remains of the underworld and the touch of his wife upon his skin. The gods of the Uchiha were born both of death and of love.

They three were very different but loved each other all the more for it. Amaterazu shone like the sun. She was the most beautiful woman of the world and she could breath fire hotter than the strongest
Tzukuyomi was pale as the moon and silent as the night. He was the smartest of the three and many wise words fell from his lips. Susanoo was like the storm, always moving, always raging. No man or god could hope to surpass him in battle except for his two siblings for he was the weakest of the three.

The Ushiha, long ago, when they hadn't yet received the Sharingan, once glanced at the three Gods from afar and their radiance was so great, Amaterazu so bright, Tzukuyomi so refined and Susanoo so loud that they decided to revere them. The Ushiha's clan head at that time, Ingyo, taught his 5 sons and 3 daughters to pray to them and make sacrifices for them.

Nagata the youngest daughter was so full of her belief in the gods that she came to bring her greatest sword as a sacrifice to the gods. Thinking that she ought to be as close as possible to them to give her offering she climbed the highest mountain of the country. The sun, the moon and the storms are all high in the air she reasoned. However, she climbed so high that the light of the sun blinded her. As a warrior she had lost both of her greatest weapons as an offering to the gods: her eyes and her sword. The gods, impressed by her faith gave her three gifts. Susannoo took the red eyes of one of his celestial horses and gave these eyes the power to see more than any eye can see. In battle she would be able to notice any movement and dodge all attacks. Tsukuyomi took the eyes and gave them the power to dream and weave dreams. In life, no enemy would be able to lead her astray with illusions and she would be able to trick and manipulate any foe. Finally, Amaterazu gave the eyes the power to create fire. Her eyes would fill her with the knowledge of fire, give her its warmth and light and the fury of never ending flames.

Nagata was gifted these eyes and descended from the mountain. She was the first Ushiha to have the Sharingan.

That was the story that Sasuke told Naruto that evening, both sitting on the roof of Sasuke's house in the Uchiha district. The sun was shining golden-red and Naruto's hair seemed to glow of its own light. Sasuke didn't tell him that as a kid he had loved nothing more than to listen to that tale with his brother and cousins at his side. Couldn't tell him that he was still thinking fondly of these days, that he longed so much to live back in these better times that it ached somewhere deep in his chest. He tried to tell the story flatly, in an even, cold voice, like someone would tell another about the weather or recent political happenings. However, his voice took on an edge, a liveliness, an echo of the voice of the old Hatsuebe.

Naruto was listening to him with a serious expression and something alive in his eyes, just as fascinated as Sasuke had always been.

When Sasuke stopped he first remained uncharacteristically silent.

"I wish, he finally said, I wish I'd have a clan like you. I mean not like you. Euh, a clan that isn't dead. Sorry."

Sasuke should be angry like he would have been if anyone else had said that. But Naruto was alone like him and had been all his life.

"You would have made a terrible Uchiha."

Naruto grinned and rubbed his head somewhat sheepishly.

It was true. He would have irked all the adult Uchiha with their rules about remaining stoic and not showing emotions. God, it would have been fun. He would have driven the elders mad in less than a
week. Sasuke would have liked that. He could almost picture it: Naruto running through the streets with his loud laugh and him running after him. It would have been nice, Naruto's happiness and liveliness as a counterpoint to Itachi's calm and silence. Naruto was balancing on the edge of the roof now.

“I mean I would look terrible with black hair.”

Sasuke snorted. Probably. Or maybe he would have looked somewhat like his cousin Shisui. Black-haired but not quite as pale as the other, with a large grin and striking eyes.

But cousin Shisui was dead and if Naruto had been an Uchiha he would be dead too. There was no point in indulging in useless fantasies.

He jumped down from the roof and entered his house. Just before closing it he shouted.

“It’s getting late, you should go back.”

Another time maybe he would have told Naruto to spend the night at his place. Another time. Maybe.

Chapter End Notes

Some part of the stories I invented others are very loose interpretations of japanese mythology.
Jiraya hadn't wanted to go to the last task of the chunin exam. He wasn't violently opposed to it but his old apartment in Konoha was comfortable if old and he never claimed to be anything but a hedonist, who indulged his whims more often than not. Then again, it wasn't just out of pure laziness that he had wanted to avoid the arena. He just knew that witnessing the fights would leave him in an unpleasant mood. For most in the audience the task was an enjoyable and exciting spectacle, a way to judge future shinobis. For the shinobi it was an important ritual, a kind of rite of passage in a village so deeply centered on its military might that the shinobi institution was nothing short of a religion and the chunin exam was another kind of baptism, a step further on the sacred path.

But then again Jiraya was more than fifty (and trying valiantly to forget how close to sixty he was getting) and he had walked that road for a long, long time. More important maybe, he had led several students on it, seen his students lead other on it and all of them, those he had taught and those his students had taught, those, in short, who carried his legacy had all been crushed by this barbaric religion of shinobi.

That's why he felt old, especially when he looked at the youngest generation. He believed strongly, that they would one day change the broken system they were living in but too much exposure to these children forced him to see that already at this age some were crumbling under the weight, that some would die, and most would suffer. He refused to believe it was for naught but sometimes the doubts crept up.

Orochimaru had been convinced that a sensei’s only task was to make one’s students strong and keep an eye out to make sure they did not become strong enough to put a knife into their teacher’s back. Jiraya still believed in morality, in the superiority of a shinobi with the will to protect compared to a shinobi who fought only for himself. His old teacher had always said he was an idealist. Probably the Sandaime was getting tired too from seeing all those young people give their life for the village. The death of the fourth had been a hard blow for them all. At least it was when Jiraya had decided that he didn’t need to return to the village more than a few times a year. It was making him tired seeing the village and remembering who he had lost.

At the end of the day the thing about the chunin exam was that it was the point where most things went to shit. If he was writing a coming-of-age novel the chunin exam would be the symbol of the beginning of adulthood, the loss of innocence and the beginning of more dangerous adventures. With a novel he could guarantee a happy end. Real life couldn’t.

Once you were a chunin there was no more babying, the still childish and amusing genin missions were things of the past. In the best cases, the team remained together, often enough everyone would be sent on their own missions, accomplish their own task and the new chunin had to face loneliness and loss on top of their new responsibilities.
The genin were the happy ones, Jiraya thought. He himself would have quite enjoyed a life as genin, working leisurely at a desk job, surrounded by mild-mannered and young women, some shinobi, some civilian, laughing together, doing things outside of work, at hot springs, or in summary fields of flowers. Enjoying the simple pleasures in life...
He was getting off track.

What he meant was that it was a lot easier to meet the eyes of the genin who failed at the exam, as sad and disappointed as they may be, than the ones who succeeded and achieved the rank of chunin. Those one he preferred not to look to closely at. Especially if they were young.

The three of them had graduated as chunin pretty late for modern standards. That had more to do with how early the age of graduation from the academy had become than anything else. Already at that time they were considered prodigies. They had finished the academy the same year, Jiraya had been thirteen, Tsunade twelve and Orochimaru eleven. Two years later they had attempted the chunin exam and succeeded, the three of them. Only two years, that was considered exceptional at that time. These days some rookies attempted the exam after only six months. The Hokage allowed it, encouraged it even. Another point on which they didn't agree.
He almost let the pull of memories sweep him away, remember their laughing face, their teacher's proud smile...no, it only served to darken his mood.

He walked towards the arena, smiling at the excited civilian kids that were all walking, often running, in the same direction. For them at least it would only be an innocent distraction. For him it was a necessity. It seemed that they had managed to deter Orochimaru's attempt but he could still attack during the last round even if wasn't the most strategically sound plan with the number of high-level jonin assembled in the audience.
He arrived on time for the first match. He would have preferred to sit somewhere in the back, but his teacher sent him an insistent look the moment he entered the arena. A seat had been reserved for him near the special loge for the Hokage and high dignitaries. As far as he understood the exam would be in two rounds. Any genin who advanced to the second round was eligible to become chunin even if he didn't win his second match. One on one fights in an arena really weren't ideal to determine a shinobi's potential in a real-life fight in which many more factors came into play. As such the rules of the exam always gave a lot of room for the higher-level shinobi's judgment. A panel of seven jonin representing all villages plus the two Hokage would take the final decisions.
He enjoyed the fights more than he thought he would. The first fight in particular was amusing. Shikaku's boy against a fiery blond Suna-girl, the Kazekage's daughter apparently. The girl won but only barely and only because she was able to outlast him. Not a very glorious victory but both were already impressive shinobies, the girl for her sharply honed instinct and flawless use of her chakra affinity, the boy for sheer bloody genius.
He wasn't surprised when the Hokage advanced him any. The shinobi in the arena had supported the boy in a discreetly approving kind of way. The civilian seemed less enthusiastic. Ah, of course, it wasn't flashy enough. Jiraya chuckled and shook his head.

Next a dark-blond Konoha kunoichi entered the arena. She was pitted against a Konoha shinobi whose eyes were covered by glasses and his face by a cloth. His ability was worrying, absorbing chakra was a very rare ability especially in humans. He knew a few summoned animals who could do that and there must be one or two forbidden jutsus who could have similar effects but like that... It wasn't a winning strategy however. The girl was using little chakra preferring taijutzu and quickly understood the other's abilities and applied herself to evade his attacks. She was leaping from one
side of the arena to the other, laying thin ninja wire like an especially nimble spider. The other genin was strong enough, probably experienced and the fight was quite interesting. However, the chakra-sucking boy seemed to hold back for some strange reason and it cost him his victory. The girl had him entrapped in her wire, a kunai to his neck.

The next match was short and gruesome. A poisonous looking Ame-nin against a red-headed boy. Jiraya didn't need to be close to the boy to feel a Biju's chakra. Well, he was somewhat of a specialist in these matters and the putrid wisps of chakra that were leaking from the boy left little place for doubts (and made him worry about the state of the seal containing the Biju). The girl managed to avoid the first attacks quite successfully. She was dodging smoothly but seemed to get more and more frustrated. Jiraya felt something like pressure built up all around them: dark oppressive chakra. Sand was swirling around the boy and soon most of the arena was barely visible. The girl moved quicker and quicker and launched an attack. She didn't even pierce the outer layer of sand. Ghostly tentacles were sprouting out of the ground and the girl jumped back panicked. She only barely managed to avoid all attacks. With a roar the boy seemed to concentrate all his energy on her. A deadly force rushed in her direction and Jiraya tensed, the girl was thrown across the arena and impacted against a wall. Slowly, stubbornly she picked herself up. He felt an old feeling of guilt awaken when seeing the Ame-girl. It was easy to see his three students instead of her. Same dark clothes and air of early adulthood, a trait most Ame-children shared. Jiraya realized there must be some happy children in rain, he just never met any.

She persevered and launched the attack he had used on that student of Kakashi, it hadn't been pretty. At least he hoped he had taught his three charges some compassion and he believed that they wouldn't fight with the cruelty of that girl. For all the good it did them. Jiraya liked to think from time to time that Nagato, Yahiko and Konan may still be somewhere out there, alive and maybe even happy but more realistically they had probably died. He had infiltrated rain a few times in the last few years but every time it grew more perilous. The new leader of rain had installed an effective lockdown on the country and especially on Amegakure itself. Never had he heard of his three kids again.

The fight was escalating, the girl was bleeding heavily, and her movement were becoming slower. The referee asked to break up the fight, but she discarded his order and with a desperate shout threw herself at her opponent. It happened to quickly. Sand surrounded her, tightened and suddenly there was the muted sound of breaking bones and blood was permeating through the sand and when she was dropped she was barely recognizable. There were shocked gasps on the civilian side of the arena and grim expressions among the shinobi.

Jiraya wanted to look away. There, another Ame-kid had died for his country, died in honor. Had she had any kind of choice? Defeat would have killed her just as surely as the crushing sand. There were some arguments and disputes. No one dared to approach the jinchuriki.

The Hokage looked severe but resigned and turned to the Kazekage at his left.

"Her death was unnecessary Raza, you know that hereby your son is disqualified."

The Kazekage didn't grace that information with an answer. Instead he fixed the Hokage with a strange kind of leer. Something in the foreign Kage's smile made a sense of familiar unease rise in Jiraya. Well, he had never liked the Yondaime Kazekage.

Despite the accident and the amount of sand and blood littering the arena the Hokage announced the
exam would go on. The Suna-boy seemed to exit the arena reluctantly and the demon's chakra was boiling furiously under his skin.

Jiraya was brought out of his dark musings by the appearance in the arena of a bright blond boy. Ah, another reminder of his numerous failings, another stab at his conscience. This day was shaping up to be the kind best ended by enough sake to get even Tsunade drunk.

Three minutes into the fight against the Hyuga boy he realized Naruto was nothing like Minato. No finesse, no elegance, more raw, careless, headstrong energy. Kushina without her talent, but the same grim determination to overthrow all odds. Yahiko with an angrier edge to his headstrong expression. Yea, a little bit like him too, an eternity ago. He won, it was less of a surprise for him than for most. The boy was to much like all of them to not make him bet on him. He'd take dumb stubbornness and loud idealism over talent and skill any day. Maybe he should pay him a visit, at one time, maybe he would finally find the guts to do that.

The next match was the last boy from sound against another Konoha girl. It was a more traditional fight. Jiraya focused on the potential spy. His abilities, sound waves produced by the construct in his arm, seemed quite like something Orochimaru would have created.

The control over sound first seemed to benefit the boy. The girl specialized in water jutzu and those were disturbed by the sound chock waves. However, she seemed to know how to protect her hearing with chakra and her taijutzu was good enough to keep up with him. Finally, the boy from sound was too distracted by defending against her water-ninjutzu and was felled down by an impressive bit of taijutzu. That girl would probably advance to chunin.

In the next match an Aburame boy defeated a Suna-nin. It was an easy enough fight. The boy kept at a distance and attacked with his insects until his adversary was out of chakra. Nothing very impressive but it was efficient enough.

Finally, the Ushiha boy that had survived the massacre was pitted against a tall boy from Suna with markings on his face. Jiraya grimaced, those usually meant a puppeteer. He never did like fighting against them.

The Ushiha was good, excellent even but Jiraya felt somewhat wary. He got the feeling that the Ushiha knew all too well how good he was, he was used to being the best. His attitude seemed to say that he didn't care for his opponent, he was aiming higher. That was dangerous. The Suna-nin was an experienced fighter. His puppet was dancing at his tune with impressive efficiency and he was quick on his feet as well.

That didn't mean that the younger boy was stupid, no, he pulled a few interesting moves. First after barely avoiding some kind of toxic gas he used katon jutsus every time he seemed to sense his opponent would launch a similar attack at him. With the heat of the attack the Suna-boy seemed to hesitate to use the potentially explosive gas.

At the end the Ushiha went down, nothing out of the ordinary, he had been a second to slow, has stumbled, lost eye contact for a second, gotten a paralytic-loaded senbon in the calf. It had been luck almost, or superior battle experience. It was clear for everyone that he had more potential. Then again that didn't matter as much as some may think, Jiraya had lost count of how many comrades with more potential had died during his lifetime. Potential needed to be fulfilled to be worth anything and to fulfill it you needed to stay alive and not underestimate your opponent because you were an arrogant little shit.

The Ushiha boy was carried out of the arena, then there was some kind of deliberation about who would battle who in the second round. The crowed became louder, civilians and shinobis discussing
the battles they had witnessed so far. Jiraya sighed, sat back and squinted against the mid-afternoon sun.

Years later he would still remember how everything fell apart after the end of that match. He would remember that one moment suddenly all the civilian sagged in their seat, felled by a genjutsu. The eerie silence that filled the arena... The cold dread in his gut. Then a flurry of movement when infiltrated shinobis from sand and sound attacked the remaining Konoha-nin. One second of hesitation and then Konoha's soldiers reacted, pushed through their hesitation and fell back onto years of training. One piece at a time Orochimaru's plan clicked into place and Jiraya finally saw it as if someone had wiped condensation off of glass and the picture became suddenly clear. In the next few seconds everything happened quite quickly. A messenger arrived: Suna's army was at their door. The jinchuriki-boy let out a bloodcurdling scream and began to transform before trashing a part of the arena and running towards the battle at Konoha's gate. And then the Kazekage rose from his seat and Orochimaru's disguise slipped away. He appeared, finally, black hair and paper-white skin, almost regal, his familiar silhouette framed by the chaos of the battle.
For a second Jiraya almost admired the boldness of his plan, then Orochimaru turned his golden gaze toward him and the Hokage.
“So, we are reunited once again”, Jiraya thought.
It felt like fate, it felt like destiny, something he would write in his books. The long-awaited climax of their tragic storyline. If he had written it, it would have ended in blood and death.
Surprisingly it didn't.

Chapter End Notes

A few comments about the changing age of academy graduation. I liked to imagine that there was an evolution towards a lowering of the age of becoming a genin. Konoha was created as a safe-place to avoid shinobi-children being roped into their parent’s war so I imagined that at the beginning the village would have put a higher age limit to leave the academy.
For me at the time of the Sanin’s youth the normal age was around 13 or 14 which was also the age where civilian children would begin apprenticeships or would actively work for their parent’s businesses.
The same goes for the chunin exams. The usual age of graduation as chunin would have been around 16-17 basically when the shinobi was more or less considered an adult.
As such the Sannin who became chunin around the age of 14-15 were considered very precocious.
The lowering of the age was the result of the times of “shinobi shortage” Konoha suffered from during the wars ( 2nd shinobi war and especially the 3rd shinobi war).
October VII

Chapter Notes

Last chapter of the first arc.

Most of the dialogue in the last part is either inspired or directly taken from the manga but pieced together differently.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The shinobi of Konoha, alerted even before the beginning of the chunin exam, that a threat was hanging over the whole event, were ready to fight back. The attack came from all sides: well-timed and vicious, but there was order in the chaos.

A large group of chunin and jonin positioned themselves around the civilians and were quickly engaged in battles against infiltrated soldiers from Orochimaru and Suna-jonin who had come with the Suna-genin for the exam. Others still were rushing towards the Hokage to support him while a last group rushed out of the arena to help push back Suna's attack. The biju-boy was transforming and Jiraya thought of going after him but when the boy destroyed a portion of the arena and ran out of it he decided that he couldn't afford to leave Orochimaru's vicinity. Only him and the Hokage and maybe a few other high-class jonin would be able to pose a real threat to their former teammate. He saw a few chunin and an unfortunate group of genin rush after the biju and hoped they would be able to slow the jinshuriki down. After that he turned back towards his own opponent.

Orochimaru sprang from behind the row of seats and ran up to the higher levels of the arena, both Jiraya and his sensei followed closely after them. Jiraija heard a sharp clang from the tiles on the roof that were being displaced by his teammates careless retreat. He followed. Wind was blowing and from there they were overlooking all of Konoha. Orochimaru had always been fond of theatrics. His slender frame was framed by the billowing fabric of the Kage robes, thin arms were jutting out of the cloth. His ink-black hair was falling to his waist. Never more than in this moment had he embodied the graceful androgyny that he had always flaunted. He felt he should feel bitter, this battle the last proof of his teammates betrayal but he felt relieved. He was facing him at least, it had been years since he had come so close to him. Facing him in battle felt just, felt right. A part of him still believed there was something to be salvaged there, the rest of him wanted closure.

The battle was on when Hiruzen, standing to his right, started a dotton. The old man was earth and fire, immense chakra and perfect control. Orochimaru was water and snakes evading and attacking, unrelenting. Jiraya didn't wait long to go into sage mode, red lines bled onto his face. Orochimaru backed away and looked at him with interest. Jiraya realized with a pang that Orochimaru had already left when he finally mastered sage-jutsu. He fought with his mentor as one; others were approaching Jiraya could feel, he thought for a second it was backup but their chakra was dark and twisting. They didn't intrude on the fight however but formed a barrier that isolated them from the rest of the village. It was a strange thing, half-seals and half something else. He didn't linger on it and focused on Orochimaru.

His opponent was looking at his teacher. The old man was calm, at peace with himself, he had given up on Orochimaru long ago.
“Orochimaru your madness and lust for power will end here.”

The snake sanin seemed unperturbed but Jiraya knew him better than anyone else on earth and he could read anger and hurt in the glint of his eye.

“How little you know me if you think me mad, sensei”

The last word was a low blow, the tone especially, the silent, soft tone he had used as a child when asking his smart question.

“I only ever wanted more knowledge”.

“And in your pursuit of knowledge you care about nothing else, neither morals, nor human sentiment.”

Orochimaru inclined his had, he didn't argue that.

“The knowledge you seek is unholy and you will be stopped once and for all”.

“You close your eyes to the inevitable, Konoha should not remain so stuck in the past”.

“Is that why you decided to invade the village?” Jiraya shot in.

Orochimaru stepped forward, less as an attack and more to reach to them, to prove his point. Jiraya understood in that moment that Orochimaru felt no more detached about the events that led to his desertion as he did.

“I will bring new knowledge to this village, new power. Times are changing, there are new enemies, soon we will need to be stronger again, it will not be enough to round up all the troops and rush them into battle. I will lead this village, it is my righteous place, you raised me for it. I will show you that I can inspire loyalty just as you do.”

For a moment he felt almost hopeful, there was something raw in his eyes. Jiraya had always wondered how much it had wounded Orochimaru to see Minato, a young man fifteen years his junior getting the hat he had always felt was meant for him.

Hiruzen however only shook his head and summoned his bō. Orochimaru sneered with that ugly, animalistic glare that he reserved for enemies and the battle was on again.

It pushed their limits and heated the air inside the impenetrable dome. Ninja battle were often quick but they were to evenly matched, to well-acquainted with each others styles, to use any of the usual tactics.

Every move could be his last. Jiraya felt his muscles burn, his throat was raw from breathing fire, he had had to end sage-mode two times, stepping back somewhat for some time. Hiruzen was using complex pluri-elemental jutsus and seals. His summon was fighting at his side. Jiraya was in and out of sage mode and his two oldest summons were sitting on his shoulder spitting oil and water, mud and fire. Orochimaru was using Kusanagi, the snake sword and didn't let up between his numerous summons, his jutsus and his more direct attacks. His regenerative abilities were challenging and several times in the fight he shrugged his skin of and appeared almost new.
They were slowly getting the upper hand however. Arguably, Orochimaru was stronger than Jiraya, possibly stronger than Hiruzen, certainly not stronger than both combined.

At one point Hiruzen locked eyes with him, in one quick movement his bō pierced through Orochimaru. One more skin fell, and his former teammate was whole again. Then his sensei stepped back and Jiraya guessed he needed time for some kind of strategy. He stepped between them and let natural chakra flow through his veins. It may not be as dense as physical and mental chakra but their was plenty of it. He welcomed his approaching teammate with burning fire and mist.

Orochimaru plowed through and he felt the blade of the sword pierce his shoulder. He caught the snake-bastard in his stomach before gripping his other hand. Orochimaru smirked for a second and opened his mouth wide. Jiraya had a second to observe the elongated fangs before a snake shot out of his mouth.

Jiraya let go of everything and jumped back, letting the blade rip though his shoulder. His left arm felt useless. A second later he aimed fire at Orochimaru and paired it with a low grade genjutsu, god knew was bad at it. Orochimaru dodged both and was onto him again. Suddenly the black-haired man stiffened and fell forwards. Old reflexes told him to catch him but instead Jiraya gripped his arms with one hand and held his face to the ground. It was hardly necessary, he saw now that black lines of seals emerged from his back, burning bright with chakra. Above them Hiruzen, his arm still outstretched his hand blackened by ink and blood, seemed to be burning with chakra.

Jiraya quickly made sure that Orochimaru couldn’t move but the man was laying face down, his eyes glassy and the seals were anchoring his chakra to his deepest core.

He quickly got up and approached his sensei looking at the searing arm. The old man was grunting in pain but still upright.

“What can I do”, Jiraya muttered trying to understand the seals.

“Very little I am afraid, it's not a forbidden seal for nothing. I judged that it was necessary in this situation.”

The dome suddenly broke and four figures rushed at them, some underling of his old friend, Jiraya mused. They may have been a challenge for others but to Jiraya, a sanin, even weakened and with the Hokage out of the game they were easy to dispatch. At best they were low jonin level. It didn't quite leave him enough room to fight consciously enough to spare them permanent harm but they went down quickly enough.

Jiraya looked around gauging where he could help but the fight seemed to die down already. He was about to turn around and help his sensei when he saw a young boy rush towards him. It was the Ushiha. He looked worse for the wear but all over pretty alive. His voice had lost some of its monotone when he addressed him.
“The Jinchuriki from Suna, he transformed into a biju. We got him more or less blocked for some time but Kakashi-sensei told me to find you as soon as possible.”

Suddenly the boy seemed to notice the Sanin on the ground and threw him a long peculiar look and Jiraya had to shake him to make him look back at him again.

"Where are they. Come on kid, we have to move quickly."

"Just outside the village wall, not far away from the Hyuga compound."

The genin promptly turned around and Jiraya followed him feeling his strength dwindle but determined to bring this battle to an end.

---

2 hours earlier: Kakashi

He felt the genjutsu like cold water on his skin, it hadn't passed him that his sharingan was already uncovered and then, overlapping with the image of hundreds of civilians falling unconscious he saw the complex web of chakra that was placed above the arena. He didn't need more than a twitch of sharingan-directed chakra to pass through it and snap the strings of chakra around him, in a second he lifted it from Gai and Genma who were standing near him. They would have been more than able to do it themselves but he was undoubtedly quicker at lifting genjutsus. Immediately Suna and Otonin were on them but between the three of them, few presented any kind of real threat. Kakashi was still distracted looking at the genjutsu web.

While most jonin had easily shrugged it of a majority of genin and quite some chuunin were trapped. Also there was the matter of the few hundreds of civilians who could be fried by collateral damage. They needed to get them out- They only way to succeed in that was to break the genjutsu.

“Gai, watch my back.”

Gai answered shortly in the way he tended to do when the fight was serious. Kakashi just closed his eyes and forced himself to relax then opened the left one only. Chakra rushed to it and he felt the pulsing-not-yet-pain that came with using the sharingan. The dojutzu didn't allow to see chakra in the way the byakugan could. It was less like having a new perspective of the world and more like hyper-processing the information he had. While the Byakugan could have seen the chakra of all the people in the audience and a skilled user could see that the chakra of most of them was sluggish which indicated a genjutsu, the sharingan noticed every minute movement of every human being in the arena, or in that case the lack of movement. And above and between them it suggested more than showed him the links of tightly woven chakra, the glinting clues of this broad net and he could read it, decipher the slow vibrating something that had been thrown upon them. It hadn't been initiated through eye-contact neither through sound, probably not through sent which meant either seals or several casters positioned around the arena or maybe both. His eyes sought out Kurenai who must be in the audience and trying to decipher the genjutsu too. He saw her several hundred meters to his left on a roof dangerously trying to concentrate on the genjutsu with no one to guard her back.
He thought of going to her aid but here at least he knew he could concentrate on his task with both Gai and Genma fighting for him. He watched her and saw that she leaped towards one side of the arena. He opened the sharingan again and closed his other eye. There it was. In the direction she had been heading to he felt one of the anchors of the genjutsu, could they sabotage it that way? He tried to find the weak point. The whole structure of the genjutsu seemed uneven and the ease with which it was evolving suggested some kind of initiator who controlled the rest of the web with the other anchors only providing the necessary chakra. He went on with his search, at one point he felt another anchor snap, either Kurenai had taken him out or some other ninja by incident.

Finally he located a weak string that he had discarded until now because of the low amount of strength but it seemed that in one way or another all strings were attached to it, he looked down and traced it back to a shadowed part of the arena in the back near a large column. He didn't want a second longer, memorized the place and closed his sharingan while jumping in that direction.

He had to defend himself against a few opponents who saw him pass by but quickly arrived at the place. He opened his sharingan again to find the exact location but suddenly the anchor disappeared and the whole genjutsu crumpled. Kakashi immediately looked up to locate the one in charge of the trap, meaning to catch him. It was proving to be difficult. Civilians, suddenly freed from the jutsu, were running around barely kept in check by the chunin and genin who had just woken up. Kunai and shuriken were whirling around and he saw several shinobi on the ground. He heard someone cry out and looked around.

A genin with glasses and light hair was crouched over another young man and had visibly been trying to heal him when he himself got targeted. In one move Kakashi slit a kunai along the sound-nin’s spine when he was to distracted and looked at the Konoha-genin.

“What is happening.”

The kid (wasn’t it the one who dropped out of the exam?) seemed to barely hold it together.

“My teammate got hurt and my other teammate just left suddenly when the attack began, I don’t know…”

Kakashi interrupted him:

“Will he survive?”

“I know some medical-jutsu, my father is a surgeon.”

“Have you seen anyone flee before the civilians woke up?”

The kid seemed thrown of.

“Euh, I don’t know I didn’t pay attention”.

Kakashi cursed and turned away. He looked up and saw that the Hokage had disappeared from the arena probably battling Orochimaru. Jiraya too had disappeared, hopefully with the Hokage. It wasn’t the kind of fight where he could be a great aid. He noticed that several shinobi’s of Konoha were assembled around another near the entrance and decided to join them to see where he was needed. Genin and chunin seemed to be managing evacuation well enough and the battle seemed to turn to their advantage but there was the battle at the walls of Konoha and the Jinchuriki to worry
about. Despite a few accidents on the way he quickly reached the group and saw Shikaku standing amongst them, which was good. The jonin commander was the next in command after the Hokage and hopefully had a better overview of the situation.

“Kakashi, were you the one to lift the genjutsu.”

The jonin nodded.

“Good. The situation at the wall is difficult. We need earth-users to reinforce the wall and anyone with fire-ninjutsu to counter wind. Also more medics. Anyone who fits into that go to the wall.”

“What about the Jinchuriki of Sand.” Kakashi asked.

“We saw some chunin go after him. Also two jonin went after them a few minutes ago.” A jonin threw in before leaving.

“Kakashi looked at Shikaku for further information.”

“I think it’s your genin who went.”

Kakashi felt his blood leave his face. Shit. Gods, please, no. They weren't that stupid.

“I'm sending you after them, I have no backup. Don’ t let the Jinchuriki enter one of the battlefields, the situation is hard enough, the arrival of a biju could tip the balance to Suna's side.”

Kakashi nodded absently and ran towards the forest. He summoned Pakkun without stopping and soon he had their trail.

He caught up with them quickly enough. On the way there he had seen a young Aburame fighting against the puppeteer from before. He just circumvented them. He hoped the Aburame would survive but right now he only cared about his kids. He erupted onto a strange scene.

Sakura and Sasuke were fighting against the blond daughter of the Kazekage and visibly holding their own. Sasuke was more than bruised and he could feel the biju's putrid chakra on his skin. Both seemed to fight while keeping an eye on the biju-possessed kid. The Jinchuriki was almost completely transformed. Only a little part of his face and his left arm and side of his torso where still human the rest was a writhing form of sand.

Naruto was close to him, propped against a tree and seemed to talk to him. Shit, the biju could crush him any second from now, sand was all around him, he had seen what had happened to the Ame girl. Any second now...

He loaded his arm with chirping thunder. And with a burst of chakra, concentrating entirely on the still uncovered part of the boy.

Suddenly he heard a scream. “No”. Naruto had leaped in front of the Jinchuriki eyes wide, arms outstretched to protect him. Kakashi felt shock and panic, he was too quick, he couldn't stop, he rolled and collided with Naruto but at least his arm loaded with Raikiri was halted by the ground and propelled dirt and rocks around him.
Immediately he took Naruto by the arm and hid him behind him, very aware that he was only a meager defense against a Biju. But the Suna-boy strangely didn't attack him immediately. He seemed overcome by some kind of inner turmoil.

Naruto was peeking from behind him.

“Gaara, Kakashi won't hurt you if I tell him not to. You don't have to listen to the demon. I didn't when he tried to convince me.”

“But I have to listen to mother, she talks to me all the time, she never leaves me alone.”

The red-haired boy's voice was strangely haunted by the Biju's deeper voice but the suffering, the very human suffering could not be mistaken.

“They always look down on me and treat me like trash and ignore me and run away. At least mother never leaves me alone.”

He ended with a roar and the Biju's influence seemed to grow on the boy's psyche.

Naruto picked and a stone and threw it at the boy were it bounced harmlessly from the sandy armor.

“Hey Gaara, that's not an excuse to kill everyone. Maybe people are looking down on you and I know it makes you feel sad and hated and that it hurts but that's not an excuse. You just have to make people accept you. So maybe it's harder. But we are not allowed to give up.”

Naruto's outburst was growing louder and Kakashi felt absolutely lost and out of his depths.

“Come on Gaara. I fucking know what it means to be looked at like I'm a monster. But that can change. I have friends and they love me and respect me and I would die for them and they would die for me. You can have that too!”

The other Jinchuriki seemed lost and struggling. Sand was rising all around them, creeping on Naruto's skin but the boy didn't budge. Kakashi was about to rush into this and try to kill it when suddenly it stopped. The boy was looking at Naruto with a chilling intensity. Kakashi didn't know what he was seeing in Naruto but a second later a small voice that was undoubtedly his and only his was talking.

“Do you truly believe that.”

Naruto nodded gravely.

The boy let out a strange sight and all of him seemed to slump, sand was falling down everywhere. He heard an exclamation of relief behind him and saw Sakura and Sasuke watching, the blond girl knocked out beside them. Suddenly he felt a wave of nefarious chakra, he turned around and saw the Suna-jinchuriki completely swallowed by the sand.

A guttural voice was haling across the forest.

“Stupid boy, so naive. Humans should bow before me and give their life to quench my thirst.”
Suddenly the sand was everywhere and Kakashi felt the immediate danger it represented.

He didn't wait a second and went through the signs of one of his larger water-ninjutsus and fed it as much chakra as he could. Water exploded from the ground. It made the sand heavier and slower. His genin could evade it more easily. He threw a kunai with an exploding tag at one of its limbs. It blew it up but it formed again.

“Sasuke, run and find Jiraya. I don't give a fuck what he is doing right now but if he doesn't want another Bijū destroying Konoha he will have to come. Naruto and Sakura try to distract him.”

All of them obeyed. The Bijū seemed satisfied to play with them for now. He knew that the Bijū could probably kill them with his chakra alone if he truly wanted. He wasn't the nine-tail but the sheer power he was exuding was hard to bear. Sakura seemed particularly affected by it and seemed to have troubles keeping up.

He quickly took a scroll out of his vest. He activated the storage seal to procure another larger scroll. Jiraya had given it to him to slow Naruto's transformation if it ever came to that, he could only pray it would work for another Bijū. He put it on the ground and haphazardly smeared blood on it before going through the signs Jiraya had shown him. He saw the seal slowly creep on the ground and felt it eat away at his chakra reserves greedily. That would soon become a problem.

It finally worked somewhat. The Bijū was heavily slowed down but it felt neither secure nor permanent. It felt like a great dog tugging at a leach made of ribbon with him trying to keep it all together. His arms began to tremble and the Bijū was gaining back more and more freedom.

He prayed that Sasuke would soon come back. How long had it been since he had sent him out? Surely at least half an hour, probably more. How long would it take. He could only pray that Sasuke had reached him, that he wasn't still involved in fighting Orochimaru or worse that he had been defeated. It got hard to not let panic back in again and he tried to concentrate fully on the beast. He ordered Naruto and Sakura to go back to the city proper. They obeyed reluctantly but he wanted them out of range if the Bijū got free again. If the seal broke two genin would hardly make a difference. He would hardly make a difference. A part of him was already imagining it, it pleased him in a way to be killed in such a similar way to his teacher, defending the village from a Bijū. It was just the kind of way he had wanted to die. He closed his eyes and focused entirely on the seals, feeling his chakra rushing out of him. He almost didn't notice when Jiraya arrived, only felt him push away from the seal and replace him. He stumbled back and breathed in a great lungful of air and tried to calm his breathing. Well, it seemed he wouldn't die quite yet. He looked back and saw Sasuke peering at the Bijū, behind him Sakura and Naruto, they had followed him back here. He wanted to berate them but his head felt like it was splinting open so he leaned back against a tree, palming a kunai because you never knew. He instructed Naruto to bind the Suna-girl's arms together. She was still lying there and they really didn't need another problem on top of everything else. Jiraya seemed to make progress: the Bijū was screeching and shouting but slowly receding back. The boys original seal must not have been broken completely because he was still alive. When the Bijū receded he just slumped over but his chest was raising and falling regularly.

Jiraya was muttering and changing the seal in one way or another but after some time he picked the boy up and threw him over his shoulder. Sasuke was carrying the girl. He got back up on his feet and tried to pretend he wasn't wobbling. Bruised and battered but very much alive they slowly made their way back to the village.
Voilà, some of you may have been disappointed that Naruto did not defeat Gaara alone. I did hesitate about that point a long time but I finally decided to have Kakashi intervene.

One thing I never appreciated in many shonen is how quickly characters become powerfull, so I kind of decided that for the first one/two years of them being shinobi in a conflict situation they will often be saved by other adults. For this fic it means that in the next arc it will be slowly changing but its only in the third one that they will begin to be real, independant shinobi, capable to carry out their own fights.
Next chapter, new arc. The next three. Mostly wrap up some plot point and prepare the next part but then we'll depart for a new arc which will force the kids to reinvent their abilities and evolve.

I wanted to give you an update about schedule and reviews, if your not interested don't hesitate to skip it.

So first I wanted to thank all of you for the reviews and apologize for the irregular updates. As a non-native speaker and someone who honestly is just embarrassingly bad at spelling (even in my own native languages sadly) prepping my chapters for publishing takes time. Additionally, I had that brilliant idea for my further uni-education to take part in a program that allows you to study three different fields at the same time, fascinating really, but also hard on my free time. It's holydays now and it will make life somewhat easier for me.

In particular, I'd like to try to be respond to your reviews more quickly and more thoroughly. It's been difficult sometimes but I really value your opinions, criticism and kind words. For one chapter for example (chapter 14,15?) a comment from one of you prompted me to rewrite the chapter entirely and I truly do think it was for the better.

Also I promised to put my worldbuilding research on a blog and you can find it on tumblr under the-blog-hidden-in-the-leaves (https://www.tumblr.com/blog/the-blog-hidden-in-the-leaves) I will gradually add everything I have on it but it will probably remain a pretty rough form.

Part II Winter's cold wind

The morning after the attack was gray and dreary. It had rained during the night and Konoha looked strangely washed out. The trees were looking more brown than red and a biting cold had replaced the mild warmth of late fall. It rarely snowed in fire-country nor did it become truly cold but the permanent moist mist that filled the valleys and leached the heat of the country made everything look listless and dead. It was particularly fitting this one day. Crimson pools of blood had been blurred but not erased by the rain. The last Sound-nin had been caught around 3 in the morning and Suna's army had pulled back when they finally realized that they had been tricked and their Kage was probably lying dead in a ditch somewhere. Konoha had won but it barely lifted the mood. Surprisingly few Konoha civilians and ninja had been killed. Orochimaru had wanted to take over the village not destroy it but for most younger ninja and even more civilian it brought the realization that death didn't just lie outside the gates, during missions, it could also come to them, in the village. Constant battle was the price to pay for survival.

The older ones who clearly remembered the last war felt more relieved than shocked, but no one dared to feel like celebrating.

The Hokage and Jiraya had both barely been seen since the attack, the former was in hospital, the
jutsu he had used had damaged his arm greatly and it was more and more clear he might lose it. The later was working down in the prisons going from Orochimaru to the Jinchuriki boy, strengthening their seals. The boy would be returned once a transitional government was formed.

The Hokage had insisted they don’t retaliate violently against Suna which had angered a good part of Konoha’s population. As far as Kakashi saw it they didn’t have the luxury to launch any kind of attack right now.

His wounds had been treated quickly and he had been placed in a packed room with his teammates and several other patients. He didn't complain, for once. He didn't sleep more than an hour here and there but felt more or less rested anyway. He smiled when he looked at his three charges. Sakura was curled around Ino and both were sleeping soundly at his left. Naruto was sitting between him and Sasuke, his head had fallen on his teammate shoulder, the Uchiha had first tried to dislodge him but had given up at some point and was now sleeping. Even in sleep he had a scowl painted on his features.

In the afternoon they went into another big room that had been transformed into a big mess hall. He was given an uninspiring bowl of grey mush but ate it quickly and without protest. Sakura noticed his emptied bowl and threw him a slightly disgusted glare before eying her own portion. Naruto only bemoaned the absence of ramen for a few minutes before downing his food. Sasuke seemed to approach the issue with the same kind grim determination he usually displayed but his disgusted expression revealed his true feelings. Sasuke was a terribly picky eater Kakashi had come to discover.

He spent another few nights in the hospital with his team, on Wednesday he was informed that both him and Naruto would be discharged in the afternoon. Sasuke, Sakura and Ino had to wait another day at least, the first because of a bad puncture wound in his calf, the second because of Bijuu chakra burns and the third because of a messy break in her left arm.

Finally, he was left to his own devices and made his way back to his apartment. He was happy to see that it had sustained only superficial damage. Considering how close it was to the arena that was great luck. He didn't feel specially emotionally invested in the place, but he liked it well enough. Despite what Asuma said, it was acceptable in size and comfort, and it would be a hassle to find a new place. He entered and checked the traps, everything was in place.

He went out quickly again and looked for a place to start help with reconstruction. Already artisans from the regions close to Konoha had come to rebuild. Most shinobi of lower rank who hadn't been injured were helping. Kakashi was amused when he arrived in the lower parts of the village and saw several Naruto clones climbing around a building bringing tiles for the workers.

Kakashi arrived near the administration building that had taken some heavy hits. A random worker called for him and asked him help to remove some rubble and Kakashi complied.

In the evening he sat down with other workers and shinobi and listened to the conversations. He thought of remaining here instead of heading home, but that choice was taken from his hands when an emissary arrived and told him he was summoned by the Hokage.

He saw the surprise in the worker's faces and the way they looked at him again, seeing him in a different way now. He got up and with a goodnight and headed towards the Hokage tower.

The building was bustling despite the late hour and he had to wait half an hour before an exhausted-looking chunin ushered him in.

The Hokage sat behind his desk. He looked strangely normal. Kakashi could easily overlook the
heavy bandages and see a man that was tired, yes, but almost satisfied. Kakashi mused that the man had reason to. Konoha had suffered material loss yes, but comparatively few human casualties and one of their most prominent threat had been dealt with.

"Hokage." He stated as way of greeting.

"How are you Kakashi."

"Good, Hokage-sama. Why have you called me."

The Hokage hummed and looked through some files.

"Orochimaru has been captured however he was heavily tied to Oto and certainly has many other supporters and allies throughout the nations. We want to deal with them as quickly as possible now that they are still disoriented and disorganized lest they become a new threat to us."

"I understand."

"Here, look."

The Hokage gave him a file. It was a basic genin-team file. The name of their teacher was vaguely familiar but it's the genin's faces that he was drawn to. One of them had large round glasses and greyish hair in a ponytail. He recognized him as the genin he had met during the battle and who had told him that his teammate had disappeared.

The other two he had seen during the preliminary fights. The second in particular he could remember. His ability to distort his limbs had made an impression on him.

"Anything special about them."

"At first glance, no. A pretty average or even mediocre team. Their first Jonin-sensei got back into active service and was replaced by this one. He too wanted to resign as a sensei if they didn't get through this time."

"Some of their skills are interesting however."

"That's the crux of the matter. The second boy, the one with the glasses isn't special in anyway. His father is a skilled surgeon but Kabuto-kun is a very average ninja. The other two are more puzzling however. They came to Konoha seven years ago, as refugees, we took them in because we found nothing suspicious about them, we must have been careless. I asked some of our specialist to look more into it and we made a far more troubling discovery. That is why I want you to handle it. During the fight one of them was clearly seen fighting on Orochimaru's side. The other one we are not sure about."

Kakashi nodded and waited for the details.

"Yoroi Akadou has the ability to extract another's chakra and use it for himself. It's a surprising ability especially since he doesn't use any kind of known jutzu."

"A kekkei genkai?"

"Probably. I didn't know of any clan that has such a power nor did any other member of the council. Some research leads me to believe that such a thing had indeed exited, there was a clan in the land of valleys."
"Was?"

"It was annihilated seven years ago by an even more obscure character: Kakuzu is his name. Kakashi frowned, he remembered the name from Bingo-books. Some nuke-nin from Taki. Very elusive but known in the underworld."

"You think there is a link between this man and Orochimaru since an offspring of the clan he destroyed ended up in Orochimaru's care."

The Hokage nodded.

"I may even know what that link is. Orochimaru fell entirely off the grid seven years ago. For almost two years Jiraya was unable to know what happened to him, we even thought he may be dead. Today I'm more inclined to believe that he joined an obscure organization, an organization where he met Kakuzu, maybe he was even there when that man killed the clan, or he only claimed some spoils. What is clear is that he was involved in some way. We know that Orochimaru is no longer part of that organization but he may have been at some point.

As soon as we got this information we sent someone out where that clan had lived. He should have reported once arrived in the land of rivers. He never sent a message, we are afraid he may be dead or at least captured. We cannot send a larger group of shinobi, we are undermanned as we are. We don't know what he stumbled upon, some of Orochimaru's research or maybe something concerning this organization."

"Do we know anything more about it?"

Sandaime inclined his head gravely.

"We have been trying to keep an eye on it for quite some time. Have you ever heard the name Akatsuki before."

Kakashi shook his head.

"You may have heard from some of his members. The most well-known here in Konoha is Itachi Uchiha, you may also have heard of Sasori of the red sand or Kisame Hashigaki formerly of Kiri or Deidara a former student of the Tzushikage. Others are more mysterious. There are two individuals we suspect are from rain, another with a scythe is from the land of hot springs, there is a last member whose origin is completely unknown and then of course Kakuzu formerly of Taki."

Kakashi winced mentally. That was an impressive amount of legendary nukenin and seemed like pretty bad news. There was something else that bothered him however.

"Impressive, you are incredibly well-informed about a supposedly secret organization."

The Hokage's eyes became cold and he gazed at Kakashi sharply.

"I have my ways."

"But you don't know for certain if Orochimaru was a member."

"That was long ago. Our information is more recent."

The Hokage was playing some kind of obscure game. Kakashi sighed. Hopefully this mission wouldn't go to fuck. Something was nagging at him; this whole matter was suspicious. But he had no
right to question the Hokage. At the end of the day he was only a soldier.

"Very well."

"Your mission is to find why our shinobi disappear and handle the situation there as you see fit. Also, if you find one of Orochimaru's bases eliminate everyone affiliated to him, if there is some research, bring it back. This is a secret A-rank mission. We have not gotten an authorization to send a shinobi to the land of valleys and don't have the time to wait for one. You know what it means."

"This is an anbu mission."

"Yes, go shinobi, the estimated time-frame is fifteen days, if you aren't back at that time no back-up will be sent. You are on your own."

Kakashi nodded and was about to turn away.

"Kakashi, good luck."

Kakashi smiled and left quickly. Instead of heading to his apartment he went to the anbu-headquarters. This time he didn't enter with the secret passageway only he knew and took the official secret passageway instead.

He was almost arrived at the storage rooms when he felt another anbu running after him. He lifted his arms and sighed.

"Anbu-san I am not an intruder I..."

"I know. What are you doing here again, sempai?"

He recognized Tenzo's tired voice.

"We have a lot to do, I swear if you were bored."

"I have a mission."

"Then what are you doing here."

"An anbu mission. Straight from the Hokage."

"And your students?"

"The mission takes precedence."

"I see. You went to retrieve new gear."

"Yes."

"Don't bother we still have your old one somewhere near the locker room."

"You didn't throw it away?"

"We kind of knew you would come back."

"Really?"

"Yes, we hardly believed that the Hokage managed to convince you to leave, but we all knew that you would never really quit anbu."
Kakashi hummed. He had hardly believed it himself. God knew he was a lot better at killing people than teaching brats. He tried to convince himself that he didn't feel more comfortable doing the former than the later but he just may be that far gone.

"And you. You want to leave anbu one day?"

"It's hardly the right time to talk about this."

"Maybe it's just the right time."

Tenzo was uncharacteristically silent while opening a sealed cabinet and handing him his armor and mask.

"One day, I think I'd like to stop. It's ok here. I like my team, but I think I'd like to have a team of my own one day, a genin team I mean."

Kakashi thought of making fun of his friend as usual but there was something very sincere in Tenzo's tone.

"I think you would be good at it."

And he was being honest, Tenzo had that kind of inner warmth and the patience that would serve him well with kids. He felt somewhat out of his comfort zone with how emotional the conversation was getting so he threw in a more light-hearted jab.

"Just be aware that they are horrible. I swear Kiri-hunter-nin are easier to handle."

Tenzou snorted and turned back to face him.

"Then I suppose this mission will be like a vacation to you."

Kakashi nodded and quickly put on the gear again, he was already wearing the normal undershirt but had to get some new gloves. His were back at the apartment. He left his Hita-ate in a shelf in the locker-room and after a last goodbye to Tenzou left the place.

Leaving Konoha like this, in the middle of the night, the bone-white armor around his waist and torso and arms and chins felt familiar in a reassuring kind of way. He calculated that if he advanced quickly and made only three or four longer breaks he should be in the land of valleys in 4 days, one more if he wanted to circumvent rain completely, which he would do. No reason to be careless.

Anbu hound disappeared in the darkness of Konoha's thick forests.

The next days in hospital were very boring, first Kakashi and Naruto left, then Sasuke a day later and she was still not allowed to go away. She was beginning to think that the boredom would be the end of her. Everyone's mood was quickly souring.

Ino had left her first boyfriend supposedly because he hadn't brought her flowers when visiting her in the hospital. To be honest Sakura thought that one could have seen it coming. Sakura had been a lot more excited about her friends first relationship than Ino had ever been. Now that it was over her blond friend looked more relieved than upset and that couldn't be a good sign.

Ino had complained that dating wasn't all that great, and she didn't understand why she had expected anything else. What could a guy which main interest was hunting and his father's blacksmith business and a girl who was fascinated by clothes, interrogation, mind-control, make-up and flowers
(in no particular order) talk about? Well not a lot apparently and when they had worn out the subject of the weather and how good the sushi were, they had nothing else left to do than kiss, so they kissed a lot and that became old at some point. They had left each other agreeing that they better keep looking for more compatible partners.

Sakura thought that sounded awfully grown up but then again, the guy had been five years older than her. Ino had been proud of that originally.

When the nurses left the packed room, they sat in a corner muttering that there was no reason to not release them already. Ino's arm would heal just as quickly at home and Sakura's chakra burns would not feel any nastier in her own bed. Then somewhere in the middle of the night, huddled under the same blanket it felt to much like one of their sleep-overs for Sakura to hold her tongue any longer. Finally, she ask if they had really, truly done "it". Ino half asleep had answered that yes, they had had sex. When Sakura all squeaky-voiced and wide-eyed had asked how it had been Ino had said it had been "ok" which seemed a little underwhelming.

Sakura thought she wasn't one to judge. Sex still seemed like that distant, adult kind of thing. She couldn't really say that she was enticed by it, it was more intriguing to her. It had probably intrigued Ino to. Where social matters were concerned, Sakura tended to advance carefully, one tiny step at the time while Ino like to jump in head-first. Ino talked to stranger and asked the questions she wanted and didn't back down when Ami dared her to kiss Kiba.

Then again it was probably fitting because Ino with her long hair and glossy lips and growing hips and absolute confidence could easily look three years older while Sakura with her straight body and big eyes, gangly limbs and buzz cut hair still passed as a fourth-year academy student.

The next day they could finally leave the hospital and head home.

Apparantly Kakashi had disappeared for some mission and she found herself with more free-time than she had had since the end of the academy. She hadn't managed to find Sasuke but had eaten at Ichiraku with Naruto. Instead of arguing because Naruto was awkwardly hitting on her as it would have been a few months before, they made great plans to go train together in the next few day and Sakura found herself looking forward to it. Naruto actually encouraged her and praised her when she got something right and these days it was even honest and not just a way to try to win her over. On the other hand, Naruto appreciated it when she explained things to him and if one took the time to show him every step Naruto could be a quick learner.

Their plans were shattered however when Sakura's mother piled chores on her. She saw Sakura's impromptu holiday as the occasion to get her back for all the house chores she didn't do when she was too occupied with being a ninja. She went to the training ground anyway to tell Naruto she wouldn't be able to go train with him.

Surprisingly he didn't seem put out by it and immediately suggested to help her. Excited once more they ran back to her house. Their enthusiasm dwindled quickly though once they arrived at the house and realize the extent of their task. Their house wasn't huge but still big enough with a garden and two levels. They had to sweep and mop the floor, dust and scrub the furniture, weed the garden and put the dirty laundry into the washer.

"I don' t like cleaning." Sakura muttered, "I don' t mind cooking or airing the laundry but I hate cleaning."

"It' s not that I hate it." Naruto explained. "I' m just really bad at it."

Half an hour in Naruto got frustrated and summoned ten clones. It only hastened the process slightly
and several clones actually managed to hurt themselves enough to dispel but it kind of worked. An hour later Sakura discovered that dusting while walking on the ceiling was a lot of fun.

Cleaning quickly became a competition.

At the end of the day the house still wasn't completely clean and several bookshelves had become the tragic collateral damage of their experimentation but at least they were having fun. When Sakura finally deemed the chores finished Naruto announced that he had to eat at least three bowls of ramen to regain his energy and Sakura agreed.

When Sakura's parents came back to their house it was acceptably cleaned, but there was no Sakura in sight.

Chapter End Notes

responding to guest reviews:

Sunny: thank you so much, I adore character development so I try to infuse it in my story :) and I'll be careful with Uchiha

Joe J.: Thanks, I especially liked writing that chapter, I hope you like the rest.
November II

Chapter Notes

I wanted to thank MadameSmoke who apart from having a cool name also corrected a mistake (well several), in particular Deidara is not a family member but a former student of the Tsuchikage.

This chapter contains two graphic scenes: the description of a corpse and of a murder. If your bothered ignore the paragraph from “There’s a dead shinobi” to “The whole display” and later on from “He didn’t stop there” to the end of that paragraph.

I always planned on the story getting more graphic but PLEASE, if your bothered by violence please say so in the comment. If several people wish for it, I will use my ff.net version to post a less graphic version of the story.

Kakashi finally arrived in view of Konoha. The greyish walls surrounded by green, lush forest made him feel a dizzying wave of relief. The whole trip home had been a blur of pain, exhaustion, blood and long sandy roads. Several times he had to stop and just wait for some time. He didn't remember how many soldier pills he had taken, he remembers vaguely that somewhere a day or three ago there weren't any left in his box and he had to go on anyway and maybe that was better because they could be dangerous, elevated heartbeat and temperature and he did feel his heartbeat throbbing through his body, pushing pain down to his hands and feet. His anbu mask was heavy on his face and he could barely breath. But now the two slits revealed the sight of gray walls and green forest and that meant he was home. It was hard not to collapse then and there but there was something unrelenting in him that told him to put one foot in front of the other, one foot on front of the other. His whole perception was reduced to that rhythm: breath in, pain, put a foot forward, put weight on it, breath out, a second of relief, breath in, pain, the other foot... Suddenly he was in front of the wall and the sudden stop made it impossible to move on any longer. Not one muscle. There were guards suddenly all around him, they were talking to him, “Anbu-san” but he didn't understand. Some time later there were nurses and they lowered him to the ground, they were undoing his armor (but not his mask, they would never touch it). He weakly batted the medics hand away to their displeasure but he felt justified in his actions After all his current state was a medics fault. He had always said medics were vicious, now he had actual proof literally carved into his bones.

He had arrived in the land of valleys a week after departing from Konoha. He had slowed down the last day to be rested when he arrived. The clan had lived in the south-eastern part of the country. He had arrived to the village closest to the old clan-lands and cautiously explored. Nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary. As far as he could see, people avoided the abandoned area. If it was just out of a sense of respect and fear of the dead or a much more rational fear of a snake-bastards was hard to say. He didn't want to reveal his identity so he hid his gear. Instead of a henge that could out him as a ninja if felt by a sensor type ninja he tied his hair back together, put on a straw hat he had stolen in the village covered his left eye with bandages and dropped his mask. A light linen shirt and a bag for groceries completed his disguise. That was one nice side-effect of wearing a mask. His face was absolutely unrecognizable. Kakashi of the Sharingan is always wearing a mask, everybody knew while Akito or Heisuke or whatever persona he chose during missions had a face that no one could recognize. And here, so far away from Konoha and amongst stranger it only made him feel slightly uncomfortable.
The information he got was interesting but worrying. The clan had been killed seven years ago but in
the next few years children had disappeared in the village as well. They had asked the daymo of their
country for help. A few local mercenaries had been sent but had not returned. As no other children
disappeared after that the matter was dropped and no shinobi had ever investigated the place, well
except the Konoha shinobi he had to find. No one had seen him so either he was intercepted before
or he even came to the village or he had made the effort to disguise himself.
The information was only barely helpful and Kakashi resigned himself to going in without knowing
what awaited him.
He decided to wait for the night.

The next morning Kakashi finally decided to pay a visit to the mysterious clan grounds near the
village. He was very careful to hide in the shadows of the small pine trees that grew in the
surrounding region. The scenery seemed untouched but to his trained eye several things seemed out
of place. The entire country of valleys was uneven and covered in forests. However a path had been
freed discreetly in the forest, large enough to allow a cart to pass. Some smaller trees had been
planted on the road but it was obviously only a way to hide the tracks. A little bit further he saw a
cave that seemed too opportune to be natural. He didn't dare enter it and instead summoned Bisuke,
arguably the most inoffensive looking of his pack, he took away her vest and hita-ate and rubbed
mud into her fur. She seemed more amused than vexed by it which was another reason he chose her.
She made a great show of appearing to be a hungry stray and approached the cave “at random”.
Kakashi didn't doubt that no one would suspect her. She came back by taking a big detour before
appearing close to where he was hidden under a thick tree.
“There's a dead shinobi inside the cave. Isn't pretty. Don’t know from which village, never smelled
him before.”

Kakashi was pretty sure he knew who it was. Well he couldn't just enter the cave like that. He used a
doton, hiding mole jutsu. He felt the earth soften beneath his feet and slowly advanced through the
rocky ground a few feet under the surface. He reemerged inside the cave and came face to face with
a mildly disturbing sight.
A man had been hung from his feet to the ceiling of the cave. The feet were pinned to the stone wall
with kunai. His hands were pinned to the ground and his stomach had been opened with a neat cut.
The skin on his sides was flapped back to the side and pinned to the wall and his bowels were
hanging before his face.
Kakashi unceremoniously pushed them away and recognized the face of the missing Konoha-nin.
That was one part of the mission that was resolved.
The whole display reminded him of a Fire-country adage: the curious butterfly will end up pinned to
a wall. Well this was...literal. And the message was clear enough. A part of his brain was still hung
up on some details however. The cuts were very precise, very neat which could indicate a seasoned
ninja, certainly, but the way the skin had been pulled back from the muscle... A torture specialist?
But the man had clearly been dead before he was cut open, the little amount of blood indicated that.
He hadn't suffered before his death. Then a medic? A surgeon?
Immediately different elements came to mind. The team of the Yoroi-guy. The one with glasses, his
father had been a surgeon. He had told him in person that he knew some iryo-jutsu, the boy he had
supposedly saved in the arena, who was caring for his teammate, what was his name again? Yes,
Kabuto. Mediocre and plain, so easy to overlook. After the fact he realized that his presence were the
genjutsu instigator must have been may not be a coincidence, he may very well have be the
instigator. It was only speculation.
He left the cave through the same way he came in and hid in the trees again. He advanced slowly
keeping an eye on the track he had discovered earlier.
He arrived in a clearing and saw, with little surprise, Kabuto in peasants clothing, the scent of blood heavy around him and with a backpack full of scrolls. Clearly he had found his perpetrator. He decided in a split second to try to use his advantage. Kabuto didn't know that he was a suspect. He was still very far away so he carefully created a clone and henged him into an average looking Konoha shinobi.

When Kabuto neared, the clone ran towards him. Kabuto tensed only for a second, he may be a lot more experienced than they knew Kakashi realized. Meanwhile the clone was close enough.

“Kabuto, are you ok? Your name is Kabuto right. You disappeared soon after your teammate did, we thought he captured you. I was able to track your scent.”

There was a split-second where Kabuto couldn't hide his surprise, then he went along. His expression became relieved.

“O my god, I can’t believe it. I thought I would have to run back to Konoha alone, I was so afraid he would catch me before I came home. I was able to escape. It's terrible he killed a Konoha shinobi.”

“I know I found him.”

He tuned out what the two were saying. Obviously Kabuto wasn't trusting and on high alert, using chakra at that point could tip him off. With infinite precaution he retreated back in the trees and positioned himself right over the track and waited for them. The pine-forest was buzzing with life around him, the chirping sound of the locusts and the dry cracking sound of pine-wood. The forest floor was covered by a thick layer of needles and dampened the sound of his clone's and Kabuto's steps a few hundred meters ahead. He picked a sturdy branch and grabbed it upside down, hanging now with his feet flat against the underside of the bough, the Tanto drawn in his right hand, his neck craned back to observe the scene ready to launch himself at Kabuto’s back.

The man walked by and Kakashi felt no change in his demeanor, or chakra presence so he attacked and sprang.

The blade entered just under the young man’s left shoulder blade, at the last moment Kabuto had turned away and he had missed the heart. He twisted the blade to the left and the man cried out. He let him sag to the floor and looked around seeing if there was anyone who had heard. His clone was looking for a pulse on Kabuto. He indicated the man was dead, took his kunai and shuriken pouch then Kakashi let him disappear.

Again he looked around still tense looking if Kabuto had had backup.

Suddenly there was a sound then intense pain on his torso, he sprang back instinctively.

Behind him, Kabuto was grinning, blood running from his mouth.

“You're not dead.” Kakashi noted.

No, but soon you'll be. I don't think you can fight with your costal cartilage separated from your ribs. The costal cartilage that's the parts that attach your ribs to your sternum, essentially what makes sure your thorax doesn't collapse.”

Kakashi felt unnerved. He felt blinding pain inside his torso so what he said may be true but his skin felt whole, there wasn't the slickness of blood running over his flank.

“There are certain kinds of medical ninjutsu that are very efficient for cutting bones, only bones. To quench your curiosity, no your clone wasn't mistaken my pulse did disappear for a few seconds. I'm not quite as good at my teacher when it comes to regenerating but I'm learning.”

Kabuto was coming closer. Kakashi noted that he was moving slowly, sluggishly. Maybe he could still take him? Every tiny inhale was shooting pain through his body and he was certain moving would be agonizing but he didn't need much to finish the other off, and to eliminate what could very well become a dangerous threat to the village...

Kabuto wasn't finished talking.

“I wondered how long it would take for anyone to notice my absence but to get not one but even two pursuers in barely more than a week and not any kind of pursuer, an anbu on top of that. I'm impressed.
I'm talking to much amen't I, I'm monologuing. Excuse-me but after pretending to be a weak genin
for so many years I do relish in being able to take credit in my accomplishments. Did you see what I
did with the other Konoha ninja. Creative isn't it. You're an anbu so I suppose you must be clever,
did you understand my message? Well anyway.”

The nuke-nin's hands were surrounded by a green glow and a low hum permeated the air. Fucking
medics. Kakashi moved a foot under himself and when the other attacked jumped to the side. When
he crashed to the ground he felt the edge of his vision grow dark, for a second he couldn't breath and
just had to wait for the pain to go away. He didn't have the time, Kabuto was onto him. It was messy
and certainly unworthy of a high-level missing-nin and an anbu but they both weren't at their best.
Again Kakashi twisted to the side and felt something be torn inside. This really wasn't good. Finally
he felt he had some purchase. He grabbed Kabuto's shoulder, came in close and slipped a kunai
under his glasses, through the eye, through the brain. He didn't stop, cut through his neck and
snapped his head back, from behind with his right hand pushed the tanto through his ribs, just where
the heart was. Then only he allowed himself to take a deep breath. The whole place was stinking of
blood, his hand were covered with it and with a whitish fluid which must be brain fluid or ocular
fluid. It took him a moment to notice his mouth was filled with it to. He was wearing two masks so
he couldn't have swallowed it by accident (how likely was that anyway) which meant it came from
him. Which was bad.

He checked again that Kabuto was really dead before sealing his body and taking the seals he had
been carrying. Then he rinsed his mouth and swallowed a soldier-pill. He sat down and wrapped his
rips tightly like he would have done for a normal broken rib. The whole process was highly
uncomfortable. He thought he blacked out at least one time and at the end he was sweating as if he
had worked out for hours. He got up and went on towards wherever Kabuto had been before he
spotted him. He arrived to another larger cave an hour later: Orochimaru’s lair (one of them). It was
sorted quickly. Everyone inside was already dead, a clean cut though the neck. There was a layer of
slowly coagulating blood on the floor. The bodies seemed normal enough but with Orochimaru there
was little doubt that they had served some purpose in his examinations. Some were young, probably
his genin's age. He counted them and opened his sharingan quickly to remember how each one
looked if he had to describe them later on. There was no more traces of the researches but he figured
they must be in Kabuto's scrolls. There was little more he could do. He slapped strong explosive tags
in each corner of the room and set them off once he had left. Hopefully that would be enough to
make sure no one would find out about this place.

Then slowly he made his way back. It had taken him four days to come to the land of valleys. It
would take a lot more to come back to Konoha.

That's how he found himself stuck back at the hospital only twelve days after leaving it. He wasn't to
frustrated because the respirators allowed him to breath at last and he was unconscious most of the
time anyway. He didn't remember anything about the first two days but on the third Sakura and
Naruto came with eggplant ramen, he vaguely remembered them telling him about trying to make
home-cooked ramen but his memories were vague. The bowl of ramen remained untouched near
him. The next day he remembered that he noticed Sasuke watching from where he was sitting on the
window still but again he wasn't absolutely certain whether it had happened or not.

He did remember Jiraya coming to see him the next day. They had finally reduced the painkillers. He
could feel the pain in his ribs again but he could finally think clearly which was well worth the
discomfort.

Jiraya had sat down on his bed and his weigh had moved the mattress which jostled him. The old
man had seen him wince and offered a very insincere apology.

“You need to try harder to remain alive kid. That's the second time you almost died in three weeks,
the third time if you count when you were poisoned by Orochimaru after the second task of the
chunin exam. If that's your usual habits than your not gonna reach thirty."
"That's not the usual rate, it's a bit frequent even for me.” He answered still feeling a bit groggy. “I
think, it's the genin's fault."
Jiraya raised a eyebrow and seemed to want to ask why but must have been thinking he had better
things to do because he just chuckled. Quickly his traits turned more serious.
“Hiruzen told me that he informed you about the Akatsuki?".
Kakashi nodded, fully concentrated again.
“There is one more thing you need to know. Let me explain. As far as we can tell their goal is
peace.”
The jonin wanted to scoff but before he could say anything Jiraya went on.
“For them it can only be accomplished through world-domination as far as we understand. And to
achieve that they want to have the Biju.
Kakashi swore tiredly. Of course, there was always someone after the Biju but these nuke-nin were
especially worrying.
“At one point or another they will target Naruto.”
“So what we forbid him to leave the village, we put him into the Hokage tower and tell anbu to
watch him 24 hours a day. You don't know Naruto well but let me tell you that's difficult.”
Jiraya shook his head.
“That's not what either the Hokage or I think is best. Make him strong Kakashi. It's unlikely they will
target him first, there are other Jinchurikis who are a lot more vulnerable. That and we don't know if
they have any way to contain the Biju's powers yet.”
Kakashi sighed.
“ It's not like I planned to do anything else.”
Jiraya smiled tiredly before pulling out a few scrolls.
“I will show you anything I know about Naruto's seal, the danger of the nine-tail getting free
because Naruto couldn't contain it is still present and the more the boy is exposed to dangerous
situations the greater the risk he we lose control.”
They went though it again for the next hour. It was grueling work. Kakashi only had a basic
understanding of seals (which was still a lot more than his other comrades) but the seal Jiraya was
showing him was a masterpiece and way beyond his level. However he was not called a genius for
no reason. Additionally the sharingan allowed him to remember every sign and pattern instantly and
Jiraya was patient and seemed to guess where kakashi would have trouble following.
When they finished the sky was darkening and Kakashi felt drained. He leaned back against the
cushion. He watched Jiraya storing and sealing his supplies. The man stood up and his massive
frame loomed over Kakashi. The jonin had missed the Sanin he realized. There was a time were he
had seen him every other day, talking with Orochimaru or running from Tzunade, eating with him
and sensei. He saw him so rarely these days that he sometimes had the feeling that Jiraya too was
only a figure of the past.
“You will go back to spying again.”
Jiraya nodded.
“Akatsuki in particular we need to keep an eye on, there are some problems in lightning country, in
Kiri the Mizukage is getting blood-thirstier day after day, Rain is still closed of and it's making me
nervous and Iwa is getting strangely restless for such a reactionary and traditional country.”
Kakashi nodded. He forgot sometimes that Jiraya may want to remain in Konoha longer but that the
work he was doing for them was invaluable.
“I know that the village is your life Kakashi so make sure that Naruto doesn't fall into Akatsuki's
hands. He needs to be able to defend himself from them, I know that's difficult but I don't need to tell
you what a disaster it would be for Konoha or even for all shinobi countries if the Akatsuki gained
the Biju's powers.
“You don't need to tell me. It's not just the village. Naruto, he's sensei son, but he's also so much
more. He's one of my kids now, I'm not gonna let him be taken away. You should meet him, I'm sure
you would like him.”
Jiraya nodded.
“ I will try. I've been away from Konoha for too long. I sometimes have the feeling I don't recognize anyone anymore. Next time I will talk to my contacts, arrange things so that they work without me always checking on everybody. Next time I'll come back for good. Or at least for a longer time.”

Kakashi smiled when the other closed the door behind him. It would be a good thing to see Jiraya back in the village and he was sure that he would take a liking to Naruto. It was hard not to. His eyes landed on a small wrapped package on his bedside table. What was that, no, it couldn't be. But yes it was!
Trembling fingers extracted the special edition icha icha paradise with extra-scene and commentary from the crumpled paper. Now he felt almost happy to have one quiet week in hospital were he could give himself over entirely to the candid and joyful world of icha icha.
The first frost surprised the members of team seven when they woke three weeks after the attack to a world covered in a thin layer of white.

It didn't discourage them in any way. It had been three weeks since their last training and they were eager to get on with it. Moreover, the Hokage had announced who had been promoted to chunin. In the direct aftermath of the attack no one had thought to much about it but two weeks later a good part of the young genin were buzzing with the need to know.

Shikamaru Nara was the only rookie to pass. It annoyed the two boys a lot but Sakura didn't really feel surprised. Shikamaru just was the kind of person who would succeed without really trying because with his unique perspective on the word he was thinking more like a ninja than any of them. Asuma looked more touched by the announcement than his student but even Shikamaru looked somewhat solemn when he entered the Hokage building to get his flack-jacket.

The next ones were some older genin from Konoha. Looking over the list, they finally recognized one of them as one of the female Konoha-nin who ambushed them at the beginning of the second task in the Hattori ruins.

The last one was the daughter from the Kazekage. Sasuke and Sakura felt a little bit smug because they had beat her. Admittedly, it had been two against one and she had been distracted by her brother, but still they had technically won against a chunin.

The announcement about her advancement was sent to Suna where a temporary government led by one of the Jonin-sensei that came to Konoha had been put into place. Until now no better candidate
had been found so he may very well become Kazekage. Both him and the Hokage were trying to establish friendly relations, well-as friendly as possible in these circumstances. One of the only demands Suna had dared to utter was that their Jinchuriki be brought back to them. Konoha quickly agreed. No one liked the idea of an unstable Jinchuriki in the village despite the fact that the new seal seemed to have lessened the unstable part. Sakura found the boy mostly awkward and terribly shy in a slightly scary way. Naruto had had several heartfelt discussions with him and he was doing pretty well. They had parted with the promise to meet again. Sakura did not entirely understand their bond but thought that it must be of these things that came with both of them being Jinchurikis.

The fact still remained that they had all failed the exam and that drove them all to work harder Sakura with the newfound certitude that she was able to fight even if she was against a stronger opponent, Naruto with a strengthened sense of belonging and the grudging respect of his peers who had been forced to recognize his progress and Sasuke with a cold anger at himself and the world, the frustration of not advancing quickly enough and a general sense of rage that made Kakashi sigh a lot.

Their sensei was still taking it easy. He moved slowly and didn't talk a lot. He said he was fine, repeatedly, but they were getting good at catching him when he was grimacing or huffing and tried to accommodate him.

Still, the first really cold day of winter found three excited genin waiting in a training field near the southern limit of the village. Naruto was wearing another set of orange clothes, these ones Sakura had bought for him. She had felt a little bit guilty that Naruto seemed so happy she had thought of him. Mostly she had seen it as an opportunity to tune it down a bit with the colors. The pants were black with stripes of darker orange and the top was a kind of burnt orange that could almost count as tasteful. Sasuke’s belief in white bottoms seemed to hold strong. His new dark navy top was now long enough to cover his forearms and he was wearing ankle length white track pants. Sakura was pretty sure she had found the best solution by bundling up in a more traditional way: with a wooly hat, a vest and longer leggings. Her sensei seemed unchanged but after some observation they all noticed he was wearing one or two additional layers of sweaters under his flack-jacket. It was of course a very...simple solution.

They all warmed up quickly and worked on taijutsu for the morning before making a full inventory of their skills in the afternoon.

Sasuke now counted three katon in his repertoire and was working on a fourth. Sakura knew two genjutsus but nothing else and was feeling her weakness in ninjutsu acutely. Naruto knew...how to make a lot of shadow-clone and how to make the least chakra-preserving shield in the history of shinobi.

Kakashi must have come to the conclusion that they had to work on that first, because he sent both Sasuke and Sakura to train shuriken and kunai-throwing for a few hours with some of his clones which were unfairly hard to land a hit on. After an hour they only managed to hit one and dispel him. Sakura was happy to note that her hits were at least as precise as Sauke’s. Her reading up on anatomy and medical jutsu allowed her to envision the best areas to target in a completely new way. Alas, as both Sasuke and the Kakashi-clones remarked on loudly and repeatedly, her throws lacked strength and as such were still somewhat useless.

In the afternoon they all worked on different areas. Kakashi told them to meet him in the large
shinobi gym tomorrow and informed them he wouldn't be available three days from now. They didn't dare ask anything about it. They were half convinced it was probably highly classified anyway.

Kakashi let them of early when the sun began to set. The jonin went home slowly, mindful of his ribs. He decided to take the long road home and to wander through Konoha. It probably wasn't very wise, medically speaking, but he felt the urge to prolong his walk home and saw no reason not to indulge. That and his apartment was cold, uninviting and he had finished rereading Jiraiya's gift for the second time so his apartment would be lonely on top of that. The streets of Konoha were lively. Mothers with children, couples and friends were walking around. The shops were still open. The military aspect of Konoha was blending with normal life in the village. It wasn't just the people, it was also the buildings and the general atmosphere. Amidst the normality subtle details indicated the military nature of the village.

Konoha's military power was housed in three main buildings. There was the Hokage tower of course where the Hokage had his office and received important foreign generals or representatives of the daymo. Just under the Hokage's office, in the same building, was the Administration. A broad name that covered all the different offices necessary to govern the complex system that was Konoha. Some parts of it were tasked with the registration of mission assignments, others had to judge their difficulty and estimate the cost, others still were coordinating the mission assignments whilst a last group managed salaries, taxes and rents.

A good part of adult genin worked in the administration corp, at the same time most chunin had to take shifts at the mission desk if they were not on missions, mainly to judge and assign mission briefs. Others still worked full time in the communication corp, a job that was often a lot more interesting than it sounded as their task was to transmit orders and information to the various Konoha outposts strewn across Fire-country; sensitive information more often than not.

Just next to it was the academy. The choice of the location could seem intriguing: why put the youngest shinobi next to the highest place of power? It had been the Nidaime's choice at a time were the main military strategy was still to attack a village directly and as such to have all important building in one place allowed for a more effective defense. It made sense to place the youngest and most vulnerable people, the most precious too as they were the future of Konoha, just next to the Hokage, another highly precious person for the village. Later the Sandaime had tried to decentralize power in Konoha and as such other important political hotspots had been placed all around the village.

Intelligence had been place next to the Naka river. It shared some tasks with the Administration and was involved in the planning of most high-ranking missions. Mainly its purpose was to keep an eye on international happenings, involve the Hokage if necessary, manage the various Konoha outposts and device plans to deal with potential threats. It was also the place from which Konoha oversaw its spy-network and as such was guarded 24/7 by anbus. Moreover, Intelligence had regular dealings with anbu and overall shared its love for discretion and secrecy. Most shinobi working full-time in the building were sworn to complete secrecy. A silence that could, in the most extreme cases, be guaranteed by a seal. Unsavory, Kakashi mused, but there was something to be said about the assurance that one's village most secret strategies would remain one's village's only.
The building also housed some other small specialized units like the decoding and encrypting corp or the seal-protection corp. The first one was tasked with encrypting the messages Konoha sent as cleverly and securely as possible and decode messages Konoha had intercepted and try to undo the work the encrypting corp of another village had done. The second corp, the seal-protection corp had once been made up of Uzushio shinobi and its symbol was still a double swirl in red and green. However these days it consisted mainly of old shinobi who tried to maintain the sealing tradition alive. Their skills paled compared to those of the late Uzushio ninja's however they were the only ones left and seals were still important for the village's protection.

The building also housed the jonin's commander's office and next to it the jonin center, also known as jounin lounge, also known as the snakes' pit. He was pretty sure the last name had been invented by some jealous chunin but it did carry some truth since Anko had come back to the village. The woman was especially fond of the place and some of her...pets could often be found in the cushions of the old ratty couches that were placed around the room.

In the middle of the village was the new Shinobi hospital that had been built under the third at the request of Tsunade. It was a large white building and had the somewhat amusing specificity that it was one of the rare places were civilians and shinobi worked side by side. A lot of the members of the staff were shinobi as only they could use the life saving medical ninjutsu. At the same time a lot of nurses but also some talented high-ranking surgeons were civilians. The two groups of population worked together seamlessly and in that place few civilians let themselves be cowed by ninja's. As Kakashi could attest even the nurses who were barely older that most genin could resist even his more advanced intimidation and evading tactics. Kakashi suspected that one part of the nurse's training was managed by T&I. A lot of people had laughed at his speculations but a lot of people also didn't know that there was a secret passageway between the hospital and T&I. After all the hospital also housed medical cells and some pretty obscure research units.

Finally T&I was a darker but no less important part of Konoha. It's purpose was obvious enough. It also had a few other tasks: preparing some shinobi for very specific infiltration missions and doing the psych check-ups. Kakashi didn't know who had decided that it would be a good idea to do those, there but in his opinion it only cemented what he already thought of the check-ups: they were dreadful and to be avoided at all cost and if really one couldn't evade them they were to be treated in the same way regular interrogations by enemy forces were.

That's why on that beautiful winter day Kakashi was dreading the coming week. His be-annual psych check-up was due soon. He had already missed the appointment twice and the Hokage had sent him a personal missive explaining how sad he would be if his genins couldn't be sent on the C-class he had carefully picked for them because their sensei had missed an important and necessary check-up. The Third was a vicious man. More and more people were whispering that he was thinking of retiring but as far as Kakashi knew he was still on top of his game. And now he couldn't escape from Inoichi any longer.

He sighed and decide to head back. That train of thought had soured his mood. Arriving home he realized that he could see his breath, even inside his apartment. Depressing. He undressed while
trying not to jostle his ribs to much and just put on another uniform, it would do for the night. Restlessness was nagging at him. The forced inactivity was not doing him any good. His thoughts were turning darker and he was dreading what he would see in his dreams but with the check-up coming up he couldn't put of sleeping. Yamanaka Inoichi was way too good at his job to miss something like that, and he was always the one doing his check-ups.

He resigned himself, brushed his teeth, threw a withering look at his hair, gave up and went to bed. He bundled up in his covers and was slowly swallowed by dreams of dark caves and falling rocks, blood-red eyes and blood-red hands. Rin was hanging in a cave upside down, feet and hands nailed to rock and her stomach opened up to make wings of flesh that were pinned to her sides. Truly, he was dreading this year's evaluation.
Interlude: of distractions

Chapter Summary

Little interlude about the small but surprising events that can interrupt the routine of a certain jonin ninja.

Chapter Notes

New interlude and last light-hearted chapter before the next arc. This one is basically crack. As I like to use you as guinea pigs tell me whether you think it disrupts the tone of the story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The day before the check-up found Kakashi entering the drugstore morosely. Shinobis had access to a wide array of meds almost for free but Kakashi tended to get little use of this privilege. The exhaustion from the mission and the last three restless nights were creeping up on him and this morning, when he had gone to the Administration building to get his pay, Naruto's old chunin-sensei had whirled around when he passed by and asked if he was okay looking genuinely concerned. The man hated him so for him to feel concern... Also if even a chunin could notice that something was wrong Yamanaka Inoichi would rip him into pieces and dig out all of his secrets. He resigned himself to take some sleeping pills to get at least one good night of sleep and stand a chance against the mind-jutsu master.

He hated the medicine, he just felt very uncomfortable with the possibility of sleeping so soundly that he wouldn't notice if someone crept up. It made him antsy and he avoided them like the pest.

He bought one little orange bottle and then headed to the market. He had half a mind to head home and just survive on his reserves of rice for the next few days but nutrition was important and now that he was outside anyway... might as well.

The market was bustling and Kakashi winced at the prospect of heading into the crawling mass of people. By the Shodaime, what had he done to deserve this? He braced himself mentally and headed towards a vegetable stand. He found some ripe eggplants and instead of looking further for other things just bought ten of them and decided that would be his vitamin source for the next few days. He looked across the market and located a stand with eggs. There, his proteins. Now about getting there... He let himself be strung along by the flow of people and finally arrived where he wanted to be. He quickly bought a batch of them and finally saw the opportunity to leave.
Suddenly a hand closed on his wrist and Kakashi tensed up all over.

The chakra felt familiar at least. He turned around and saw green eyes and a child's smile beaming up at him.

“Hello, Sakura.” He said somewhat awkwardly.

“Hello sensei, I didn't know you liked eggplant that much.”

The young girl was slowly dragging him to a calmer place behind a fruit stand. She seemed to finally get a good look at him and frowned.

“Are you alright sensei, you still don't look well. You know you shouldn't overexert yourself!”

Kakashi grimaced. Was it really that obvious?

“I'm alright Sakura.”

The girl had raised an eyebrow in an expression that looked quite like the one Tenzo used to throw him when he lied about injuries during missions. Did everyone who worked with him automatically learn to throw him that look.

“You're lying sensei. Is there anything I can do for you? Should I carry your bag?”

Kakashi spluttered, now that was ridiculous.

Sakura seemed insulted.

“I'm strong enough now, sensei.”

And she began tugging on his eggplant bag.

“Stop Sakura, I’m not ill, I’m perfectly fine. There is just something I need to do and don’t want to.”

Sakura looked at him critically. She was probably thinking about mission reports which he did tend to leave up to his charges; completely against regulation, as she liked to remind him.

“Aha, and what is that thing?”

Kakashi sighed and decided to go for the truth.

“Psych eval.”

“The what?”

“Psychological evaluations. All jonin have to do them twice a year.”

“And you don't like them.”

“Obviously.”

“Isn't that one of the things Ino's dad is in charge of?”

“Yes.”

Sakura was looking at him with a thoughtful expression he didn't quite like.
“And you really don't want to go there.”
“Definitively not.”

Sakura nodded.

“Ino's dad is a little bit strange, so I understand you. When is this evaluation?”
Kakashi sighed.

“Tomorrow.”

“If I found a way to delay it what would I have in exchange.”

“How could you do that, psych evals are directed by the Hokage and a section of T&I. Inoichi is especially strict when it comes to them.”

Sakura had the wicked smile that she usually displayed when she had tricked one of the boys.

“I have Ino.”

That may actually work...Inoichi was crazy about his daughter, especially since his wife died. If the girl could play it right...

“You would do that for me, right Sakura. I'm your sensei and you like me.”

“What do I get in exchange.”

“Sakura…”

“What?”

Kakashi didn't have any kind of idea. He could give her money but that seemed wrong in a way and he had no idea what amount would be appropriate.

Finally, he settled on shrugging and telling her he had no idea, what would she like?

Sakura's expression was closed off but she couldn't quite hide a little smile.

“Show me what's under your mask.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Half a day and I can do whatever I want with your hair, and I can take pictures.”

That actually didn't sound too bad. But it was puzzling, why would anyone want to get close to that bird's nest?

“Ok, but why?”

Sakura was smiling in an indulgent kind of way at him.

“Sensei, you really have no idea about the dynamics of teenage girl groups, do you?”

“No, none at all,” Kakashi said honestly.

“Pictures like these would put me at the very top of the hierarchy for at least a few weeks and would
let me enter new and higher circles of popularity. In the long-term, it would give me power and influence over my peers and secure me a place among them.”

“My hair can do that?”

“You rank in first place in the mysterious but probably hot category just before Eishun Aburame.”

“Eishun? From the intelligence department? But he's always wearing goggles and a mask.”

“Yes, that's the requirement for the mysterious but probably hot category.”

Kakashi felt somewhat lost. People were talking about him, like that, it made him feel slightly uncomfortable.

But it was unimportant he supposed. He had found a way out of his psych eval. He nodded numbly and Sakura beamed at him. They set a time and a place and the whirlwind of pink and red that was Sakura disappeared.

It was almost in a good mood that he walked back to his apartment, if everything went right, there would be no psych eval tomorrow.

“Dad, tomorrow I thought we could go walk together, it's been so long since we've been at the lake, you know the one mum liked so much. You will have time, right?”

Inoichi winced, why now of all times, tomorrow he was to meet Kakashi and that was a long overdue, important appointment.

“Euh, sweetheart I have work tomorrow.”

“Again, but you're never home when I am.”

“Yes but that's because you're almost never ho…”

“...then I suppose I will go with Jiro-kun. I think he wants to date me.”

His sweet daughter with that brute of a chunin! But this appointment was important. He looked up and saw the upset and hurt expression on the beautiful face of his girl. Wasn't he a father above all else?

“I will find a way sweetheart, you know what your mother said, you're my heart and sun. I love you.”

“I love you to dad, you make me so happy. I don't really care for any of the boys anyway.”
Inoichi felt a warm feeling of contentment fill him. Oh, how he loved his sweet and innocent daughter.

The next day a messenger bird disturbed Kakashi while he was under the shower. He was making a decent effort to unknot his hair but the arrival of the animal convinced him it was in vain and that he had better things to do.

He was more than happy to receive a message that said that psychological evaluation would be shifted to after their next C-rank. Good, a respite.

He busied himself with some ninjutsu training before heading to Sakura’s house. She had assured him that at that time of the day neither her mother nor her father would be there. Kakashi thought that was good, he wasn't sure they would approve. Sakura instructed him to sit on the couch and lean back. She was sitting on a raised chair and had a basin with warm water and at least six different hair products. She slowly began to wash his hair and Kakashi winced, feeling somewhat ashamed when she stumbled upon the same hurdles he faced every morning. His hair was incredibly thick and knotted, stiff and almost bristly. However, she must be more determined than he was and the strange products did have some kind of special effect. At first, he tensed every time her hands approached his neck or his temple and he found it all very uncomfortable. It was very easy to kill someone if one had access to the head. The cranium was solid enough but with chakra... and the neck was of course extremely vulnerable and if she had a good grip... and people often overlooked the temples but they were very delicate: even with very little force one could pierce through them.

However, with time he relaxed. This was Sakura, he could kill her easily even in this position. She was commenting on every step of the way and the running commentary spared them the awkward silence that would have reigned otherwise. That and the warm, nice-smelling water and her fingers were feeling very good against his head. Actually, maybe they should do that instead of psych evals, he was sure it was a lot more conducive to his mental health and overall well-being. At one point Sakura applied a thick cream on his hair and just let it sit. It was smelling especially good and he began to try to guess what were the ingredients. When he said one out loud Sakura chuckled. It became a game, she was holding the bottle and he was guessing. Sakura was quite impressed.

It took another hour and five or six other products before he was allowed to sit upright again. He almost missed the nice feeling of warm water on his skin and he really didn't like the hair-dryer: too loud and too hot.

Then there were other oils and creams again. He swore he had never borne so many different smells. On a mission he would be caught in a second because of it; right now, he didn't care. For the first time in his life his hair felt soft, it wasn’t sprouting upwards but was curling and falling more naturally, it looked longer to and Sakura drew great pleasure from trying different types of little ponytails and even two pigtails at one time.

The process of taking the pictures was very awkward but Sakura was giggling all the time and was
looking so happy that he complied without protest.

Finally, he left because her parents would come back soon. His hands were full of five different bottles and jars that Sakura had insisted he take when she had learned he washed his hair with a normal soap bar. He would have to write down the order in which he had to do what before he forgot.

That evening when he looked at himself in the mirror and was still surprised by the soft locks of hair he mused that Sakura was a good person. He didn't really care about the state of his hair but at one point in the afternoon he had felt the shift in Sakura: she wasn't thinking about the potential influence the picture would earn her anymore, she genuinely wanted to make him happy.

Suddenly it hit Kakashi again how much he had come to care for the three kids. He was entirely invested in them, there was no denying that anymore. He would hold them close, this time he would protect them, not because it was his duty but because he cared for them, for their hidden gentleness, for their passion and their flaws. God help him he would keep them alive despite everything the shinobi world would throw at them.

Chapter End Notes

Please be aware that this is in no way the beginning of any kind of romance.
Hello guys so I've decided that I need to be completely honest about updating schedule and so on. As you may have noticed I do have a lot of problems when it comes to correcting and re-reading what I've written and just preparing it for uploading. Now I will at no point give up on this story, after all it is almost entirely written already but I do want to tell you that I'm sorry that I can't update as regularly as I hoped I would. Hopefully it will get better because regarding private life and my studying I will get into a phase where I don't have to work quite as much from the winter holidays onward.

yeah so next chapter…

Team seven had to meet near the Mission room around midday. The three genins were instructed to pack everything in advance including necessary items to sleep outside for several days, emergency food for three days, the necessary weapons for a long term mission and optionally something to occupy themselves with.

They succeeded, more or less. Kakashi made them unpack everything and seemed to take great pleasure in pointing out their mistakes. As such seven packets of ramen were taken from Naruto (to voluminous, not nutritious enough), almost three pounds of miscellaneous weaponry from Sasuke (yes, he could seal it in a scroll but having to many different weapons heading into a fight could only mean confusion, better stick to the ones one knew well), Sakura had to leave her spare dress behind and while her sensei emphasized strongly that one book was a wonderful tool to stave off boredom having three was just over the top. After that, they headed into the mission room. Some of the chunin and older genin managing the place must have seen them from the windows because they were looking bemused and were chuckling at them. Naruto didn't seem to notice but Sakura was turning beet-red and her hands were balled into fists. Sasuke had settled on throwing murderous looks at his sensei's back who was strutting happily to the main desk.

The chunin seemed vaguely annoyed to see the man and asked tiredly if he was turning in a report or asking for a new mission. He seemed relieved to hear it was the second and redirected them to a desk in the corner. A tired man was looking at them and gave them a scroll and explained that all necessary information was in the scroll and had already been sent to their jonin a few days ago. Kakashi nodded with emphasis and they all left the place.

They jumped from roof to roof until they arrived outside the village proper. In view of the outer wall, they stopped near a rarely used training ground and went over the information together.

“So, this is our second C-rank. Contrary to prior experiences these are not supposed to be too hard and only mildly life-threatening. So probably no A-rank or S-rank missing-nin this time. Any question?”
"Yes, sensei what is the mission." Sakura asked with a voice that was only one touch away from being insolent.

"Ah, yes, the mission, no escort mission this time. We are on protection and threat-removal mission. Bandits have been attacking a settlement in south-western land of earth."

"Why would people from earth ask Konoha for help? Konoha and Iwa aren't exactly on great terms."

Kakashi chuckled without humor, that was the understatement of the century.

"The answer to that is in the extra information in the documents. The settlement is a mix of people from different nations, the scroll wasn't exactly forthcoming but I guess a mix of political opponents and refugees. Their leader is a scholar banned from Lightning.

Sakura's brows rose and Sasuke's drew together, Naruto was frowning but mostly at his comrades' reactions.

"So guessed what the main difficulty will be."

"Not creating some kind of political incident." Was Sasuke's acerbic replay, it was clear enough what he thought of international politics.

"And they chose Konoha because they think that neither Kumo nor Iwa shinobi will treat them fairly, the first because they were the one to ban their leader, the second because they are stranger on their territory."

"Exactly Sakura."

"And who's attacking them?"

"Apparently some bandits."

"Are we sure."

Kakashi grimaced.

"As far as we could gather information, it seems so, but it's not certain. I doubt however that any kind of major opponent would be interested in these people. I chose this mission for two reasons. One, so you learn what a mission far outside Konoha entails, two, so you get a taste for international politics. Technically shinobis from another nation are allowed to enter foreign land and even take missions but in reality, the situation has much to do with the strength of a land's hidden village. In a land with no shinobis, missions are free for all, there are certain zones of influence, for example, tea-country has made it a habit to only employ Konoha-shinobi but that's all unofficial. There are often skirmishes during missions if opposing parties have hired shinobi's from different countries. It can degenerate into major disputes so it's sometimes better to give up on a mission instead of persevering and potentially creating major political tensions. If the mission is issued by a country with a small hidden village, a bigger hidden village will often take the job from the local ninja's. That sucks for the small hidden villages but they are pretty limited in what they can do to retaliate. Mostly they try to specialize or offer lower prices. Then our present situation: someone from a major shinobi country employs foreign shinobi from another major shinobi country. It's highly frowned upon. If Iwa catches us and stated that we did something illegal, which can be fabricated if necessary, then we are screwed. On the long run they have to extradite us to Konoha but until then they can do pretty much whatever they want to us. Also, they are likely to stop us at the border and try to detain us. It could cost a lot, literally, for Konoha to get us back.
Without the international component, this mission would have been an easy C-rank, the objective is clear and easy enough to take care of, but it does have the potential to become extremely delicate. This is the kind of mission that can prepare you for a B-rank. Don't look so happy that's just to show you this will be difficult.”

“How will we enter into Earth country? Try to bypass the border?”

“I'd do that if I was alone but Iwa is especially good at surveying its border. No, we will go through the front door. We will be checked at the border but that will be mostly me, children fly pretty far under their radars. We will use a mixture of genjutsu and more trivial disguise but we will have to look inconspicuous. Please exercise some restraint. If I remember well Iwa's prisons are highly uncomfortable.

His smiled coldly at that and the genin did not seem reassured.

“We will sleep outside most of the time so try to remember how we did it during the last C-rank. Chores will be split and once we are outside fire-country we'll do strict guards during the night. Understood?”

They all nodded and Kakashi could see the excitement on young faces which had not yet learned to school their expression.

The first day was pretty uneventful. Naruto and Sasuke were bickering from time to time but their spirits were high and they were happy enough to help set the camp. It took a little too many explanations for Kakashi's taste but he knew it would iron itself out in the next eight or nine days they would need to reach their goal.

Their dinner was acquired quickly. Sakura wasn't horrified that they stole the eggs out of a nest like she had been the last time. Sasuke caught two fishes expertly in a nearby stream and Naruto showed that he knew several little tricks from rummaging around in the forest and found them a few nice berries and nuts.

This was the easy part. Most fire-country children were well-off in the forests, the challenge would come when they reached the drier parts of earth country.

The evening was nice enough. They were comfortable and safe enough to light a fire and Sakura and Naruto were talking animately about some kind of popular character from a well-known manga. Sasuke was mostly trying to pretend he wasn't listening but was throwing in a cutting comment from time to time.

They went to bed early while Kakashi remained propped against a tree, confident that he would be alert immediately if somebody came close.

There was a lot of rustling among the three sleeping rolls, Naruto was trying to roll unto Sasuke to come closer to Sakura while the Uchiha tried to cautiously creep away from the girl who had put her roll on a slight slope and was steadily inching towards Sasuke.

Kakashi was suddenly filled by the mental image of a small colony of caterpillars and restrained a chuckle. Finally, they seemed to drift off and he was left to appreciate the peacefulness of one of the
last temperate night before fire-country winter.

The next morning they took off early and had another uninspiring day. They reached the border late in the evening and spent the night in an outpost. The next day was filled mainly with stalling. They crossed the border through grass and traveled the short distance between the border to Fire-country and the border to Earth country in half a day. They sealed away any equipment before sealing the actual scroll into another scroll which Kakashi gave Pakkun.

They would have to smuggle the weapons inside as any kind of scrolls was a dead giveaway of a shinobi. Every storage seal, especially if poorly made, damaged its content at a molecular level (the reason why one couldn't seal a living person or even food in a seal). When there were several layers of storage seal inside one another than the damage increased exponentially. Kakashi launched into an explanation of why that was but even Sakura was lost after the third sentence.

Changing their appearance was the next point. They knew that their sensei had taken off his mask but had immediately switched it for a large scarf. They put on simple, brown linen clothes and then Naruto, Kakashi and Sakura dyed their hair black. It was kind of a mess, the three of them bowed over a little basin of water, trying to get the rest of the dye out of their hair. Naruto was wildly excited and showed it off to Sasuke who was standing a distance away looking mildly intrigued.

The boy had been in a dark mood since they left, Kakashi had noticed and he was happy to see the boy’s interest being roused by something.

Finally, they were more or less ready and Kakashi made them repeat their cover story.

“So you're our oldest brother and we're from northern fire-country. We are potters and want to sell the ware's in the winter solstice festival in Kamishima-mura where you already went a few times in the last few years. Sasuke is the oldest and has already accompanied you a few times. Naruto and I are the two youngest and are traveling with you because our father just died and there is no one except you to take care of us.”

Kakashi nodded while working on the small cart that hey had bought in the morning. The donkey had already bitten Sakura when she had tried to pet him so she took a step back. They had loaded the cart with pots and jars that Kakashi had brought from Konoha and just unsealed. Kakashi urged them to try to familiarize themselves with this invented situation.

Sakura took to it easily. She took on her sweeter voice that she used to favor around Sasuke and was easily slipping into the persona of a timid but excited young girl, eager to help her brother and well-versed in the negotiation of prices. Naruto was a little more awkward but his enthusiasm worked with his cover and he was playing dumb most of the time. Sakura was always chiding him and together they worked well enough.

Sasuke was the problem. He seemed annoyed by the whole setup and Kakashi had to resist the urge to throw him off the cart and explain to him why exactly this was crucial and in which way exactly the Iwa prisons were the worst of the elemental nations (maybe except Kiri, but he’d never been
caught by Kiri so he couldn't be sure).

Finally, the boy settled for the role of the silent, efficient older brother who told his siblings to shut up from time to time.

Kakashi walked in the front and changed his expression from bored to tired and let himself imagine the life of that young man, tired by the road and the added responsibility of his three siblings. Still sad about his father's death and weighed down by the burden it put on him, wary of the guards at the border who always caused problems and worried about how well the ware would sell.

They arrived at the gates around four o'clock. The sun was high but it was slightly colder than in fire country. The guards stopped them immediately and began to ask questions. Kakashi hopped down from the cart ungracefully and offered their name and explained their goal. The guards became more hostile when they learned he came from Fire-country but Kakashi hadn't dared to pick a cover story that the kids would be unfamiliar with.

In the end, it was Naruto who got them out of the tricky situation. He approached one of the guards and was looking fixedly at the large sword at his back, the guard noticed but only seemed vaguely amused. Suddenly the boy announced loudly that he would become a shinobi one day and would be the strongest shinobi of all.

The guard laughed and told him that he was way too old anyway and that to become a shinobi he should have been training for years already.

Naruto looked crushed and his expression was so sincere and surprised that the two guards began to snicker.

Sakura played her part and began to chastise him while tugging him back towards them and Kakashi sighed loudly.

“Well, now maybe he will forget about that ridiculous idea.”

The guards were still looking at the blond.

“Yeah boy, listen to your brother, better don't run to the tree-huggers. They are the worst of all. Here in Earth-country, we have some rules but in Konoha, they sent kids half your age into front-line battles. You wouldn't last a week with them.”

The line behind them was getting longer. The guard who had been looking through their things half-hardheartedly finally came back and shrugged. They were let through with the instruction to be back at the border in three weeks.

Kakashi smiled gratefully and they hurried along. They didn't stop before they were half a day away in a small spruce forest.

Kakashi felt some tension drain away. They burnt the cart, sealed the pots again and decided to sell the donkey in the next village before waiting for Pakkun. The dog found them late in the night and they all felt better when they had their weapons on them again.
They advanced quickly during the night and hid during the day.

His students were seeing another great shinobi nation for the first time. The large endless dry plains were new for them and the snow on their fifth day made Naruto and Sakura giddy. He saw that Sasuke was getting annoyed with his teammate’s antics and Kakashi felt slightly worried about the new level of anger and impatience the boy was exhibiting. He had thought it was getting better. Another thing he would have to keep an eye on.

Finally, on the dawn of the eighth day, they arrived near the village the scholar who had asked for their protection had indicated. It was a small settlement, about four dozen low houses of stone and wood were scattered around. Small fields had been set up next to the houses but the people seemed to live mainly from cattle farming. An enclosed plot of land was housing almost a hundred large red-brown cows and several younger ones were bound to the houses.

The mission scroll had indicated that the house of their client was easily identifiable by its placement. Supposedly it was a little outside the village and the house was bigger. They saw it easily enough, about half a mile away from the village. They circumvented the village, deciding to hide their presence for now and quickly noticed they had a problem. The door of the house was wide-open, the wooden roof had a large hole in it. Inside everything had been upturned and some furniture was smashed. More importantly, their client was nowhere to be seen.

Chapter End Notes

So this was a very dialogue heavy chapter but I felt it needed a certain amount of information to build up the premise for the mission.
Next chapter! It's late, I know. I can only offer sincere apologies and explain that I was very unsatisfied with the next few chapters which I found boring and useless. Now I made some radical cuts and transformed a 7-chapters-arc into 2/3 chapters and I think it makes it a lot better.
Once again, every comment makes me happy, criticism included! (Except flames...)

They entered the chaotic house carefully and began to look around, the struggle indicated some kind of attack, probably by the very bandits they’d been sent to take care of. The wardrobes and trunks had been opened and no valuables seemed to have been left behind. Kidnapping the man seemed superfluous but it wasn't unheard of for bandits to capture people either to sell them as slaves or to request a ransom.

Kakashi looked around, careful not to draw conclusions too hastily. His students were looking around in the main room and he opened a door at the back revealing a small bedroom in a similar state than the rest. Interestingly it contained two beds and a supple smell of more tangy sweat seemed to suggest at least one had been occupied by a woman. A wife maybe? A lover? A sister maybe even? Nothing had been said about family members in the mission brief.

A door at the back led to a small pantry with drying onions and smoked meat hanging from the low ceiling. This was the first element which confirmed the slight feeling of unease which had risen up as soon as Kakashi had approached the village.

He had no exact understanding of what kind of bandit had been at work here but the disorder and mindless destruction suggested a rowdy, primitive bunch. Was it compatible with that disorganized group to leave meat and food untouched? The lard and stuffed, smoked fish looked appealing enough.

Kakashi exited the pantry and the bedroom and looked around once more. Sakura was flipping through some books on the far end of the room and he joined her. It seemed that most had been taken away but thin notebooks had been left behind in a corner and Kakashi’s attention was caught when his eye fell on a chakra-seal.

Sakura handed him some loose papers which seemed to contain a theoretical analysis of genjutsu mind-control caused by kekkei genkai.

The first image he had made of their client changed. The man seemed to be highly educated and well-versed in ninja secrets. This was not looking like the uncomplicated, long-range C-rank he’d hoped for.

He went out and called the two boys who had been looking at the debris and signs of battle,
surrounding the house.

Each boy gave a small account of what he had found and some more suspicious details came up: Naruto seemed to have found a spot where the bandits had burned books. How was that supposed to maximize the spoil?

The most decisive element, however, was found by Sasuke. He’d picked up several sharp instruments which fit the image of an unorganized hoard: long knives, rudimentary swords, and clumsy ax but also, and Kakashi’s heart picked up when he saw it, a blackened metal box, torn apart.

Kakashi gulped and picked up the misshapen object. He held it under his nose but the smell confirmed his suspicions.

“Take this and memorize the smell”, he instructed, “every shinobi who fought Iwa during the third war knows that smell and knows to run when he smells it. It’s a special explosive powder, a lot stronger than our explosive tags. Iwa was very fond of blowing things up, Konoha ninja especially. Even now Konoha isn't able to recreate the substance, it's one of Iwa's best-guarded secrets.”

Kakashi didn't elaborate and the three genins still didn't quite understand the implications. Kakashi grimaced and went on:

“It means that it's very unlikely that random bandits had access to it, only high-ranking Iwa chunins or jonins could be in possession of such a weapon. In other words, it seemed more and more evident that Iwa was involved in this so-called bandit attack. That, in turn, means that that to accomplish your mission and rescue your client you'd have to go against Iwa.”

The genin now had an identical frown on their face and Sakura turned a questioning gaze at her sensei.

“So brats, our mission officially went to shit.”

They had come to the conclusion that immediately they could nothing about the kidnapping of their client by Iwa-nin. Kakashi had half a mind to just head back to Konoha because he was unwilling to put the kids in a mission with potential inter-nation confrontations but finally decided to at least get more information.

They went to the village and asked around, learning that the attacks had increased in frequency in the last few weeks. The people looked miserable and little effort seemed to be made in patching up the houses damaged in the last robbing.

The four decided to wait to witness the next attack on the village and see if they could gather anything by observing the attackers. Thus they were left waiting and except for regular check-ups on the happenings inside the village they were left with a lot of time on their hand that Kakashi decided to use for training.

His charges finally possessed the skills he would have expected from a genin who graduated from the academy. He was honest enough to admit that his standards may be a little high. In concrete terms, it meant that they were all able to perfectly perform the most basic D-rank jutsus expected of ninjas: standard clones, small-scale shunshin, replacement technique, rope-evasion technique, and
genjutsu-lifting technique. Moreover, they had finally mastered more difficult chakra manipulation which meant, of course, tree walking and water walking but also precise chakra direction inside the body and the ability to perform the most rudimentary jutsu without hand-signs.

Then in taijutsu, they were finally at a point where they could each hold their own efficiently. Sasuke had perfected all the basics and had begun to heighten his speed to such a point that he could become truly dangerous even though he still lacked the destructive raw power to do a lot of damage if he attacked bare-handed. He had also learned to incorporate clan-typical moves. Naruto still used very few techniques of the standard academy courses and at that point, Kakashi doubted he would ever really learn them. Instead, his style was wild and surprising. He was strong and able to jump high and quickly enough to circumvent attacks completely and at the same time he was resilient enough to take on attacks head-on. It made for an interesting mix. Sakura was the one who followed the standard academy forms the most closely however she had learned to compensate for her lacking endurance with her flexibility and had become very good at evading attacks even at a very close range. In addition to that her aim with shuriken was improving week after week.

genjutsu was clearly less advanced. Naruto was completely unable to produce them. His enormous chakra levels were in the way, moreover, he lacked the ability to visually perfect the planned illusion. Sasuke had learned two but he wasn't really taking to it despite being an Uchiha. Maybe it was an unconscious fear of them after his disastrous experience at the hands of his brother, maybe he just lacked the patience. Sakura was progressing: her repertoire consisted of five genjutsus, among them three C-ranks. She could become good but didn't seem entirely convinced it was her path.

Additionally, he had taught them battle strategy, basic hand-signs, and codes, traps, and seal-identification.

Now came the next step: elemental ninjutsu. Not all good ninja were using higher level ninjutsu. For example, only half of all the jonin he knew were using ninjutsu as their main weapon but it was usual to at least try it out, his students could see for themselves if it worked for them. The first step was, of course, to see which chakra-nature they identified with. He was pretty sure that Sasuke like the absolute majority of Uchiha would be fire-nature but it was a fun experiment and would certainly excite his students.

He let slip that the next day they would try out something completely new and was met with excitement. They ate their meal that they took in the little nook they had discovered in a rocky groove a mile away from the village and where they hid their camp. Naruto was chatting away happily. Sakura was listening with a half-smile but seemed just as happy. Sasuke seemed to have been brought out of his dark mood by the perspective of learning something new and joined in in the discussion from time to time. They finally went to sleep, him on one side of the fire and Naruto and Sasuke on the other under a rocky spur and Sakura sitting above them, taking the first guard shift.

Naruto was the first to wake the next morning. He felt absolutely full of energy and excited about what they would do. In a lot of ways, his training with Kakashi despite the man's annoying quirks was a lot more effective for him than the academy had ever been. Long texts or lectures weren't compelling to him, they lacked practicality. Theoretical explanation never really made sense and he was quick to dismiss them. But with his team, he was learning from the new experiences he was making every day. Sakura seemed surprised to see that he could be patient but he already knew that. He could wait for hours for a trap to go off!

He knew that but he felt gratified anyway when he demonstrated that he could learn too. He just had to be shown clearly. It didn't help him to know he had to use only a fifth of his chakra and direct it to
the outer layer of his feet. He needed to feel it and then he would get it.

He didn’t know if his sensei really understood that but at least he let him do his things and just showed him what he had to do and didn’t try to prove to him why and how and so on.

Speaking of his sensei. The man was sitting against a rock and was looking away from him. He must have taken the last shift and had already boiled some water and heated the rest of the meal from yesterday that could be scrappled from the ground. Naruto woke the other with a hard shove (Sasuke) and a gentle tap (Sakura) and they began to eat. They finished their meal in record time and before the sun had risen behind the outline of the mountains that constituted the western border of earth-country they were all standing on a flat area behind the large rocks looking expectantly at their sensei.

“So you know that a shinobi can have a variety of skills. You already saw genjutsu, ninjutsu, and taijutsu, there are others still. Do you know some?”

“Iryo-jutsu, that's healing jutsus, shuriken-jutsu which can be seen as a subcategory of taijutsu and trap-setting.”, Sakura recited in the monotone voice that said she was quoting a book.

“There's kekkai genkais.” Sasuke quipped in.

Naruto tried to find an answer of his own and settled on the memory of the last guy who fought against Sasuke during the Chunin exams.

“There’s also the puppet-thing from Suna.”

Kakashi nodded.

“There are still several other but you got the gist of it. You see every high-level jonin will choose one of these specialties or combine several to make his very own style. You too will find the skills that work best with your abilities. Ninjutsu is one of the most popular choices and we’ll look at it more closely today, however, keep in mind that there are many other specialties. Most powerful jutsus are elemental jutsus which means that they create and manipulate one of the five elements of chakra. There are only five elements of chakra: wind, earth, water, fire, and lightning.”

Kakashi went on an added some details. Naruto was trying to concentrate as best as possible on what was said but they were slowly losing him. Kakashi must have noticed because he went over it again. He accompanied his explanation with a short demonstration. Naruto couldn’t quite contain his excitement and cheered loudly and tried to ignore the vaguely annoyed looks from Sakura and Sasuke. He didn't like it when they made him feel like he was stupid.

“Ok, now we will try to find out which powers all of you have.”

Naruto felt a grin stretch his face. That sounded honestly really amazing. He had thought that the mission was a little bit boring but this was incredibly exciting.

Visions of him with different powers flitted through his head. Kakashi-sensei had said before the Chunin exam that he would be the protector of the team so first, he imagined earth-power, him making a gigantic wall appear, or maybe fire and he would do a fire-ball ten times as big as Sasuke’s or wind and then he could fly or water and flooding all his enemies or lightning and, and...
He went back to paying attention when he saw Kakashi rummage through his pockets. He took out a small envelope with pieces of paper inside. Naruto felt intrigued but also a little bit scared. It wouldn't be a written test right?

Kakashi carefully shook the envelope and the content dropped on the ground. About ten little pieces of paper were scattered between them. Their teacher squatted down and took a piece. When he showed it to them it was strangely wrinkled. He put it next to another piece of paper and they could clearly see the difference. The paper he had touched seemed to have been crumpled carelessly.

“This paper is chakra sensitive. In contact with my chakra, it changed, in my case, it crumpled. It's the sign of lightning release.”

Immediately the jutsu that had killed Haku came to Naruto's mind. Blinding white energy and a high chirping sound. It had reminded him of lightning.

“Now, ladies first.”

Naruto looked curiously at Sakura.

“It broke off it little pieces sensei?”

“Congratulation that would be earth-release. Now your turn Sasuke...!”

“What a surprise Uchiha you have fire release.”

Naruto watched in awe as the piece burnt away.

“No, now Naruto, your turn.”

He took a second to select one of the pieces of paper and took one near his sensei’s right leg. When he brought it up the paper was sliced in two.

Kakashi looked especially interested.

“Wind-release, kind of surprising it's usually genetic, well, there are exceptions…”

Naruto didn't really listen to him he was busy grinning and cheering. Wind-release just sounded so cool. Although he was honest enough with himself to know that whatever power he would have gotten he would have found it the absolute coolest.

They spent the next few hours training jutsu. They each got to choose one jutsu of their element. Naruto for once listened closely to his options and hesitated for quite some time but settled for Fūton: Toppa (Wind release: great breakthrough) which seemed pretty strong and overall interesting.

He struggled and his first attempts were completely ineffective. From the corner of his eye, he saw a small earthen wall appear on Sakura's first try and a fiery beam near Sasuke a few minutes later. Before it would have frustrated him but at this point, he was kind of used to failing at first and persevered.

In the next few days, they only warmed up quickly before concentrating on their jutsus while Kakashi was usually doing some spying in the village. Sasuke was struggling a little bit but his jutsu was a B-rank. After all his teammate had already trained with fire-release ninjutsu in the last few weeks and was now learning a more complex jutsu that involved an oily substance and produced
fiery bullets which allowed for a persistent attack. Naruto was finally able to emit the large wind barrage but while it was already strong he struggled with channeling it more precisely.

To his surprise and dismay, it was Sakura who seemed to have the most problems. Even after three days of training her earthen wall barely reached above her shoulders and seemed brittle. Also, she was left panting and tired after only three or four tries which he found puzzling.

He kind of wanted to help her because she often helped him but also felt awkward about it.

After seeing her try another time and failing to get her wall to rise about her hip level and then plopping down looking murderous he decided to head towards her.

He squatted down next to her and hesitated in how to put it.

“Euh, Sakura. Are you sure that you put enough chakra into it? You know if you use more chakra the wall will get taller and stronger.”

The gaze she leveled at him was frigid.

“Oh really?” She began with an overly sweet voice. “You think so Naruto, I never figured that it would work best with more chakra.”

She ended with a growl and even Naruto could easily read the cold sarcasm in her voice. It almost made him flinch back. He mumbled a sorry and was about to turn back but he felt Sakura's hand on his shoulder. He looked back and saw her expression soften and she sighed.

“Sorry Naruto, you only wanted to help. I'm just very frustrated right now. I guess I'm not used to struggling so much to learn something.”

Naruto grinned in response.

“Don't worry I'm like the master of struggling to learn something.”

Sasuke grinned too, but a little tiredly.

“It's just that I really can't manage it the way you two do it. Kakashi-sensei warned me. I just don't have as much chakra, ok. And that's not really something I can work hard to change. I can do some exercises but even when I grow up it will always be less chakra than most ninja.”

Naruto nodded and looked down. Well, he had never really thought about it that way. Sakura had always been the best at the academy so it had surprised him when he had realized around the time of the chunin exam that, well, he had become stronger than her. She must have realized it too because since then she had worked twice as hard but this...When Naruto struggled he just stubbornly went on and trained until it worked but he could see how it wouldn’t solve Sakura’s chakra problem.

Another voice suddenly interrupted them.

“Stop moping around, you're wasting training time.”

They both looked up and saw Sasuke with both hands shoved into his pockets.

Sakura immediately looked away and she looked upset. She never liked to be caught in a moment of
weakness by Sasuke. First Naruto thought it was still because the girl had that crush on the stupid Uchiha but he thought it was more because she wanted to be part of the team and Sasuke's habit to dismiss anyone that he thought was weaker (and he certainly viewed Sakura that way) hurt her.

“It's not like a lack of chakra is a good excuse to not become strong.”

Naruto squinted his eyes and tried to guess if the comment was actually an encouragement in a roundabout, Sasuke-typical way.

Sakura had gotten up and was tense. She had a hurt and angry expression on her face. One that she had never directed at the Uchiha until now.

“Tss, what do you think, that every jonin got a ton of chakra. It's not like it never happened to an Uchiha to have low chakra reserves. He was still expected to become a jonin or at the very least a chunin. So yeah maybe you won't become a ninjutsu-specialist but you are stupid if you thought that was the most likely choice for you.”

Sakura seemed to hesitate for a second but took a deep breath and told them that she got it.

“You're right. This probably doesn't make a lot of sense. I'll go to the village and look around a bit. It's probably more useful. No Naruto, Sasuke is right and I need some time to think.”

Naruto seemed to accept her explanation even if it made him sad to see Sakura so upset. Then he turned to his other teammate not sure if he should be angry or thankful. Honestly, he was surprised, the Uchiha had rarely talked so much.

The raven boy was already training again and Naruto suddenly had an idea.

“Hey, Sasuke. Do you want to try something?”

The boy looked up exasperated.

“Remember how sensei said that wind is weak against fire because it makes the fire stronger.”

Naruto put his hand around his mouth and opened his arms, mimicking his jutsu and some kind of explosion hoping to convey that adding his wind to Sasuke’s fire would make for a pretty amazing result.

Sasuke seemed to get it and there was an interested gleam in his eyes.

“You may be onto something, dead-last.”

Chapter End Notes

One relevant change I made is Sasuke's chakra nature...and I can't really offer an explanation. I like the idea of a certain Uchiha-trademark style of ninja-skills and I like that the idea of them being the clan with the fire and the genjutsu skills.

I also felt that the only reason Sasuke was given lightning nature was so he could learn chidori because Kishimoto loves parallels between generation and that way there is a lightning nature parallel between Kakashi and Sasuke and I found it a little unnecessary. But honestly, it's a very personal opinion with little rational reasoning behind it.
December II

Chapter Notes

Next chapter: a little bit of set-up, a little bit of training and a lot of interactions. I wanted to concentrate a bit on Naruto and how perceptive but also vulnerable he can be around his teammates.

They entered the chaotic house carefully and began to look around, the struggle indicated some kind of attack, probably by the very bandits they’d been sent to take care of. The wardrobes and trunks had been opened and no valuables seemed to have been left behind. Kidnapping the man seemed superfluous but it wasn't unheard of for bandits to capture people either to sell them as slaves or to request a ransom.

Kakashi looked around, careful not to draw conclusions too hastily. His students were looking around in the main room and he opened a door at the back revealing a small bedroom in a similar state than the rest of the house. Interestingly it contained two beds and a supple smell of more tangy sweat seemed to suggest at least one had been occupied by a woman. A wife maybe? A lover? A sister maybe even? Nothing had been said about family members in the mission brief.

A door at the back led to a small pantry with drying onions and smoked meat hanging from the low ceiling. This was the first element which confirmed the slight feeling of unease which had risen up as soon as Kakashi had approached the village.

He had no exact understanding of what kind of bandit had been at work here but the disorder and mindless destruction suggested a rowdy, primitive bunch. Was it compatible with that disorganized group to leave meat and food untouched? The lard and stuffed, smoked fish looked appealing enough.

Kakashi exited the pantry and the bedroom and looked around once more. Sakura was flipping through some books on the far end of the room and he joined her. It seemed that most had been taken away but thin notebooks had been left behind in a corner and Kakashi’s attention was caught when his eye fell on a chakra-seal.

Sakura handed him some loose papers which seemed to contain a theoretical analysis of genjutsu mind-control caused by kekkei genkai.

The first image he had made of their client changed. The man seemed to be highly educated and well-versed in ninja secrets. This was not looking like the uncomplicated, though lengthy C-rank he’d hoped for.

He went out and called the two boys who had been looking at the debris and signs of battle, surrounding the house.

Each boy gave a small account of what he had found and some more suspicious details came up: Naruto seemed to have found a spot where the bandits had burned books. How was that supposed to
maximize the spoil?

The most decisive element, however, was found by Sasuke. He’d picked up several sharp instruments which fit the image of an unorganized hoard: long knives, rudimentary swords, and clumsy ax but also, and Kakashi’s heart picked up when he saw it, a blackened metal box, torn apart.

Kakashi gulped and picked up the misshapen object. He held it under his nose but the smell confirmed his suspicions.

“Take this and memorize the smell”, he instructed, “every shinobi who fought Iwa during the third war knows that smell and knows to run when he smells it. It’s a special explosive powder, a lot stronger than our explosive tags. Iwa was very fond of blowing things up, Konoha ninja especially. Even now Konoha isn’t able to recreate the substance, it's one of Iwa's best-guarded secrets.”

Kakashi didn't elaborate and the three genins still didn't quite understand the implications. Kakashi grimaced and went on:

“It means that it's very unlikely that random bandits had access to it, only high-ranking Iwa chunins or jonins could be in possession of such a weapon. In other words, it seemed more and more evident that Iwa was involved in this so-called bandit attack. That, in turn, means that that to accomplish your mission and rescue your client you'd have to go against Iwa.”

The genin now had an identical frown on their face and Sakura turned a questioning gaze at her sensei.

“So brats, our mission officially went to shit.”

They had come to the conclusion that immediately they could nothing about the kidnapping of their client by Iwa-nin. Kakashi had half a mind to just head back to Konoha because he was unwilling to put the kids in a mission with potential inter-nation confrontations but finally decided to at least get more information.

Kakashi decided to head to the small settlement of refugees close to the farm and took Sakura with him as she was the aptest at following social cues and act discreetly. They hadn’t taken their ninja clothes with them and with their still black dyed hair and dusty clothes they looked average enough.

Indeed, at first, they encountered no problems. People were noticing them, which couldn’t be avoided in such a small place, where everyone knew everyone, but the people seemed too tired or apathetic to muster up the energy to inquire about their identity...With one very loud and relatively annoying exception. While on their way back out of the city, they were suddenly accosted on all sides by a group of ten or so teenagers and children. Kakashi remained relaxed but stopped, putting on an air of wariness and he felt Sakura tense at his side.

One teenager stepped in front of the group and looked up at Kakashi angrily, not bothered in the least it seemed, that he was almost three heads taller than she was.

“My name is Oki. I am the boss of the children in this village and we are the one who keep an eye on everything. You were reported by my agent”, she made a gesture to the snot-nosed kid at her right side and another, tall and thin one at her left, “to act suspiciously in our village. Our village is in a state of emergency and as such we take suspicious activity very seriously. I hereby demand that you state your name and occupation in this place”.

...
Kakashi was happy that he could hide his amused expression behind his scarf, which replaced his mask. The girl certainly had spunk, golden eyes glittering and her dark-skinned arms crossed before her chest. She was no more than two or three years older than Sakura but seemed convinced she could incite respect and fear.

Sakura showed once more that she was good at social interactions by answering when the silence stretched.

“Eum… my name is Ami and this is Sukea. We’re from the east and we left after our village was attacked… by bandits. We couldn’t settle until now. People don’t take kindly to strangers, and even less to refugees without money.”

Kakashi approved of the tone. Uncertain, sad with only the barest note of disbelief which the girl could not quite hide in the face of their...surprising aggressors.

He’d hoped that this would conclude the incident but the girl looked at them with her eyes narrowed. People were gathering and seemed to defer to the girl. Indeed she did seem to wield some power in this town and while the theatrics were slightly ridiculous, Kakashi had to admit that the girl had good instincts to be so suspicious of them.

It took another half an hour of pourparler and a detailed rendition of their (fabricated) backstory before she brought them to a bare room, probably for cattle in the winter, and left them with only one “guard” in front of the door informing them she would inform them of their fate in the morning. It took them way less time to leave by jumping out through the opening high up in the wall and they quickly went back to the other two Konoha ninjas.

It was decided that from now on information gathering in the village would be entirely from the shadows and with no contact with the locals.

Kakashi shuddered at the thought of what would happen if Oki, the spunky young leader, and Naruto came into contact. They’d either fight to the death or ally themselves to take over Stone country.

The following, more discrete trips to the village revealed that the attacks had increased in frequency in the last few weeks. The people looked miserable and little effort seemed to be made in patching up the houses damaged in the last robbing.

The four decided to wait to witness the next attack on the village and see if they could gather anything by observing the attackers. Before that, they decided to hide and looked around the surroundings of the farm for a good hiding place that would let them keep an eye on the place, in case anyone came back. Their best lead apart from waiting for the ones who were responsible for the attack and the suspicious explosive was to find the person who might have lived with their client.

Thus they were left waiting and except for regular check-ups on the happenings inside the village they were left with a lot of time on their hand that Kakashi decided to use for training.
His charges finally possessed the skills he would have expected from a genin who graduated from the academy. He was honest enough to admit that his standards may be a little high. In concrete terms, it meant that they were all able to perfectly perform the most basic D-rank jutsus expected of ninjas: standard clones, small-scale shunshin, replacement technique, rope-evasion technique, and genjutsu-lifting technique. Moreover, they had finally mastered more difficult chakra manipulation which meant, of course, tree walking and water walking but also precise chakra direction inside the body and the ability to perform the most rudimentary jutsu without hand-signs.

Then in taijutsu, they were finally at a point where they could each hold their own efficiently. Sasuke had perfected all the basics and had begun to heighten his speed to such a point that he could become truly dangerous even though he still lacked the destructive raw power to do a lot of damage if he attacked bare-handed. He had also learned to incorporate clan-typical moves. Naruto still used very few techniques of the standard academy courses and at that point, Kakashi doubted he would ever really learn them. Instead, his style was wild and surprising. He was strong and able to jump high and quickly enough to circumvent attacks completely and at the same time he was resilient enough to take on attacks head-on. It made for an interesting mix. Sakura was the one who followed the standard academy forms the most closely however she had learned to compensate for her lacking endurance with her flexibility and had become very good at evading attacks even at a very close range. In addition to that her aim with shuriken was improving week after week.

genjutsu was clearly less advanced. Naruto was completely unable to produce them. His enormous chakra levels were in the way, moreover, he lacked the ability to visually perfect the planned illusion. Sasuke had learned two but he wasn't really taking to it despite being an Uchiha. Maybe it was an unconscious fear of them after his disastrous experience at the hands of his brother, maybe he just lacked the patience. Sakura was progressing: her repertoire consisted of five genjutsus, among them three C-ranks. She could become good but didn't seem entirely convinced it was her path.

Additionally, he had taught them battle strategy, basic hand-signs, and codes, traps, and seal-identification.

Now came the next step: elemental ninjutsu. Not all good ninja were using higher level ninjutsu. For example, only around half of all the jonin he knew were using ninjutsu as their main weapon but it was usual to at least try it out, his students could see for themselves if it worked for them. The first step was, of course, to see which chakra-nature they identified with. He was pretty sure that Sasuke like the absolute majority of Uchiha would be fire-nature but it was a fun experiment and would certainly excite his students.

He let slip that the next day they would try out something completely new and was met with excitement. They ate their meal that they took in the little nook they had discovered in a rocky groove a mile away from the village and where they hid their camp. Naruto was chatting away happily. Sakura was listening with a half-smile but seemed just as happy. Sasuke seemed to have been brought out of his dark mood by the perspective of learning something new and joined in in the discussion from time to time. They finally went to sleep, him on one side of the fire and Naruto and Sasuke on the other under a rocky spur and Sakura sitting above them, taking the first guard shift.

Naruto was the first to wake the next morning. He felt absolutely full of energy and excited about what they would do. In a lot of ways, his training with Kakashi despite the man's annoying quirks was a lot more effective for him than the academy had ever been. Long texts or lectures weren't compelling to him, they lacked practicality. Theoretical explanation never really made sense and he
was quick to dismiss them. But with his team, he was learning from the new experiences he was making every day. Sakura seemed surprised to see that he could be patient but he already knew that. He could wait for hours for a trap to go off!

He knew that but he felt gratified anyway when he demonstrated that he could learn too. He just had to be shown clearly. It didn't help him to know he had to use only a fifth of his chakra and direct it to the outer layer of his feet. He needed to feel it and then he would get it.

He didn't know if his sensei really understood that but at least he let him do his things and just showed him what he had to do and didn't try to prove to him why and how and so on.

Speaking of his sensei. The man was sitting against a rock and was looking away from him. He must have taken the last shift and had already boiled some water and heated the rest of the meal from yesterday. Naruto woke the other with a hard shove (Sasuke) and a gentle tap (Sakura) and they began to eat. They finished their meal in record time and before the sun had risen behind the outline of the mountains that constituted the western border of earth-country they were all standing on a flat area behind the large rocks looking expectantly at their sensei.

“So you know that a shinobi can have a variety of skills. You already saw genjutsu, ninjutsu and taijutsu, there are others still. Do you know some?”

“Iryo-jutsu, that's healing jutsus, shuriken-jutsu which can be seen as a subcategory of taijutsu and trap-setting.”, Sakura recited in the monotone voice that said she was quoting a book.

“There's kekkai genkais.” Sasuke quipped in.

Naruto tried to find an answer of his own and settled on the memory of the last guy who fought against Sasuke during the Chunin exams.

“There’s also the puppet-thing from Suna.”

Kakashi nodded.

“There are still several other but you got the gist of it. You see every high-level jonin will choose one of these specialties or combine several to make his very own style. You too will find the skills that work best with your abilities. Ninjutsu is one of the most popular choices and we’ll look at it more closely today, however, keep in mind that there are many other specialties. Most powerful jutsus are elemental jutsus which means that they create and manipulate one of the five elements of chakra: wind, earth, water, fire, and lightning.”

Kakashi went on an added some details about weaknesses of the elements and how they needed to consider their own and their opponent chakra nature before a fight. Naruto was trying to concentrate as best as possible on what was said but they were slowly losing him. Kakashi must have noticed because he went over it again. He accompanied his explanation with a short demonstration. Naruto couldn’t quite contain his excitement and cheered loudly and tried to ignore the vaguely annoyed looks from Sakura and Sasuke. He didn't like it when they made him feel like he was stupid.

“Ok, now we will try to find out which powers all of you have.”

Naruto felt a grin stretch his face. That sounded honestly really amazing. He had thought that the mission was a little bit boring but this was incredibly exciting.

Visions of him with different powers flitted through his head. Kakashi-sensei had said before the
chunin exam that he would be the protector of the team so first, he imagined earth-power, him making a gigantic wall appear, or maybe fire and he would do a fire-ball ten times as big as Sasuke's or wind and then he could fly or water and flooding all his enemies or lightning and, and...

He went back to paying attention when he saw Kakashi rummage through his pockets. He took out a small envelope with pieces of paper inside. Naruto felt intrigued but also a little bit scared. It wouldn't be a written test right?

Kakashi carefully shook the envelope and the content dropped on the ground. About ten little pieces of paper were scattered between them. Their teacher squatted down and took a piece. When he showed it to them it was strangely wrinkled. He put it next to another piece of paper and they could clearly see the difference. The paper he had touched seemed to have been crumpled carelessly.

“This paper is chakra sensitive. In contact with my chakra, it changed, in my case, it crumpled. It's the sign of lightning release.”

Immediately the jutsu that had killed Haku came to Naruto's mind. Blinding white energy and a high chirping sound. It had reminded him of lightning.

“Now, ladies first.”

Naruto looked curiously at Sakura.

“It broke off it little pieces sensei?”

“Congratulation that would be earth-release.” Sakura looked back down at the crumbled bits of paper with a contemplative look on her face. Kakashi turned to the Uchiha and pointed at another strip of paper on the ground.

“ Now your turn Sasuke...!”

“What a surprise Uchiha you have fire release.”

Naruto watched in awe as the piece burnt away. Sasuke nodded as if he too had expected that result. The blond, as it was his turn, immediately went for his own piece of paper and reached for one near his sensei's right leg. When he brought it up the paper was sliced in two.

Kakashi looked especially interested.

“Wind-release, kind of surprising it's usually genetic, well, there are exceptions…”

Naruto didn't really listen to him he was busy grinning and cheering. Wind-release just sounded so cool. Although he was honest enough with himself to know that whatever power he would have gotten he would have found it the absolute coolest.

They spent the next few hours training jutsu. They each got to choose one jutsu of their element. Naruto for once listened closely to his options and hesitated for quite some time but settled for Fūton: Toppa (Wind release: great breakthrough) which seemed pretty strong and overall interesting.

He struggled and his first attempts were completely ineffective. From the corner of his eye, he saw a small earthen wall appear on Sakura's first try and a fiery beam near Sasuke a few minutes later. Before it would have frustrated him but at this point, he was kind of used to failing at first and persevered.
In the next few days, they only warmed up quickly before concentrating on their jutsus while Kakashi was usually doing some spying in the village. Sasuke was struggling a little bit but his jutsu was a B-rank. After all his teammate had already trained with fire-release ninjutsu in the last few weeks and was now learning a more complex jutsu that involved an oily substance and produced fiery bullets which allowed for a more persistent attack. Naruto was finally able to emit the large wind barrage but while it was already strong he struggled with channeling it more precisely.

To his surprise and dismay, it was Sakura who seemed to have the most problems. Even after three days of training her earthen wall barely reached above her shoulders and seemed brittle. Also, she was left panting and tired after only three or four tries which he found puzzling.

He kind of wanted to help her because she often helped him but also felt awkward about it.

After seeing her try another time and failing to get her wall to rise higher than her hip and then seeing her plop down looking murderous he decided to head towards her.

He squatted down next to her and hesitated about how to put it.

“Euh, Sakura. Are you sure that you put enough chakra into it? You know if you use more chakra the wall will get taller and stronger.”

The gaze she leveled at him was frigid.

“Oh really?” She began with an overly sweet voice. “You think so Naruto, I never figured that it would work best with more chakra.”

She ended with a growl and even Naruto could easily read the cold sarcasm in her voice. It almost made him flinch back. He mumbled a sorry and was about to turn back but he felt Sakura's hand on his shoulder. He looked back and saw her expression soften and she sighed.

“Sorry Naruto, you only wanted to help. I'm just very frustrated right now. I guess I'm not used to struggling so much to learn something.”

Naruto grinned in response.

“Don't worry I'm like the master of struggling to learn something.”

Sasuke grinned too, but a little tiredly.

“It's just that I really can't manage it the way you two do it. Kakashi-sensei warned me. I just don't have as much chakra, ok. And that's not really something I can work hard to change. I can do some exercises but even when I grow up it will always be less chakra than most ninja.”

Naruto nodded and looked down. Well, he had never really thought about it that way. Sakura had always been the best at the academy so it had surprised him when he had realized around the time of the chunin-exam that, well, he had become stronger than her. She must have realized it too because since then she had worked twice as hard but this...When Naruto struggled he just stubbornly went on and trained until it worked but he could see how it wouldn’t solve Sakura’s chakra problem.

Another voice suddenly interrupted them.

“Stop moping around, you're wasting training time.”
They both looked up and saw Sasuke with both hands shoved into his pockets.

Sakura immediately looked away and she looked upset. She never liked to be caught in a moment of weakness by Sasuke. First Naruto thought it was still because the girl had that crush on the stupid Uchiha but he thought it was more because she wanted to be part of the team and Sasuke’s habit to dismiss anyone that he thought was weaker (and he certainly viewed Sakura that way) hurt her.

“It’s not like a lack of chakra is a good excuse to not become strong.”

Naruto squinted his eyes and tried to guess if the comment was an insult like the tone suggested or actually an encouragement in a roundabout, Sasuke-typical way.

Sakura had gotten up and was tense. She had a hurt and angry expression on her face. One that she had never directed at the Uchiha until now.

“Tss, what do you think, that every Jonin got a ton of chakra. It’s not like it never happened to an Uchiha to have low chakra reserves. He was still expected to become a Jonin or at the very least a Chunin. So yeah maybe you won’t become a Ninjutsu-specialist but you are stupid if you thought that was the most likely choice for you anyway.”

Sakura seemed to hesitate for a second but took a deep breath and looked back at them resolutely.

“You’re right. This probably doesn’t make a lot of sense. I’ll go to the village and look around a bit. It’s probably more useful. No Naruto, Sasuke is right and I need some time to think.”

Naruto finally accepted even if it made him sad to see Sakura so upset. Then he turned to his other teammate not sure if he should be angry or thankful. Honestly, he was surprised, the Uchiha had rarely talked so much.

The raven boy was already training again and Naruto suddenly had an idea.

“Hey, Sasuke. Do you want to try something?”

The boy looked up exasperated.

“Remember how sensei said that wind is weak against fire because it makes the fire stronger.”

Naruto put his hand around his mouth and opened his arms, mimicking his jutsu and some kind of explosion hoping to convey that adding his wind to Sasuke’s fire would make for a pretty amazing result.

Sasuke seemed to get it and there was an interested gleam in his eyes.

“You may be onto something, dead-last.”

Chapter End Notes

So I had a whole story planned for the orphans of the little town and their leader, Oki. There is a whole genre of books with kids running cities or towns and I quite like these kinds of books so I wanted to write something about this but honestly, rereading it I
realized it brought nothing to the plot. -sigh- Bye, bye beloved characters I invented, I
liked you well enough but I can't keep you here...

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!