The Bloody Oracle of Kiri

by CannibalisticApple

Summary

By the end of the Third Shinobi War, she gained a spot in most Bingo Books with various monikers attached to her name: “Poison Apple,” “Bloody Princess,” and “The Mad Butcher.” However, a small handful of Leaf ninja had another moniker for her: "The Bloody Oracle of Kiri".

Or: An SI/OC who's already got a screwed up moral compass and fits right in with the Bloody Mist.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Chapter 1

The first time Namikaze Minato saw her profile in a Bingo Book, he had only been mildly incredulous at the picture of a small girl.

No older than nine, she looked small and out of place among the countless jounin filling the pages, her bright green eyes still large on her chubby, slightly red face. If anything she looked more like a street urchin than a ninja, her muddy green-brown hair messy and in need of serious brushing. Not exactly an adorable little girl, but still obviously a child.

While plenty of children could be deadly prodigies—just look at Kakashi—this girl had earned her place on the page not for her skill, but by the company she kept.

The unnamed child never strayed far from the Seven Mist Swordsmen. If one saw her, they could guarantee at least one deadly swordsman to be nearby. Her presence on the battlefield signaled for weaker and injured ninja to flee, and for the strong and able to brace for an inevitable battle. Her entry gave almost no detail on her actual abilities, in part because the few survivors who'd recalled her presence had never seen her fight before the Swordsmen would appear.

Minato knew his upcoming deployment would place him near the last reported sightings of the Swordsmen, so he made specific note of her photo before moving on. As he skimmed over the entry on the next page Kushina hovered behind him, studying her picture with a keen eye. "Hey, Minato, keep an eye out for her," she ordered, and he glanced at her curiously. "Huh? Why?" She pursed her lips, her violet eyes considering.

"Just a hunch, I guess," she replied finally. He frowned at her unusually vague response but accepted her advice nonetheless, taking another look at the girl's entry as he contemplated just what about her could elicit any kind of gut feeling in his lover.

The first time Minato encountered the girl in person, he had been caught completely off-guard and mildly horrified.

A single girl with an umbrella of seaweed-like greenish-brown hair sat in the middle of a veritable battlefield hunched over a mangled torso, the land around her strewn with severed limbs and maimed corpses. Horrible, quiet groans reached his ears and he quickly realized to his sheer horror that most of the "corpses" were in fact alive, just left in varying states of dismemberment and injury that rendered them incapable of moving.

His attention snapped back to the girl, more alert and wary of the sole standing figure on the battlefield. This time he noticed the bluish-green glow coating her hands, her body rigid with intense concentration as she attempted to staunch the bleeding from the gory stump that once held a man's right arm. A medical ninja? Minato watched her with narrowed eyes. She seemed a bit young to really do anything, but he couldn't help but feel mildly impressed by her tenacity and grasp of the Mystical Healing Palm.

His thoughts were disturbed as he felt a hand clutch his ankle, and he snapped his gaze downwards only to freeze. A vaguely familiar man trembled on the ground next to him, his legs nothing more than stumps and his face streaked with blood, dirt and tears as he stared up at the blonde jounin. He didn't have a hitai-ate as far as Minato could see, but the familiar green flak jacket made his Konoha allegiance obvious.
"Minato," he rasped, coughing. "Th-that girl... sh-she's a monster... She has... p-poisons... We c-couldn't move..."

A harsh shudder ran down his spine at the words, his gaze raising to scan the other bloodied ninja littering the battlefield. Six in total, one other man with a Konoha vest and the rest in the colors of Iwa. "She did this?" he whispered, his stomach lurching. His gaze flickered back to the girl, and he froze when he found himself staring into a pair of bright, bright green eyes.

Only then did he recognize her face from that photo, and his hands clenched at his side as he watched her lift her hands from her "patient." Her bangs fell in her face like an obi with a dirty metal plate bearing four wavy lines. Kiri, he thought in disgust, gritting his teeth. While she might be young, she was still an enemy, and a potential threat. Pure curiosity shined in her eyes as she regarded him, and her mouth then opened in a small "o" as she pointed at him with a loud exclamation of surprise.

"Ah! You're... You're..." She trailed off, her face growing blank for a second as she frowned. "Um... I never actually got your name. Like, ever."

Minato didn't waver at her youthful voice, his hands reaching for his kunai pouch. "I see Kiri is living up to its reputation as the Bloody Mist," he remarked coolly. Her face clearly belonged to a child, she didn't even look as old as his students, and yet she'd managed to cause this much bloodshed, or at least participated in it. The child blinked at him, looking surprised.

"Huh? Oh, right, the graduation ceremony..." She trailed off, crossing her arms with a frown as she closed her eyes. "Um, I think that got done away with the year before I graduated. Um..." She trailed off and hummed, her eyes pinching tighter as she rocked her head side to side with a small frown. Her sheer lack of wariness around him caught Minato slightly by surprise; the girl seemed to be busy mulling over something despite him clearly being an enemy. Not one to waste an opportunity, he silently wrapped his fingers around a kunai and started to pull.

Just before he could pull his hand out of the pouch, the girl's eyes suddenly snapped open and she pounded a fist into her open hand triumphantly. "Ah! Right! I remember now! You're Arashi, right?"

Cue a near face-plant from Minato, the kunai clumsily sliding from his now-slack grip back into the pouch, but he barely paid it any mind. "What?" he sputtered, face twisting in confusion. "Where the heck did Arashi come from?" The girl blinked and frowned, tilting her head with that same thoughtful, almost puzzled look.

"...Am I mixing up fanon with canon again?" she mumbled to herself, and Minato blinked as she casually slipped two unfamiliar gibberish words into the sentence. Frowning, he shoved the thought away and decided he'd humored her long enough, and blurred into motion. The girl squeaked in surprise and quickly lurched away as he appeared behind her, narrowly avoiding an open-handed strike to the back of the neck. "Wh-what the hell!?"

Minato didn't reply, instead spinning and planting his foot into her stomach. The girl cried as she flew back, her body skidding and bouncing across the ground like a stone across water. Rolling into a crouch on the final skip, she clutched at her abdomen with a pained gasp, shakily raising her head to stare at him. Genuine shock registered on her face as if she didn't expect him to attack, but Minato just stared back stonily, retrieving a kunai from his pouch and lunging forward to finish the job.
However, just as he was about to land the killing blow, her expression shifted and a sad, resigned smile flashed across her face. The sudden change gave him pause and he froze with his kunai halting mere seconds from impaling her jugular, the tip of the blade pressing into her throat without puncturing the skin. Killing children had always been the worst part, and seeing so many complex emotions on a child's face always made his stomach lurch, always made him hesitate for just a few seconds.

"I... We're enemies, aren't we?" she asked, sounding as if she'd only just realized it. Tears began to prickle the corners of her eyes as she closed her eyelids, her sad smile still in place. At that moment she looked every bit the child she was, and the fact that a child from Kiri could show that sort of emotion shook him to the core. "I guess I forgot, since I'm used to great Fourth Hokage being one of the good guys."

Despite the fact this girl was an enemy and he should be actively killing her Minato instead stood in shock, his mouth opening and closing in a respectable impression of a fish as his cool momentarily ceased to exist."...Hokage?" he repeated dumbly. "What are you talking about?" At this her eyes popped open again, sincere surprise evident in the vivid apple-green orbs.

"...You haven't been...?" She trailed off, doing her own impression of a fish gasping for water. Then she leapt back with a loud squeak, her hands flying over her mouth. "Oh crap I just spoiled that didn't I, shitshitshit, please don't screw up the future..."

Her quiet self-rambling managed to reach Minato's highly-trained ears, and he stiffened at her words. Comprehension visibly sparked in his blue eyes as he stared at her, his earlier shock fading as his mind shifted from kill to capture and interrogate.

The kunai disappeared into his pouch only to be replaced by a three-pronged one which he immediately threw in her direction. Gasping, the girl quickly darted to the side as it zoomed past her head to embed in a boulder behind her, and Minato pulled on the seal wrapped around the handle and appeared next to it a moment later. He immediately lunged after the fleeing child, a spool of wire already in his hand in preparation to bind her.

However, just as he was about to make contact he abruptly tensed and activated the Hiraishin again to flash back to his original kunai, neatly avoiding the large sword that cleaved through the air where his neck had just been. He frowned as he saw a man with bar-like red stripes tattooed on his mouth standing between him and his quarry, hefting the giant meat cleaver-like blade over his shoulder.

The girl spun to watch the newcomer as she continued retreating, her eyes wide. "Juzo!" she cried out, and the man snorted.

"You're more trouble than you're worth," he growled, facing Minato with a stern scowl. "Sorry, Yellow Flash, but if I let you hurt the runt back here Ameyuri'll kill me in the afterlife."

Minato's mind raced as he shifted his position to something more defensive, quickly recognizing the man to be one of the Seven Shinobi Swordsmen of the Mist. Fighting even one would be difficult and messy, and while it would be more beneficial in the long run, right now he had other priorities. Eyes flicking back to the still-groaning forms of his fallen allies, he made his decision and quickly darted to their sides, grabbing them and disappearing in a yellow blur as he tugged on another nearby Hiraishin seal.

The last thing he heard before the seal teleported him away was the little girl casually quipping, "I guess you're not dying here then, huh Juzo?"
About a month later, when Minato got the latest updated Bingo Book, he was only mildly surprised to see her entry had been updated. The photo remained unchanged, but it now had a name:

Ringo Sute.

Minimum C-rank threat, known to heavily rely on poisons and her small size in her fighting style. A large amount of her skills still remained unknown, because she played support more than anything, but reports had started to trickle in from survivors who had faced her. And that was just the word to use—survivors. Those who faced her in battle usually ended up mangled, some kept alive and in pain by her immediate application of medical ninjutsu. Whether that could be seen as a mercy or a cruelty was up for debate, because he'd met her victims, and they spent nearly all their time in agony.

Minato's lips thinned as he read over the brief entry, his mind flashing back to his brief encounter. Everything about her had been unsettling, from her actually child-like demeanor to her legitimate surprise and sadness that he attacked her, but for some reason what stuck with him most were her words:

"I guess I forgot, since I'm used to great Fourth Hokage being one of the good guys."

"Fourth Hokage," he breathed to himself, his eyes narrowing as he stared at her photo. The notion of him becoming Hokage was almost alien. The Third had no intention of retiring before the war ended, and everyone knew he favored Orochimaru for the position. While he'd love the position, he doubted anyone else would expect him to be Hokage either. Hell, Kushina had better odds than him, what with being from an actually established clan and all. But that wasn't what really struck him as odd; it was the way she said it, the almost matter-of-fact casualness to her quip. No matter how he looked at it, he could only reach one conclusion:

She didn't know him as Namikaze Minato. She knew him only as the Fourth Hokage.

And he had no idea why.
Every story has a beginning. Sute's just starts a little differently.

Reincarnation, despite the various portrayals within fan fiction, did not automatically gift a newborn with adult intelligence.

Infant brains could not handle the complex processes of a fully mature mind, so a reincarnated infant would be the same as any other baby. They would not have instant memories of their previous lives, they would not be forced to spend years struggling with boredom as they waited for their bodies to mature enough to use. For that reason, she didn't remember any of the boring tedium of infancy, or even have the brain power to fully process her circumstances.

Her earliest memory in this life had her huddled in the nook of a tall tree hugging a giant, tattered book, the branches and thick foliage seeming to fold around and shield her as she watched shinobi slaughter each other in the distance.

Her next memory placed her directly onto that battlefield, carefully stepping around the mangled corpses littering the ground until she reached one that was relatively intact. She bent down and began rooting around the pouch tied to his leg, retrieving a single knife (kunai, not a knife, some voice corrected). Eying the kunai speculatively, her gaze slid to the body and she crawled over to him, rolling him over with great effort to expose his front.

Then she used the kunai to cut off his shirt, slicing through the front and the sleeves before rolling him back over to free the remainder of the fabric, and wrapped herself in the bloody garment like a makeshift blanket as she ran back to the cover of the trees.

That had been the first time she remembered looting a corpse, and no where near the last.

Those first few years were simplistic and minimal. She spent her days just wandering aimlessly, making her home in holes and trees and caves with her only consistent possession that giant, tattered tome nearly half her size. She didn't have an explanation for why she felt the need to lug it around despite always leaving her arms sore, it served no purpose. Then again, she didn't have an explanation for many of her actions back then.

Sometimes she'd come across new plants and instantly know to avoid them or that it would be safe to eat. More than once she knew exactly which ones to grind into paste and rub over cuts to avoid infection and speed up the healing process. When she found a spool of wire she knew to attach it to a stick, and to fashion a hook from a broken pin and use worms as bait to go fishing. She even knew to boil water to make it safe to drink—and on that note, she knew how to make a fire.

Even back then, she knew that she shouldn't be this capable on her own. She knew that knowledge had no logical reason to exist in her consciousness. She had been forced to fend for herself for as long as she could remember, starting when she was still a tiny toddler. With no parents or even anything close to a consistent adult figure in her life, she should have no way to understand how to care for herself—and even the fact she knew and understood that spoke of some strange
abnormality within her.

Perhaps most disturbing though, was how easily she adjusted to growing up in a series of veritable battlefields.

Blood and corpses littered her earliest memories, but it never really fazed her. Raiding bodies for supplies felt gross, but that stemmed more from hygiene concerns from touching rotting skin than *actual* discomfort. She'd take the clothes from their backs and wash them to wear whenever she outgrew her own, and would raid their bags for rations and tools to aid in her survival. She never gave them much thought.

*(Sometimes, she'd leave flowers around the bodies if they remained more than a day. She liked to pretend she was a forest fairy, banished from her forest home to wander the world and spying on the humans as they fought. Fairies couldn't talk to humans, so she could only go out after they died and leave some sort of tribute in their honor. She'd always move on though, because she couldn't stay around death forever or she'd be tainted.)*

Sometimes though, she discovered some of the "corpses" to still be alive.

As she'd approach them they'd open their mouths but could only wheeze or make wet gurgling noises, their bodies twitching and broken beyond repair. She never knew what to do when she came across those people. Being around them didn't particularly disturb her or scare her—in fact, she largely felt indifferent to their agony, though a tiny part felt just a tiny bit pitiful for their extended agony. Killing them would *probably* be merciful, but something about that left a bad taste in her mouth. More often than not she'd find herself just sitting next to those people, keeping them company until they passed on so they wouldn't die alone.

Every day went like that for probably three years, just a simple, bloody, solitary existence of wandering aimlessly with her only companionship the few dying people she'd find on the battlefields.

That woman had seemed no different.

Sprawled on her back amidst a litany of corpses, the auburn-haired woman was the only person on the field showing any signs of life, staring at the sky with half-lidded black eyes. Her breaths came out ragged and raspy, her limbs splayed limply outwards and her long hair fanned around her head to soak up the blood pooling beneath her. The woman barely turned her head when she approached, her bloodied lips tugging upwards into a sharp-toothed smirk.

"What's... this... a kid?" she rasped, each word slow and careful as if requiring a great deal of effort to utter. She just stared at the woman for a long moment before plopping onto the ground next to her, taking care to stay away from the pool of blood so it wouldn't soak into the ragged yukata she'd snatched off another corpse. The young girl reclined lazily and looked at the cloudy sky, humming thoughtfully.

"Bunny!" she chirped, offering the dying woman a bright smile as she pointed to one fluffy cloud. The woman's eyes creased with amusement, chuckling quietly, and her eyes lit up with delight. Normally near-corpses didn't respond other than stare at her blankly or ask to die. Encouraged by the positive reaction, she turned back to the sky and pointed to more clouds, loudly proclaiming each one's shape. "Duck! Puppy! Knife! Fishy! Cotton!"

"Cotton?" the woman repeated, her body shuddering with a small snicker. "All clouds... look like... cotton." The smaller girl turned to her and pouted, crossing her arms with a huff.
"Meanie," she grumbled, and the woman snickered again.

Hours passed like that, with her just pointing out any clouds that stood out while she waited for the woman to die. Sometimes the woman would chime in with her own observations, naming shapes the younger girl could only vaguely recognize when she looked at the clouds in question. As the sun slowly moved across the sky she felt a growing respect for the woman's vitality, as she continued to hold on longer than any other person she had ever found.

Eventually though, she found her gaze flickering to the setting sun, her lips pursing in a disappointed frown. She knew instinctively that staying in a battlefield after darkness would be dangerous, so with a heavy sigh she got to her feet and turned to the woman. "Sorry," she mumbled. "Need to go." Surprise flickered across the woman's face and she frowned.

"Ser..ious...ly?" she wheezed. "Come on... kid. Don't... go."

"I'm sorry," she repeated guiltily, and quickly left before the woman could respond.

The next day she ventured back to the battlefield only to find several of the corpses had vanished, including the woman's. Only pools of blood denoted their former presence, outlines of bodies that had once lain there staining the dirt. That happened sometimes, though she didn't really get why, so she just shrugged and went about her life, placing a single flower on the spot the woman had occupied before leaving.

Probably a month later she was scouring another battlefield when she saw the woman again. Honest surprise flickered across her face when she spied the familiar figure on the ground and she darted over, dropping to her knees next to it. Once again the woman laid in a pool of blood, though this time on her stomach, and she curiously poked her back.

Or at least, she tried.

Instead she found herself suddenly upside-down dangling from her feet, her eyes now level with the hems of a pair of loose-fitting black pants. Blinking in surprise, she bent her torso slightly to peer up at her captor and found the woman staring down at her. Black eyes flashed with surprise as the woman looked at her, her lips quirking up.

"Well, well, what do we have here?" she asked, mouth curving into a smirk that revealed sharp, jagged teeth. "Long time no see, kid. You got pretty far from the last place, huh?" The child's face scrunched up with concentration as she pondered her answer, before finally giving a small shrug.

"You live?" she questioned, and the woman's smirk faded for a moment and she studied the child. Then it returned with a sharper edge, her eyes glinting with amusement.

"You know, I think I like you kid. You got a name?"

"Nuh-uh," she hummed, shaking her head before flinching. "Put down?" Throughout the whole conversation the woman had continued to hold her upside-down by the ankles, and the constant flow of blood rushing to her head started to hurt.

"No name, huh?" The woman totally ignored the uncomfortable whine, rolling her neck as she thought it over. Then she nodded firmly and declared, "Sute."

"Sute?" the young girl repeated, blinking in surprise.

"Yeah. Foundling. Because I found you."
"Okay? Put down now?"

"Now why would I do that?" The woman flashed another toothy smirk and Sute shuddered as she saw mischief sparkle in her eyes, knowing instantly that it wouldn't bode well. "I just found you. I'm not letting you go that easily!"

With a quick wave of her arm she'd flung Sute over her shoulder and then took off running. The small girl squeaked in surprise before her hands flew over her mouth, her stomach churning violently as their surroundings blurred. The world continued to spin around her until they finally stopped, and the woman lazily tossed her to the ground. Sute yelped in surprise and staggered to her feet, groaning as she hugged her stomach.

As she struggled to readjust to the sudden stillness the woman called, "Hey guys, look! I found that cloud girl!"

"Cloud girl?" Freezing at the new voice, Sute slowly turned around to see six figures scattered around the clearing, which she quickly realized must be a campsite despite the lack of tents. A dead campfire sat in the center of the clearing, the charred wood still smoldering and smoking slightly, and they used a collection of logs and boulders as seats. One man, with a bizarre tattoo of red bar-like stripes over his jaw, huffed as he examined her. "Tch, she doesn't look like she's from Kumo to me."

"Stop joking around, Juzo," scolded another man, leering at the first with beady eyes from a rather puffy looking face. He had a slight orange tint to his skin, which matched his long and luxurious dark orange locks. "Ameyuri's talking about the brat she saw on the battlefield." One of the other figures blurred and suddenly a gangly giant of a man loomed in front of Sute, bending at the waist to study her more closely. She reflexively leaned back as his long straw-colored hair dangled in her face, her head tilting back to look at his white mask.

"So this is the cloud watcher, huh?" he questioned, his voice just as sleek and slimy as his appearance would suggest. "Doesn't look like much to me." As he spoke a flash of metal appeared at his neck, and he flickered backwards as the red-haired woman abruptly appeared between them, wielding two blades with one pointed his way.

"Don't even fucking think about touching her, Kushimaru," she growled. "This brat's way too interesting to kill off so soon."

As the pair stared each other down Sute's eyes flickered over the other surrounding figures. Absolutely none of them felt familiar whatsoever, and the only real conclusion she could reach was that most of them had intimidating builds and thus were probably dangerous. However, she did find two details of the scene jarringly familiar: a giant sword shaped like a meat cleaver by the guy with red bars on his face, and a similarly large object wrapped in bandages to the point of mummification sitting next to the orange-tinted guy with long orange hair.

As she stared at them images flashed through her mind, cartoon versions of those two swords wielded by people with drastically different faces, and all she could think was, Oh.

That was about when the memories finally started to trickle into her conscious awareness, of a world quite different from this one. Sute could not fully understand just what this sudden influx of memories meant just yet, but they allowed her to at least understand one thing: this was not her first life, and this was not her original world either.

(Later, when she would start to realize the full implications of her memories, she would deeply regret not watching more anime in her old life.)
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Sute makes a friend. Kisame is mildly traumatized.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the late update! In my defense, I had my wisdom teeth taken out on Thursday, and spent most of the weekend just recovering. Then yesterday (Sunday) was my birthday and got a Nintendo Switch!! Mostly out of pity for the recent surgery. So, yeah. Been a weird few days.

Anyways, remember how I said this might seem crack-ish at times? This chapter is what I meant. Yep. Enjoy!

Contrary to what one would expect of this sort of story, the Seven Swordsmen did not shower Sute with love and affection. The five-year-old did not grow on them and worm her way into their hearts during the two months between Ameyuri dragging her into their bloodthirsty band of warmongering shinobi, and their return to Kiri. Her presence did not teach them life-altering lessons on love and peace that led to profound changes and cause them to sprout some sort of magical sense of empathy. They did not all develop secret soft spots for the kid and go out of their way to protect her.

This is not said in denial, but instead as a simple, basic fact.

In fact, the main reason that Kushimaru and Jinpachi didn't slaughter her for kicks was because they didn't want to deal with Ameyuri nagging them about killing the brat. The rest of the Seven Shinobi Swordsmen did not possess any particular feelings towards the girl, and generally regarded her presence with ambivalence. As long as she didn't get in their way or expected them to feed her, they offered no objections to her presence.

Even Ameyuri, the one who'd dragged her into the mess, didn't go out of her way to care for Sute. The closest thing to concern she showed was when Sute insisted on retrieving that mysterious book she'd been lugging around for literally as long as she could remember. The kunoichi took one look at the tome's cover, and her face... changed. Became sharper somehow, almost grim. Lips pulling back in a frown, she silently took out a scroll and with a puff of smoke the tome disappeared, at which point she shoved the scroll into her pocket.

"Don't tell anyone about that," she growled, and Sute just stared at her before biting her lip and nodding.

As they continued their bloody campaign and she managed to keep up with them though, the Swordsmen admittedly grew a small, tiny degree of respect for the kid. They never went out of their ways to make her life easier or tried to keep her away from battle, but she managed to fend for herself fine. She possessed a survival instinct that rivaled that of most chuunin, able to take care of
finding and preparing her own meals, and her childhood on the battlefields seemed to give her a level of comfort with death that Kiri spent years hammering into students' heads in the academy.

Two months passed between when Sute first joined up with the Seven Shinobi Swordsmen and her subsequent arrival to Kirigakure. When the locals saw the dirt-covered girl tagging along with the infamous horde of bloodthirsty killers, they eyed the scrawny little five-year-old with varying degrees of curiosity and wariness. When Ringo Ameyuri then went to the Mizukage to claim legal guardianship of her, they looked at each other with shrugs and decided to just go with it.

Ameyuri held a great deal of respect as the sole kunoichi to join the Seven Shinobi Swordsmen. Anyone who knew her even a little bit knew she wouldn't randomly sprout maternal instincts towards some random orphan she found on a battlefield. No, if she brought a kid back from the front lines and inducted her into her own clan, that meant the kid had some serious potential which would only benefit the village.

Ringo Sute quickly proved this belief to be correct.

Ridiculously smart for her age, the tiny girl quickly absorbed every academic lesson imparted upon her, showing a bright and quick mind for problem solving. Her taijutsu skills became noticeable quite early, her style rough and a bit clumsy due to her small body and inexperience, but she had clear potential and an ability to adapt. They couldn't say anything about her ninjutsu ability since her chakra coils had yet to mature enough to actually use any, but she started practicing her control fairly young.

Most promising though, she showed no signs of the inhibitions about resorting to violence that most of her peers possessed.

Once, shortly after she first arrived in Kiri, a boy shoved her in a puddle of mud and teased her about her hair. "Look at her, she looks like a clump of seaweed!" he snorted, pointing and laughing as his peers erupted into raucous laughter. Chants of "Seaweed-hair, seaweed-hair" rose from the ring of children surrounding her, their faces twisted into cruel sneers and mocking smirks as they laughed at her.

The green-haired girl blinked slowly as she staggered to her feet, wiping mud from her eyes, and watched them a moment longer before she turned and quietly departed.

When Sute returned to her new home and knocked on the door, Ameyuri quickly opened it and took one look at her state before her features twisted in disgust. "Kid, I know you're probably used to getting dirty, but even Kiri's a bit more civilized than that," she declared flatly. Mud and dirt covered Sute heavily to the point that her recently purchased teal yukata appeared to be brown. The small girl just shrugged it off, uncaring of the dirt.

Rather than let the girl track mud into the house, Ameyuri doused Sute with a low-power water jutsu, essentially hosing her off before throwing a fluffy towel at the child to dry herself. "How'd you even get that dirty?"

"A boy pushed me in the mud and said my hair looked like seaweed," Sute replied as she began wiping herself off. "What should I do if he tries it again?"

"Give them hell," the ruthless kunoichi replied without a second thought.

"But what if I don't really care?" her charge asked with all the innocence of a five-year-old who grew up scavenging battlefields.
"Do it anyway," Ameyuri replied flatly.

The next day, Sute did just that.

Coincidentally, the next day also happened to be the day that Suikazan Fuguki decided to introduce Ameyuri's new ward to his subordinate and the most likely contender to inherit the Samehada after him, Hoshigaki Kisame.

The shark-like teenager had some misgivings about meeting the kid his teacher and his colleagues picked up on the front, since past experiences taught him that young children did not typically favor him. Which was a polite way of saying they screamed like banshees and dove for cover behind the nearest vaguely familiar adult. Yeah, he didn't really want to deal with another kid freaking out at him. He was nothing if not loyal though, so he dutifully went to Ringo Ameyuri's house.

About halfway there, he passed some kids running with panicked looks on their faces, which was... interesting, and roused his curiosity.

When he turned the corner a few seconds later, he stumbled upon a very interesting sight.

A young girl knelt by the feet of a boy shrieking on the ground in fear and agony, a bloody kunai discarded on the ground next to her. Her eyes flickered in Kisame's direction when he approached and her bright green eyes widened, and she quickly leaped to her feet and fled without a word. A little perturbed by the sight but not too much so since Kiri had a penchant for churning out violent children, Kisame continued onwards and paid the scene little mind other than a brief glance at the cowering boy, blood oozing through his fingers as he clutched his left foot with small sobs.

When he arrived at Ringo Ameyuri's house though, he found his teacher's colleague standing in the front yard speaking to the same scrawny little girl with green hair he'd just seen crouched over the other kid mere minutes earlier. "Oh, Kisame, there you are!" Ameyuri called with a sharp-toothed grin. "Great timing, Sute just got back!" The child in question turned to face him and their eyes locked, and Kisame noted her hands still had blood and she seemed to be holding something small and pink.

Blinking, her apple green eyes flickered first to him and then her hand, and then him again before finally she stepped towards him. Almost reverently she extended her hand with her palm facing up and presented the small, pink thing to him like an offering—

Wait, was that a toe?

Yes, the blue-skinned teenager silently confirmed in shock, that was indeed a tiny toe. Being offered to him. By a five-year-old girl.

Bloodthirsty killer in training or not, Kisame couldn't help but feel something horribly wrong about the blank look she had despite just giving him a severed toe. Not "blank" as in dull and lifeless, but "blank" as in childish and innocent, her eyes still just as bright as any other five-year-old. It clashed way too strongly with her bloody hands and if not for the fact he'd seen her hunched over that kid five minutes ago, he'd almost think she just found the toe. Which would still be mildly disturbing but not nearly as much.

She looked at him expectantly, and it occurred to him she might not be presenting it to him like an offering, but she might actually be doing just... that. Presenting it to him, as some kind of weird gift.

"...You shouldn't have," he said lamely, his usual sharky smirk replaced by a blend of
befuddlement and mild shock. He had never really gotten a gift before, let alone a severed toe. Still looked warm, too. Which... Kind of gross, actually.

"I didn't," Sute said, her bangs falling into her face as she tilted her head. "He made fun of my hair and Ameyuri said I needed to get payback on him for it. I cut off his little toe because he doesn't really need it, and he can learn to get around without it if he trains enough."

"...Okay then," Kisame muttered awkwardly. There was clearly something very off about this girl, even he could recognize that. Suddenly he understood why she managed to last two months without getting killed by Kushimaru or Jinpachi.

As he reached out and gingerly took the... gift, he supposed, he started to pull back his hand only for her tiny fingers suddenly gripped his wrist. Kisame gave a small start, admittedly caught off guard. Bright green eyes bore into him as he stared at her, her face still blank, and then.

Then the weird kid smiled.

"Blue!" she cheered, rising onto her toes to latch onto his arm with both hands. Startled by the abrupt contact and cheer, Kisame stared at her dumbly as her grin grew bigger.

"Uh, Ameyuri?" he called, feeling a bit uneasy at the weird manic glee that seemed to sparkle in her eyes. "I think your kid's broken." The kunoichi gave a loud snort in reply, not even trying to stifle her snickers.

"You need to learn to take a compliment," she called, and Kisame whipped his head to stare at her in disbelief.

"Compliment?" he sputtered. "All she said was blue!"

"Ah, but she said it in a happy voice, right?" The shark-teen blinked before turning to the kid again and found Sute still grinning up at him, the weird manic glee in her eyes shining even brighter.

"Blue," she repeated in a delighted hiss, and before he could conjure a response the child leapt up and started climbing him. The teenager gave a startled yelp and tried to shake her off, having more than exceeded his normal quota of daily physical contact. Apparently the brat had monkey genetics though because she managed to cling onto him despite his best efforts, and she managed to scale his body before settling on his shoulders.

Strands of wavy muddy brown-green hair (which definitely did resemble strands of seaweed) dangled into his face as she leaned over him, and he reflexively tilted his head back to meet her gaze. Her face had that same blank innocence it had earlier, her features slightly somber as she reached out a tiny hand and patted his hair.

"Shark-nii-san," she declared solemnly.

Kisame's brain shut down for about five seconds as he processed the latest insanity to leave her mouth.

"...Ameyuri?" he called, his voice cracking as just a hint of panic seeped through. "Uh... help?"

Her only response was raucous laughter.

Kisame's skin grew two shades paler as he stared at the innocently smiling Sute, his brain struggling to process his current predicament. What the hell. What the actual freaking hell. Children should not smile so cute and innocently, especially kids picked up from freaking
"Onward, Shark-nii-san!" Sute declared eagerly, her legs kicking outwards in excitement as she wrapped her arms around the top of his head in a tight hug. That day, Hoshigaki Kisame learned that young children who didn't fear his shark-like appearance did exist, and he sincerely wished that she didn't.

Later that night, Sute sat in her bedroom with a small notebook, scribbling in a familiar childish scrawl that would look like gibberish to anyone else. No one could read English in this world after all, as far as she could tell the language didn't exist.

_Hoshigaki Kisame. Current Age: 12? 13? (Very tall, hard to tell)_

_Status: Genin? Already connected to Seven Swordsmen, but no Samehada yet._

_Surprisingly kind and a bit nervous. Disembodied toes make him very uncomfortable. Further observation needed._

She doodled cat heads and flowers in the corner of the page, drawing looping arrows to connect them to random words. Running into Kisame had been outside her expectations and plans, not that she really had any plans yet. But she at least knew the man was future Akatsuki, which meant he'd be incredibly strong. Her notes on the man were bare-bones at best, it had been years since she'd read the Naruto series in her last life, but seeing him had jarred some memories and facts. Blue shark-like men tended to be pretty distinct after all. Humming in thought, she jotted down one more sentence:

_May be able to befriend before his defection._

She underlined it and then capped her pen and dropped the notebook onto her bedside table, before reaching to turn off the lamp. As darkness fell over the room she laid her head on her pillow, her mouth curving into a grim smile. She knew this world was harsh, and she already knew that she in particular would be a prime target for many forces. She had spent five years doing basically nothing before the memories trickled in, and she couldn't afford to sit by idly and let her knowledge of the world fade.

Sute snorted in faint amusement as her eyes slid shut, a certain person's words echoing in the back of her head:

"This world has a lot of bad people in it who would want to hurt you. You're a little girl, so they'll go after you more. I want you to be able to defend yourself, no matter what."

Funny how those words would apply to both this life and the last.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Who wants to spend 15 chapters covering a detailed account of academy life when you can condense 2-3 years into one chapter?

Chapter Notes

**WARNING!** This chapter opens with some disturbing scenery, specifically references to date rape drugs. Feel free to skip to the end of the italics if you're uncomfortable with that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*She’d been seventeen the first time a boy slipped a drug into her drink at a party.*

The hungry look in his eyes made his intentions perfectly clear as he took her upstairs to one of the bedrooms. He’d moved fast after closing the door, trying to pin her to the bed with her hands above her head. She was seventeen and on the smaller side of average, not petite but definitely not the type of girl one would expect to be able to fight off a larger man. He had a savage grin as he leered at her, an almost manic glee as he started unbuckling his pants.

*He didn’t expect her to rocket her head forward and bite off his nose.*

He also didn’t expect her to then headbutt the still bleeding hole where the cartilage still barely clung to his face, her skull colliding with raw, exposed muscle and making him screech in pain.

When the other party guests came running they found her looming over a boy with a bloody face and a frantic, wild look in her eyes. They never suspected that fear in her eyes to be only marginally genuine, and the tears of anxiety she shed to be the product of countless hours of practice for just this sort of situation. And they would never know she had lured him by pretending to be drugged, and that she’d switched her drink with the other girl they found unconscious downstairs.

*She had learned to be savage, to always be on guard and take advantage of her seemingly weak appearance. She was seventeen and on the smaller side of average, the type of girl predators loved, and she had no qualms taking them down as painfully and brutally as possible.*

When Ameyuri first enrolled Sute in the academy, the girl had been easily the smallest member in her class. She mixed pieces of various martial arts styles into her own unique blend, throwing off her opponents by switching mid-spar from a strong uppercut to the jaw to a roundhouse kick to the stomach. She quickly gained a reputation for being absolutely savage in spars, but her body still lacked a lot of physical strength. Bigger kids could easily overpower her if they made sure to keep out of range of her teeth, and she didn't have the muscle definition she had in her previous life to back up her hits. It would take time for her to catch up to her peers in terms of physical ability.
Weapons proved a little trickier. She had plenty of experience with knives and scalpels in non-combat settings, but that was it. Kunai and shuriken took some time to get used to handling, as did senbon. In her old life, she'd been taught to hold weapons close and never discard them. In this one, she was told to throw them at enemies first and then resort to close combat.

Swords seemed like the natural compromise, especially since she'd been adopted by one of the Seven Shinobi Swordsmen, which was why Ameyuri gave her a wooden one to practice kenjutsu.

Three sessions later, Ameyuri took back the sword and declared Sute had no aptitude for kenjutsu and she should focus on other fields.

People figured out early on Sute would not be a weapons mistress.

Academically though?

\textit{Ringo Sute might be one of the most terrifying geniuses Kiri had ever seen.}

It first became clear when a trip to the school nurse early in her first year ended with her taking a book on medical ninjutsu home, and she quickly devoured every book she could find on the subject. While she couldn't understand them clearly due to the complex terminology involved, or actually practice any of the techniques outside of basic chakra control exercises due to her age and developing coils, she \textit{did} take extensive notes on the diagrams of human anatomy that gave her an even larger edge in fights. And also outside of fights.

Actually, her knowledge of human anatomy was downright disturbing. The first time she asked to shadow a medical ninja at the hospital they'd humored her because they needed any medics they could get in a village as stab-happy and violent as Kiri. But by the end of the first month, they had deemed her absolutely abnormal and had no idea how to classify her.

Most kids, upon seeing human intestines for the first time, tend to freak out a bit. Vomit is a common reaction, either instant or delayed a few minutes until after the shock wears off. On occasion, some may also find it "cool" and "fascinating," which was a surefire sign of a budding psychopath. Given it was Kiri, they usually tried to cultivate that sort of mentality over the opposing horror.

But Sute just looked at the poor man's innards with a look of clinical detachment, watched the doctors stuff them back in and sew him up, and then moved on to the next guy. No disgust, no horror, no pity, not even an ounce of sadistic glee showed on her face. Just the sort cold, clinical detachment usually found only in veteran medics who'd seen infinitely worse.

Battlefield brat or not, she should \textit{not} be that desensitized to some of the infected wounds found in the hospital. The only one who didn't find it surprising was Kisame, who just felt grateful she hadn't brought him any more souvenirs when she'd recount her \textit{latest} hospital trips to him during their far-too-common encounters.

However, her genius aptitude first \textit{really} became clear to Kiri as a whole when the academy started its botany section midway through the first year. Specifically, poisonous ones. Up until that point, Sute hadn't actually stood out that much outside of math classes, mainly because she was still rusty when it came to reading and writing Japanese. The girl tended to pick up kanji pretty fast, and she actually had pretty decent handwriting, but for the most part she typically lingered towards the center of the class rankings.

But when they opened the botany textbook for the first time, her eyes lit up with recognition at the photos.
"I remember this one!" she exclaimed to Ameyuri later that night, holding up the textbook to point at one photo. "It makes people act all weird and woozy!" Ameyuri arched an eyebrow as she took the book, recognizing the plant instantly.

"Yeah, this one's from Earth Country and the northern part of Grass," she confirmed lightly. "That's about where I nabbed you the second time."

"And the one a couple pages ahead too! The blue one that looks kinda like a fern!" Ameyuri dutifully flipped ahead and had to pause when she saw the plant in question, recognizing it after a few seconds of thought.

"Sute, when did you see that one?" Sute frowned and started counting on her fingers, before realizing she hadn't kept track of time back then and just shrugged.

"I dunno, I was really little."

Ameyuri just hummed and quietly returned the book without comment, which confused Sute until they started studying geography a few weeks later. At that point she cross-referenced the botany textbooks and realized that many of the plants she saw could be found in at least three countries, starting from the northern border of River, traversing the entirety of Rain country, and all the way to the northern tip of Grass. For a small toddler surviving purely on her own wits, she had covered a terrifying amount of ground in three different war-torn countries.

But that did not matter in the present. What did matter was that the Ringo family house had a greenhouse behind it. Ameyuri had it kept loosely maintained in honor of her cousin Akihiko, who had died just three months prior to her discovering Sute, but for the most part it was sitting there unused. According to rumors, her subsequent conversation with Ameyuri went like this:

"Ameyuri-san?"

"Yeah, kid?"

"Can I use the greenhouse to develop the most volatile and insidious poisons ever seen, and thus begin my reign of terror on this poor unsuspecting village of innocent bloodthirsty mercenaries?"

"Sure, knock yourself out."

Obviously, the exact wording of the exchange had been embellished by rumors, but the result remained the same either way. It took no effort to convince the kunoichi to give the tiny green-haired girl access to a fully functional greenhouse, and only slightly more effort to convince some of Ameyuri's colleagues to bring back foreign plants to stock it. Stuffing a plant into a storage scroll took almost no time or effort, so most of them didn't see a reason to outright refuse and even found the request vaguely amusing.

Then someone gave Sute a book on poison and paralytics, and she leapt upon the subject with an eager energy that admittedly terrified some of the adults around her.

At least a few of her acquaintances felt a sudden sense of mortal peril when she trudged into the mountains surrounding Kiri over a long weekend and returned with some very specific plants to begin her experiments. Ameyuri at least had the foresight to request the Mizukage to have his forces test her concoctions on war criminals and prisoners, rather than risk Sute testing it on one of their own agents.

Her success wasn't instant. The recipes she'd acquired called for very precise measurements of the ingredients, meaning she had a lot of room for error. Her progress developed gradually enough that
it largely escaped notice until one day an observer compared six-month old notes and realized with a start that her potions had gone from failing to leaving the victim with uncontrollable muscle spasms in their arms and a temporary loss of consciousness. For an adult, that level of improvement would be disappointing.

For a six-year-old child who’d never made poisons before, the growth rate was exponential. And it just kept growing from there.

By the end of her first year it was clear that Sute would be in her own class once she got older. Poisons and medicine seemed to be her two passions, a natural and obvious combination, but nonetheless incredibly terrifying. Combined with her desensitization to murder and bloodshed due to her history growing up on battlefields, she showed a gruesome sort of promise that only Kiri could appreciate.

Throughout it all Sute retained that same innocent childish light in her eyes, her young naiveté apparently paradoxically intact even as she suggested slicing into someone's appendix one cut at a time during torture sessions since, hey, appendixes weren't vital organs. Some people looked at her and called her a psychopath or sadist. Others looked at her and declared her to be a living paradox because no one could talk about that kind of stuff with such bubbly and pure, childish smiles.

Overall, Sute fit right in with the Bloody Mist, and most kids (and adults) quickly learned to stay on her good side.

But she did have her eccentricities. Specifically, her constant references to "old memories."

From almost day one in Kiri, Sute made casual remarks hinting to memories that somehow provided a limited insight to the future. Small comments, like her continual bland greeting to Juzo about his continued living status, or lightly teasing Zabuza about possessing a soft spot for orphans with kekkei genkai, or sometimes calling the Second Mizukage's three-year-old grandnephew, Hozuki Mangetsu, "Suigetsu" instead.

Those around her paid the comments little mind, treating it as a random eccentricity in the same vein as her propensity to make traps. Guests to the Ringo household were particularly aware of that hobby, if only because of the framed photo in the tearoom of a six-year-old Sute grinning at the camera as a scowling Zabuza laid on the ground hog-tied with his hands and legs behind his back, his face promising murder.

As she grew older though, one "old memory" caused Sute to grow increasingly worried. Concern filled her eyes whenever she'd look at Ameyuri, frowning whenever she noted the kunoichi falter mid-step or so much as cough. At the same time she glared at the woman's apprentice, Kurosaki Raiga, with increasing heat until Ameyuri stopped inviting him over when Sute was around. The girl's nervous fidgeting only became more frequent though as her gaze roved over her guardian's increasingly tired face, clearly wanting to say something and struggling to keep her mouth closed.

Medical textbooks soon filled the child's room, pulled from every shelf in Kiri she could find. Countless hours passed with her scouring the pages with multiple dictionaries at hand to help translate the more technical jargon, scribbling her findings in no less than five notebooks. Bags soon shaded the girl's eyes from a lack of sleep and she found her attention drifting at class, much to her teachers' annoyances.

Then one day Ameyuri returned home without her beloved twin blades Kiba in sight, and the girl's panic hit new levels.

"Where are they?" she demanded, her face twisted into a stubborn glare. "You never leave them
"I passed them to Raiga," Ameyuri replied, and Sute physically recoiled, recognizing the implications of that statement.

(From the day Sute met Ameyuri's apprentice Kurosuki Raiga, it was obvious she did not like him.

The young girl had always been distant with him, calling him a "crybaby" and "really creepy" while glaring at him warily before skittering away. He never pushed the issue, just ignored her for the most part, but anyone who saw them in the same room could tell she did not trust him. Most people never bothered to delve into the reason for her dislike of the man, just accepting her comments about him being creepy as reason enough. But that had nothing to do with her avoidance of him.

No, she hated him because she remembered him.

Snapshots of a cartoon man with green hair and thinly-drawn lips clad in a black cloak haunted her dreams, tears streaming down his face as he mourned a man screaming inside a casket even as dirt piled atop the wooden lid. Even hazier flashes had him wielding matching blades with ghosts of lightning lingering in her subconscious, his face contorted in a crazed scream as he raged in battle.

And not once did she see Ameyuri wielding those blades.

Shortly after meeting the morose man, she realized that his mere existence translated to a death sentence for the kunoichi who had given Sute her name. She wouldn't go as far as to say she thought of Ameyuri as her mother, but she was the closest thing Sute ever had to the concept, in this life or the last, and she did care about her.

So she hated Raiga, she despised him with her entire being. She loathed everything he stood for, even without those memories of him burying hapless civilian villagers in mockeries of funerals. She wanted him to die a slow and painful death for daring to exist in a world where Ameyuri clearly would not.

But hating him couldn't change anything, wouldn't stop the universe from taking its course. And that just made Sute hate him even more.)

Ringo Ameyuri did not meet her end on the battlefield in a gory display of strength and valor against a giant horde of enemies, but instead in a hospital bed in Kiri.

Illness felled the ruthless kunoichi, her body failing her over a period of several months. Doctors knew exactly what ailed her, and because of that they also knew no cure existed for her condition. They could only watch helplessly as she withered away day by day, doing their best to make her final moments comfortable.

Sute dutifully visited her guardian whenever she could, spending nearly all her free time in the hospital either in her room or shadowing the doctors on their rounds. During one of those visits where she couldn't stay the night, Ameyuri imparted some final words to the young girl. "Never... show your bare back to anyone," she whispered, her voice barely more than a rasp. Sute's eyes scrunched together in confusion, her head tilting.

"My... bare back?" she repeated. "Why's that so special?"
"Just... trust me. You'll... understand, when... you're old...er..." Ameyuri offered a weak smile, and then broke into a coughing fit that lasted several minutes. When it finally subsided she whispered, voice even weaker than before, "And... in my bedroom... the back of... the closet..." She coughed again, but forced herself to continue, "Don't... show... anyone."

Her orders made Sute's face scrunch up even more, biting her lip as Ameyuri broke into yet another coughing fit. She wondered what was in the back of the closet, but did not voice the question and instead forced herself to nod when the coughing fit ended and solemnly vowed, "I promise."

"And... one more thing." This time her voice barely rose above a breath, but not from coughing but instead intentionally trying to be quiet. Sute frowned and leaned forward, her ear hovering just above Ameyuri's mouth so the woman could whisper without being heard. Her breath tickled her ear, her words only audible due to the extreme proximity:

"I know what you do in the greenhouse. Don't show anyone, ever."

A chill ran down Sute's spine, and she quietly pulled away and sat back down, her face a perfectly smooth and blank mask. "I won't." Even as she spoke her hands clenched into fists at her sides, her eyes sparking with steely determination.

Ameyuri just smirked, her lips pulling back to flash sharp, jagged teeth. "Good luck, kid."

Ameyuri ultimately passed away towards the middle of Sute's third year in the academy. As she had passed away inside Kiri the village could hold a proper funeral for her, making her one of the few shinobi to actually have one during the war. Her reputation and contributions led to a sizable number of her peers attending, including a brief appearance from the Third Mizukage who paid his respects before returning to his busy work. Of the Seven Shinobi Swordsmen, only Juzo, Fuguki and her successor Kurosuki Raiga attended, the others currently deployed on the front lines.

As the ceremony unfolded, seven-year-old Ringo Sute seemed particularly tiny surrounded by the empty seats reserved for the family of the deceased, the rest of the Ringo clan dead well before she arrived in Kiri. Murmurs of sympathy rose among some of the attendees, but most of them paid her little mind. If the death of Ameyuri broke her, then she had no place in Kiri.

Surprisingly, when the service ended and people started to disperse, Kisame approached her. "Oi, brat, you gonna be okay?" he asked, and she looked up at him with those innocent apple-green eyes that still seemed ridiculously pure and bright, her head tilting as her mouth tugged into a thoughtful frown.

"I think so," she decided after a few moments. "I kinda figured Ameyuri would die, I thought I might have more time though."

"You figured?" he asked, his eyebrows raising as he dropped into the seat next to her. "You mean beside the fact she was sick?" Sute bobbed her head with an affirmative hum, and Kisame contemplated her for a few seconds before nodding. "Let me guess, your old memories?" Another nod, and she swung her legs as she twisted in her chair to peer at the crowd behind them.

"I remember Raiga-san, but never Ameyuri," she explained, scanning the crowd for the man in question. "I can't really remember it all that well, but I remember he called himself one of the Seven Swordsmen and he had Kiba."

Kisame looked thoughtful at this, his face a bit more serious than usual. "You're actually serious, aren't you?" he asked, and she shrugged.
"I'm always serious," she replied with a childishly innocent look, and he repressed an instinctive shudder. Yep, weird kid.

That night when the funeral ended, Sute returned home to an empty house and went straight to Ameyuri's room. Keeping in mind her guardian's dying orders to raid her bedroom closet, Sute had dutifully scrounged through it and discovered a storage scroll. She recognized it almost instantly as the scroll Ameyuri had used to store that mysterious book which she had once carted through three different countries.

A rush of memories flooded her as she touched the scroll, a bittersweet nostalgia of days where she pretended to be a forest fairy while flitting about the battlefield. Holding it gingerly, she silently carried it to her room and crawled into her bed, hugging the rolled-up parchment to her chest like a teddy bear.

Nestled in the warm layers of blankets in her plush bed, the young girl could not help but feel more alone than she ever did on the battlefields.

The next morning she stuffed the scroll under her bed and went to the academy, knowing she wouldn't open it for years to come.

Ameyuri's passing saddened Sute, but she did not languish over it. Her studies at the academy continued unhindered, and if anything she got even more dedicated to it, shutting herself away in the greenhouse behind the Ringo family home to work on her poisons. She got one of the medics to finally teach her the Mystical Healing Palm, and had already learned to heal light wounds by her unofficial eighth birthday.

When the year ended, the third Mizukage permitted her to graduate early. She still had much to learn, but everyone agreed at this point she needed more physical conditioning than anything, and they needed all the aid on the battlefield she could get. At the very least, her experiments with poison could be incredibly useful.

Thus at the tender age of eight Sute found herself sent to the battlefields once more, this time fighting on the front lines and carving her name into history.

Chapter End Notes

And so ends Sute's academy years! This chapter was a challenge to write, since I don't want her to seem TOO overpowered or smart. I have some specific goals for her, so it's tricky trying to keep her balanced. But here we can get a real taste for her personality and a few hints about her original history. I feel kinda sad killing off Ameyuri so soon, but she did die well before canon, and I don't want to spend 15 chapters on Sute's childhood. I wonder if anyone picked up on the hints I've been giving. Next time, we move on to war!
War, part one!

At eight, Sute was easily one of the younger people on the front lines, and definitely the youngest member of her platoon.

Sute did not know how typical her experience was for Mist genin, but she had no formal team with a jounin sensei and a couple of other genin like canon Konoha. Instead she got slotted into one of the smaller platoons which had been tied to the Seven Swordsmen as support, and sent straight to the front lines. The closest thing she got to a regular sensei was probably a blue-haired guy with an eyepatch named Ao.

Ao was gruffer than some of their comrades, and he was a classic example of the Bloody Mist mindset, often complaining about coddling children too much. He and Sute got along well enough though because of their shared knowledge of human anatomy. After acknowledging she had a pretty good understanding of vital points (and also some less than vital but still freaking painful), he decided to teach her to throw senbon.

"This is simple," he told her gruffly. "This is one of the most basic weapons to use, and you have the anatomical knowledge to back it up. So why are you failing?" The training dummy he'd set up had been littered with senbon, but they had largely missed the marked vital points. And in some cases, the dummy in general. She did manage to skewer a bird though, purely on luck, so at least they'd get an actual dinner out of it.

"They're too light," Sute mumbled, her cheeks puffing out as she crossed her arms. "Not my fault I want to throw them like knives." Ao scoffed, crossing his arms with a stern frown.

"Don't use that excuse. I've seen you throw kunai, you use the wrong technique for that, too."

"Throwing away weapons feels stupid though!" she protested. "You use weapons to boost your fighting ability! It's like you're leaving yourself unarmed!"

"If you have good aim, you won't need to be armed because your opponent will be dead."

"But if you miss or they dodge it won't matter! I'm totally fine with just a combat knife!" Rather than respond to the childish outburst, Ao stalked over to her and lifted her by the scruff of her shirt,
"Brat, right now you're tiny and weak," he growled lowly. "You might be vicious and able to tear off people's toes, but if you fight someone bigger in a close range fight, you're shit out of luck. Combat knives have too short a range if you don't throw them, your best bet is to hit them with poisoned kunai or senbon. I've seen the poisons you make, half the platoon uses them. Just a nick with those should take them out. Right now, you're wasting them."

He dropped her and she landed with a small 'oof,' scowling up at him as she sat up and rubbed her sore side. He met her gaze with a stony one-eyed blue stare of his own, folding his arms over his chest as he peered down at her. "Pluck out those senbon and start over. You're not eating until you can hit three vital points."

 Needless to say, they had a lot of arguments, and he was the main reason she didn't actually join any fights until a month into her deployment.

As her unit was technically tied to the Seven Swordsmen as support, Sute also spent a good amount of time with them. Sort of.

Most of them still didn't particularly care for her so she didn't interact with them too much, but they mostly tolerated her presence. Mostly. She quickly figured out that Kushimaru and Jinpachi would probably kill her at a moment's notice, and she still avoided Raiga like the plague. Aside from that, they didn't really care that she spent most of her time around them and their apprentices during downtime. She usually just pestered Juzo since he seemed to be the most laidback outside of battle and thus least likely to maim her, along with their apprentices.

Actually, about half the motivation for not murdering her came from the amusement those interactions provided.

"Oh, you're still alive," the eight-year-old greeted Juzo when he returned from one scouting expedition, before turning her attention back to the bingo book she'd scrounged from a corpse. Nearby his own apprentice and Sute's appointed babysitter for the day, Momochi Zabuza, snorted in amusement but kept his focus on maintaining the giant water sphere floating in front of his extended hand.

Murderous intent rippled from Juzo in waves as he planted the Kubikiribocho in the ground, and to his satisfaction the girl gave a small flinch.

"Why do you always greet me like that?" he growled, and the child glanced at him briefly before quickly averting her eyes with a shrug.

"Because you're not in my old memories and Zabun has Kubokiricho?" she suggested meekly, raising the book a little closer to her face like a shield.

"Kubikiribocho," both swordsmen corrected automatically. Kids tended to flub long and complicated names like that, and if they got mad at every little kid who mispronounced the sword's name there wouldn't be any kids in Kiri.

Then they processed what she actually said, and Juzo scowled and grumbled under his breath while Zabuza allowed the water prison to collapse so he could turn to face the girl. "Really now?" he asked, flashing a jagged smirk. "Am I better than him?" Sute paused to seriously consider it before finally bobbing her head in affirmation, and then flinched when Juzo's murderous intent flared with a renewed vengeance.
Without a second thought the child fled from the scene with her book in hand, running as fast as her legs could carry her. Of course her speed couldn't compare to a fully trained shinobi, especially a jounin, but fortunately for her the proud swordsman merely scowled and crossed his arms as she made her exodus. "The hell does that even mean, old memories?" he grumbled. "Tch, stupid brat doesn't make any sense."

Zabuza just rolled his eyes as he returned to training, feeling just a bit smug at the exchange. His general irritation with her would soon return though.

"How did you graduate," Zabuza deadpanned, staring at the washed-out clone crumpled on the ground next to Sute. "I don't care how smart or deadly you are. This is one of the basic three jutsu. There's no way you should have graduated with that pathetic display." Sute just stared at the pathetic-looking copy of herself blankly for a moment before turning back to the irritated adolescent.

"Ameyuri-san taught me to make water clones," she informed him blandly.

"What. Why?"

"Because I can't make regular clones."

At this point Kushimaru, who had been doing warm-up stretches nearby with some of the others, couldn't help but interject. "So, just to double-check," he started, "you can perform the Mystical Healing Palm, and can use water clones, but you can't make normal clones?"

Sute shook her head, and the gangly giant of a Swordsman just cackled with laughter while Zabuza felt his eye twitch in annoyance.

However, the most memorable interaction came when the adults apparently decided that because Sute graduated so early, she likely missed some very vital lessons and that should be rectified as soon as possible.

"Okay Sute, what do you know about sex?"

Sute stared at Kisame blankly. Nearby Jinpachi and Kushimaru snorted in amusement while Zabuza just scoffed and continued his training katas. Why was Kisame asking her about sex? She was eight. She was not exactly the proper age to learn about seduction, and Kisame was definitely not suited for seduction missions. Only Mist kunoichi, well-paid courtesans and maybe Itachi or Anko would be turned on by that face.

Jinpachi and Kushimaru's presences were also questionable, since they obviously weren't planning to train and normally couldn't even stand in the same space without trying to murder each other, but... Not as weird or urgent as Kisame asking about sex.

"Why?" she deadpanned, and the teenager groaned.

"Well, you graduated before you could learn sex ed and someone needs to teach you, and I drew the short straw. So answer the question, I need to know what I'm working with."

Still not a satisfactory explanation as to why they felt the need to teach it to an eight-year-old, but, whatever. "I assume proper sex should not involve corpses or young children," she replied flatly, and heard Jinpachi outright guffaw at that.

"She's not wrong!" he called, sounding way too amused, and Kisame just scowled.
"I'm being serious here," he growled, and Sute tilted her head, strands of seaweed-like hair falling in her eyes.

"So am I," she replied blankly. "Consent requires two adult parties who can both agree to have sex. Drugs, alcohol, death and youth hinder one's ability to consent. Consciousness also must be taken into consideration, as a sleeping partner does not automatically mean they consent. As corpses are not conscious, they are obviously incapable of consent."

As she spoke Kushimaru and Jinpachi’s snickers gradually stopped and even Zabuza paused in his katas to shoot her an incredulous look. "...Holy shit, you're actually serious aren't you?" Kisame muttered in disbelief, and she shrugged.

"Yeah. Why?"

"You're, uh, a bit young to know about necrophilia."

"...What the hell did you see on those battlefields?" Zabuza asked, and she turned to flash him a sweet, childish smile.

"Nothing new, just a lot more bodies than my old memories." The men fell silent at that, while Sute just smiled at them in placid surprise. Judging by their faces, her last life might be a little more f*cked up than she realized. Which said a lot since even then she'd understood it to be pretty bad.

Outside the training shenanigans, Sute quickly gained a reputation for her brutality on the field.

Faced with large swaths of opponents several times her size, the small girl put all the knowledge she'd attained in Kiri to brutal use. More often than not she would appear with members of the Seven Shinobi Swordsmen, and she took advantage of gaps in the enemy's attention as they faced the seven more obvious threats to launch surprise attacks of her own.

Torn tendons, severed limbs, broken bones. Complex toxins to heighten the sense of pain, strong paralytics that left chuunin and genin unable to move for hours on end and even a few jounin with an uncomfortable numbness in their limbs.

Nearly every opponent who faced Sute in battle found themselves in a world of agony. Their surprise at being felled by the small girl was only equaled by the overwhelming suffering as they bled on the ground, helpless to do anything but wait either for rescue or someone to end their lives. Usually her allies would put them out of their misery, if only because they found their moaning annoying.

Those who survived encounters with her described Sute as a demon in the body of a child, a ruthless monster with no apparent sense of mercy. Her genius did not match the levels of Hatake Kakashi, who earned the rank of Chuunin on the battlefields at the young age of six, but she proved herself deadly nonetheless. Sute knew her strengths, so she struck fast and hard, weaving through the crowds and slicing through people's tendons with chakra-infused poisoned kunai to shred their muscles while simultaneously poisoning them. She counted on her allies to take care of the bigger opponents, acting more in support than a front-line fighter.

Between fighting she would practice her medical ninjutsu, using their fallen enemies as guinea pigs as she experimented with the limits of the Mystical Healing Palm. She had already memorized all she could from textbooks; she could only work on practical experience now, and working with the Swordsmen meant their side usually had fewer casualties for practice. The others typically let her hang back after easier fights to practice on enemies while moving on, since her improvement would...
only help them in the long run.

It was after she encountered the Yellow Flash during one such incident—shortly after her designated ninth birthday—that they finally ended her first deployment to send her back to Kiri.

"You're part of a small group, kid," Tsurugi told her gruffly as they headed back. He was a Hunter-nin with some sort of connections to Ao, and had been saddled with taking her back to Kiri since his own rotation was due to end soon anyway. "Not many people survive encounters with the Yellow Flash."

Sute just hummed, her mind still reeling with her first encounter with the future Fourth Hokage. Up to that point, she hadn't really considered the implications of her ending up in Kiri instead of Konoha, and now the thought had wormed its way into her head and wouldn't leave. She'd probably be a villain in the canon story, an enemy to all the characters she knew. That thought should probably distress her more, but...

"He teleported," she mumbled instead, her brow furrowing. "I remember there were seals on his kunai's handle. I didn't know fuinjutsu could be used like that, I thought they were just for scrolls and exploding tags."

"Fuinjutsu can do a lot of things," Tsurugi snorted. "Storage seals and exploding tags are just the beginning. Not many masters are left though." Sute hummed in thought, her mind racing. Fuinjutsu seemed different from the other skillsets shinobi used, more intellectual than physical, and her mind seemed to jump at the idea of learning something actually new and fresh. Medicine and poisons were fine and all, but she'd been in med school in her old life, so it was more like rehashing what she already knew, just with chakra added to the mix.

Fascinating as the idea was, they were at war though, and she had more immediate priorities than satisfying her yearning for new knowledge. Meeting the future Fourth Hokage just reminded her that she had to get stronger. Survival always came first—always.

Chapter End Notes

Part one of the war. Here we see the start of the rise of Sute's reputation, and her atypical experiences in war. As well as some more hints to how twisted her first life was. This chapter is just slightly wonky because originally I had Mangetsu there too, but then I realized that since he and Suigetsu are called the "Second Coming of the Demon" (as in Zabuza) it would be weird if he and Zabuza were in the same age bracket, so I wrote him out and replaced his lines with random Swordsmen. (Did I mention how hard it is to figure out the Kiri timeline? There's literally no information on Mangetsu, or even when Yagura comes into power.)

Anyways, I hope you enjoyed. Also, a big shout out to everyone at the March for Our Lives rallies today. I watched the DC rally on TV, and that was one of the most powerful things I've seen in a while. I don't usually like to bring politics into my stories, but I think all my US readers can agree that we're sick of seeing another mass shooting reported seemingly every month. This horrible phenomenon destroys entire lives, and while I doubt the US would ever get rid of guns entirely, we aren't doing nearly enough to limit and stop these tragedies. No matter what side you're on, today history is being made.
To quote Yolanda Renee King's chant: "We are going to be a great generation."
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Sute makes a friend, and then goes back to the war front. Canon is starting to take shape.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

After returning from her first deployment, Sute got a week of rest before being shoved into the hospital for the next three months. They wanted to keep her out of the field until the Yellow Flash had moved on to a different area, and her skills luckily made her just as useful in Kiri as on the front lines. She had no complaints about the new assignment, hospitals were familiar ground in both this life and her last, and it kept her busy. She also got to use an actual training ground between shifts, giving her plenty of time to hone her combat skills even if alone.

Surprisingly, she made a new friend during this time. It happened one day a bit after lunch, when a jounin came in with a boy around her age. The other apprentice medics cleared out pretty fast for some reason, leaving Sute to take on the case alone.

"So you're here for his arm?" she asked, thoroughly unimpressed with her colleagues' swift departure. The jounin nodded, pushing his student forward.

"He injured his arm during training today." The boy stumbled at the small shove and swiveled his hair to scowl at his teacher.

"It's fine!" he protested. Sute remained unimpressed.

"Take off your shirt and show me," she ordered, and the boy scowled before removing the gray-colored garment so she could look. He grimaced as he started to tug on the arm, and Sute blinked as she heard the telltale sound of flesh ripping, prompting her to surge forward and grab his wrist.

"Stop. What the hell kind of jutsu were you hit with?"

"A hot water jutsu," his teacher replied with a sigh. "He was supposed to dodge it, but he tried to block it with his arm instead."

"Yeah, well, I think you melted the fabric of his shirt to his skin," Sute informed him flatly. "Tone it down next time." Turning back to the boy, she looked him dead in the eye and he stiffened slightly. "I hope you have a high pain tolerance."

"What do you—GAH!" He screamed in alarm and pain as she suddenly ripped his sleeve off his arm, tearing off a slither of skin with it. As he grabbed the now-bleeding and skin-free section of exposed muscle he hissed through gritted teeth, "What the hell!?"

"Trust me, tearing it off suddenly is better than gradually," she said flatly, and sighed as she carefully pried his hand away from the exposed muscle. His chakra spiked in irritation, almost acidic and painful as it brushed against her, but she dutifully ignored it and smacked his head with her free hand. "Stop being a baby and let me look!"
The boy just stared at her bug-eyed but his volatile chakra simpered down and she ignored his
gawking to wave a glowing green hand over his arm. Even as she examined it she could feel his
skin and muscle knitting together on its own, the tears and rips mending swiftly and neatly. Her
fingers flexed as she nearly jolted in surprise, able to detect the movement of every single sinew,
but she steadily poured healing chakra into it to aid in speeding up the process.

"You heal fast," she commented once it finished, for lack of anything else to say. The boy had just
shrugged and looked away, scratching absently at the newly formed layer of skin.

The next time Sute saw him, her shift had just been about to end when he'd come in with a twisted
ankle. Which was a light way of describing his left foot being twisted over ninety degrees to the
right. "Don't you know how to fall properly?" she grumbled, silently cursing her colleagues for
suddenly clearing out again. "That's super basic."

"I was already falling and got hit by another blow from the opposite direction," he countered
sullenly. She just rolled her eyes and carefully grabbed his ankle, her grip loose and ginger as she
checked it.

"Is the fast healing a normal thing?" she asked even as minty-colored chakra began to seep from her
hands.

"Yeah, I guess. Why—GRAH!" He screeched as she proceeded to twist his ankle back into its
normal position, even his teacher wincing in sympathy at the loud crack. His chakra flared again,
this time even more violent than the last, and Sute winced but continued to swiftly pump healing
chakra into it. By the time she finished her palms hurt like hell and the boy just glared at her with
tears in the corners of his eyes, but she carefully rubbed her hands on her medical apron as she
looked at him.

"Stay off that ankle for the rest of the day. Tomorrow, meet me at training ground seven. If I'm
going to be the only one who'll actually heal you," which seemed likely if her colleagues' behavior
would follow the pattern she'd sensed, "then I am going to make sure you don't come in for
something as basic as falling wrong."

She gave him no time to respond before turning and stalking away, hollering at one of the superior
medics to let them know she was leaving. Only after she reached the safety of her home did she
break into a run and race into the greenhouse, cursing loudly as she swiftly threw together a
homemade ointment to rub on her burnt palms. Chakra burns were a new experience, and she
ended up having to sleep with her hands doused in ointment and mummified in bandages to soothe
the pain.

Surprisingly, the boy actually did show up the next day, along with his teacher. He still looked
sour but he dutifully joined her in basic taijutsu drills, which she took some glee in goading him
since normally she was the one on the receiving end of critique over bad form. After that they
started training together more often on her off-days from the hospital, meeting a couple times a
week until she finally got sent back to the front three months later. It hadn't been planned on her
end, but she enjoyed having someone actually in her age bracket to train with for once.

"Why aren't you going to the front?" she asked quizzically the day before her departure.

"I need to focus on training," he replied with a shrug, and she snorted and rolled her eyes.

"Hell yeah you do," she muttered, and ignored his glare as she continued, "But seriously, we're in
war and you're actually really good. It seems like a waste just holing you up in Kiri." He frowned
at that, averting his gaze.
"It's... complicated. I'll tell you when you get back. Maybe. Assuming you don't run into the Yellow Flash again." She snorted again at the jab to her so-far most infamous war story and whacked his shoulder playfully.

"I'm holding you to your word on that, Utakata."

Sute's second deployment proved just as eventful as the first, and also just as monotonous. During her absence one of the Swordsmen, Munashi Jinpachi, had died and gotten replaced by an apprentice. He'd had a particularly strange and violent camaraderie with Kuriarare Kushimaru, not quite friendship but some sort of strange bond forged over their severe blood lust intense even among the bloodthirsty forces of Kiri. His death left the group a bit quieter and the mood slightly more somber.

Her reaction?

"Congratulations on outliving him, Juzo," she greeted flatly. Kisame had barked out sharp laughter at the bland comment, while Kushimaru had snarled and lobbed several kunai her direction outnumbered only by the colorful threats he spewed at her.

It didn't take long to settle back into the usual routine. Wage bloody war on the battlefield, pester her allies during downtime, and heal the mangled bodies of their enemies to advance her medical skills. Sute developed an intense interest in studying the effects of her comrades' unique fighting styles, even performing occasional autopsies. During this time she had a few interesting encounters with Kushimaru, whose sword Nuibari could easily be one of the more macabre blades wielded by the Seven Shinobi Swordsmen.

"It sews people together?" she asked, staring at a twitching mass of tangled bodies from afar with a tilted head. "Have you ever used it to stitch wounds?"

"That," he hissed, stabbing the end of the long, thin blade into the ground next to her, "would be an insult to it. Nuibari is for battle, not healing."

"It's like Army of One," Sute mused, only flinching slightly at his spike in killing intent at her implied insult.

"Arm-ee of One?" he repeated, the foreign words just slightly clumsy on his tongue as he leaned towards her. "What the hell's that?"

"It's a story by Junji Ito. Except, I guess Junji Ito doesn't exist here," she added thoughtfully. "That's too bad. He was my favorite horror mangaka. Army of One was about large groups of people disappearing and then turning up later dead with their bodies stitched together. Like, at Christmas their bodies were hung across trees like garlands."

Pausing, she tilted her head at the tangled mass of bodies and mused in English, "Yeah, it's just like Nuibari. I wonder if Kishi read it and got inspired by it."

"The only word I understood out of that was Nuibari," Kushimaru informed her blandly.

"I know," she replied with a sweet smile, and then hopped to her feet. "Okay, it's not moving now, I'm gonna do some autopsies." As she scampered off to go examine the now-still mass of bodies to examine the corpses Juzo appeared next to Kushimaru, shaking his head.

"I told you, there's something wrong with that kid," he muttered.
"You're just bitter because you're the only one she insists will die," Kushimaru sneered, and had been sorely disappointed when Juzo's violent reaction did not nearly compare to the violent outbursts Jinpachi had. Still, he did keep Sute's comments about the "Army of One" thing in mind, and she had been delighted to direct him when he asked in an attempt to recreate some of the scenes she remembered. Even their peers found the sight of dozens of mostly nude corpses strewn about trees like macabre human garlands a bit disturbing for their tastes, but Kushimaru felt very satisfied by it.

After that, one more notable event occurred with the Seven Shinobi Swordsmen.

It has been closer to the war's end. Sute's part of the platoon had separated from the Swordsmen briefly, and she in particular had broken apart from the main group to hang back and try to heal one of their teammates, a man named Chukichi. He'd been one of their more valuable members, a sensor whose ability exceeded even that of Ao, and losing him would have been a serious blow. It was made even worse by the fact he'd fallen to some sudden illness of all things; at least a battle wound would give him some sort of honor.

In the end she'd barely managed to stabilize his condition long enough for a reserve unit to rush him back to Kiri for urgent aid. Later on she'd find out he ultimately died from the sudden illness, but in the meantime she just turned and started trekking after her platoon to regroup alone. It had been on her way there that she came across the Seven Shinobi Swordsmen and a small group of enemies.

Faced with the fearsome Seven Shinobi Swordsmen, the trio of Leaf ninja visibly felt the cold, prickling tingle of utter terror pricking the back of their necks, sweat beading down their faces. Escape would be impossible, and the trio of teenagers obviously knew they couldn't possibly hope to face all seven at once. As they exchanged wary glances, likely acknowledging they wouldn't survive, Sute tilted her head and squinted at them.

"...Ah." Her voice seemed to jolt them and they swiveled their heads in alarm to stare at her, their eyes wide as their gazes locked onto the Kiri insignia around her waist. Sute paid their stares barely any mind, instead focusing on two of them in particular. All three felt vaguely familiar, but she found the green sleeveless leotard and the bandana/sunglasses combo pulling at her memories, and she lifted a hand to point at them in turn.

"You're... Gai, and... Ebisu?"

The two boys in question grew tense, their eyes narrowing sharply and standing on even higher alert than before. So she'd been right. She cast a glance at the third boy, who had a long, hooded jacket and a senbon in his mouth, and he tensed with visible apprehension. He also felt extremely familiar, especially the senbon chewing bit, but she didn't know his name off the top of his head. Either way, the only thing that mattered was that she recognized them all, which meant one thing.

Humming in thought, Sute leaped around them to land amongst the swordsmen, tilting her head to look up at one of them perched atop a higher branch. "You might die today Juzo," she declared flatly, and half the swordsmen broke into sharp peals of laughter as she took off at a run. The man she addressed just scowled as he turned to face the Konoha chuunin, his eyes flashing murderously.

Less than two minutes later Sute nearly slipped off a branch as she felt a sudden surge of energy from the direction she'd just come, the overwhelming power obvious even with her minimally-developed sensory abilities. Grabbing the tree trunk to steady herself, she squeezed her eyes shut and ground her teeth as she tried to center herself, her nails digging into the bark before she set off again. When she finally reached the rest of their platoon they'd bombarded her with questions, but
she'd just shaken her head and curled up high in a tree.

Hours later, three familiar figures appeared at the camp, staggering through the trees with exhaustion and pain weighing upon their frames. "Hello, Juzo," she greeted quietly from her perch as he passed beneath her, and the Swordsman paused, his gaze slowly sliding up to her.

"I'm alive," he intoned flatly, his voice more hollow and tired than usual.

"There's still time," she responded blandly, but it came out quieter than every other jab she made. He'd said nothing, just continued to limp to the camp, and a minute later she jumped down to follow him to begin administering first aid.

The Seven Shinobi Swordsmen had been reduced to three, their unit felled by a lone man who had never risen above the rank of genin. When Sute heard the man's name for the first time she'd snorted just so slightly, amused by the horrible English pun hidden in "Maito Dai" and remembering the person who shared half that name. It seemed not even the ever-youthful Maito Gai was immune to having tragic backstories in this world.

There was one more person in her platoon worth noting, a woman with long black hair and dark eyes. She was beautiful by every definition of the word, her hair smooth and silky and her skin a perfect unblemished white. Whenever Sute stood next to her she felt frumpy and ugly, like a little swamp monster next to an angel. Her manner of speech tended to be brisk and short, not harsh but not really gentle either.

She didn't talk to people that much. She had a kekkei genkai, the hyoton—she could make ice form from thin air and manipulate it to her will. That alone made her stand out from the rest of the soldiers, their comrades eying her warily.

As the war raged and Kiri's imminent defeat became more apparent the tension in the platoon only rose, and a good chunk of it became directed at her. People, when faced with intense suffering, preferred to find someone to blame their suffering on, and blaming Konoha would be akin to admitting Leaf ninja were better than Mist ninja. No, shinobi had too much pride to admit weakness in any form.

So they blamed the people with kekkei genkai, who had been among their most active fighters. A sort of tension had always existed, with civilians fearing and shinobi envying their natural abilities, but as the war progressed it became more volatile. That woman happened to be the only one on their team with one.

It was subtle, but Sute could see the growing rift. No one approached her more than necessary, and she in turn kept her distance too. Even on the battlefield she remained separate, their comrades never once trying to aid her if she got overwhelmed. Sute watched from afar for the most part and said nothing. She never even learned the woman's name.

Towards the end of the war though, there was one battle when Sute got separated from the others. The woman had been the first to find her, and she'd found the young girl surrounded by a horde of stunned-looking Rock ninja just gaping at her, their bodies littered with large holes spilling blood at alarming rates. The woman took one look at the scene, and then silently flashed through a simple hand sequence and then sharp icicles erupted from the ground, impaling them through the pre-existing holes and adding some additional vital spots for a swift but brutal death.

When the rest of the team caught up, they took in the scene and said nothing, just dismissed it and continued to regard the woman warily.
A few days later Sute approached her, late at night when most of the others were asleep, a bingo book in hand. The woman had regarded her warily, and Sute just stopped at a safe distance and looked her dead in the eye.

"You should leave," she warned flatly, her voice soft to avoid carrying to the others. "The stigma's going to get worse. It won't be long until there's a genocide."

"How do you know?" the woman sneered, her lips pulling back in a small snarl. Rather than respond Sute carefully and deliberately opened the bingo book, flipping through the pages before extending it towards her.

"There's a reason people call me that," she told her bluntly. The woman eyed it for a moment before carefully taking it, skimming over the page before her gaze sharpened. Without a word she handed the book back, and Sute returned to her own section of the camp in silence.

A few days later the woman vanished after one particularly vicious battle, only a pool of blood left. While they never found her remains, they never really went looking for her either.

By the end of the Third Shinobi War, Sute had gained a spot in most Bingo Books with various monikers attached to crude drawings and blurry photos of her face: "Poison Apple," "Bloody Princess," and—most common of all—"The Mad Butcher." Her rank tended to vary from a C-class threat to A-rank, the other villages unable to accurately gauge her actual skill level due to her largely support-type roles on the battlefield. The only thing survivors could agree on was that she approached battle with a brutal tenacity rarely seen even in seasoned chuunin.

However, a small handful of ninja survived encounters with her largely intact. And among those people, another name began to spread. Wisps of whispered rumors leading to another moniker that floated around taverns and bars but never appeared in writing, save for a few hand-scribbled notations found in a select scattering of books carried by Leaf ninja:

_The Bloody Oracle of Kiri._

Chapter End Notes

Chapter six is out of the way! Utakata finally makes his grand entrance, and can I just say I love him? I've only written him a few times but his dynamic with Sute is great. Also, most of the Swordsmen are dead. Canon is starting to really take shape now.

So, an important note: Army of One is an actual thing. And if you're not at least 16 or are sensitive to horror imagery, do NOT look it up. The top search result is a drawing of mostly-nude two bodies stitched together. The first time I saw Nuibari in canon my mind went there, and I really do wonder if it Kishi read it and got inspiration. On that note, I recommend against searching for Junji Ito if you're sensitive to scary and graphic imagery. Junji Ito is by far my favorite horror mangaka, and his works are the reason I love horror manga. His stories can sometimes be silly or not even that scary, but the imagery is what makes it horrifying. He knows how to set the mood, and his artwork seriously gives me chills sometimes.

If you like horror (especially body horror), look up his stuff. (Fun fact: his most famous work to date is actually titled Uzumaki.) But just be aware, it's NOT safe for
work or younger audiences. Seriously, I spent years reading horror manga to build up a
tolerance just so I could read his stuff after finding a Wikipedia article on it. (Also,
just read the manga and avoid the recent anime adaptation of his works. Based on the
reviews I've seen, it doesn't do a good job at capturing the atmosphere, and also has
some pretty iffy picks.)

Anyways, that's all for now. See you next Saturday!
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Enter: Team Seven, past iteration.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Dammit, it's all spinning..."

"Be quiet, Bakakashi," Obito hissed, shifting his grip on his silver-haired teammate as he half-carried him on his shoulder. Next to him Rin shot them a worried look, her brown eyes filled with concern and anxiety as they roved over their teammate. Obito knew Rin, ever sweet and kind, wanted nothing more than to stop and treat him, but even he could tell that stopping now for any reason would be a bad idea.

What started as a B-rank delivery mission within the war zone took a dangerous turn when an unexpected battle erupted between their allies and some enemy shinobi. During the fray a stray kunai had grazed Kakashi's leg, and while initially he'd been fine it quickly became clear that something was wrong with it after a while he'd started getting nauseous. As much as Obito wanted to blame Bakakashi for being inept, he knew none of them held any particular responsibility. All of them had small nicks and scratches, but Kakashi had the misfortune of the only scrape he got being from the one kunai that happened to be poisoned.

Thus, Team Seven found themselves trying to sneak through enemy territory to safety, or at least find somewhere safe enough for Rin to properly examine and treat their poisoned teammate. With one man down and in increasingly bad shape they had no time to waste, they needed to move fast.

Sneaking through the brush and stones, they darted behind a series of boulders and Rin peered around the corner. Her eyes widened and her mouth pulled into a tight frown, her grim expression prompting Obito's stomach to sink even before he poked his head around the corner. He froze when he saw a small girl with brownish-green hair pulled into a bushy ponytail hunched over a corpse, her hands folded as if in prayer. His breath hitched as he saw the ragged state of her clothing, almost seeming to hang from her small frame as her head tilted forward.

This is only a kid, he thought with a pang of sadness, and a glance at Rin told him she had similar thoughts. Indecision visibly flickered in her eyes as she glanced at him, but he could see her caring personality already winning. Flashing her a small, reassuring smile and a nod, she returned a strained smile of her own before she stepped out of their hiding place, leaving Obito behind with Kakashi.

"Hey, excuse me?" she called, her voice slightly hushed to avoid drawing unwanted attention but still carrying that sweet, nurturing tone that made his heart flutter. "Are you okay?" Startled by her voice, the girl spun to stare at Rin with wide green eyes—

—and Obito froze as he saw the Kiri plate on the sash tied around her waist.

An enemy!? Here and now!? Startled, he found himself rooted to his spot as he stared at the metal
plate, and a glance at Rin revealed her to be in an equally shocked state, her gaze riveted to the symbol. The girl rose to her feet as she turned to face Rin more fully, and at that point Obito noticed her eyes seemed to be focused on a point just above Rin's eyes—crap, her hitai-ate!

Heart pounding, with barely a second's thought Obito quickly slid Kakashi to the ground and leapt out of his hiding spot. From the corner of his eye he saw Rin give a small start at his sudden appearance while the girl turned to face him, but he shoved his anxiety to the back of his mind and kept a giant smile plastered on his face as he met her gaze. "Hey there!" he greeted loudly with a note of false cheer, willing himself to sound calm and cheerful and not freaked out at all. "You're pretty young to be out here alone, aren't you?"

"Ah, y-yeah!" Rin agreed quickly, gaining the girl's attention once more. "It must be really scary being out here, right?"

Blinking owlishly, the girl tilted her head and regarded both him and Rin for a brief moment before speaking. "Are you scared?" she questioned, her voice the epitome of childish curiosity, and the two Chuunin felt their smiles grow more strained, their bodies stiff as they faced her.

"Um... no?" Obito squeaked, and even Rin winced at how high-pitched his voice got. The girl's head tilted in the opposite direction and she hummed in thought. Then before any of them could speak a soft groan emanated from behind the boulder, making the two Leaf ninja's blood run cold. Kakashi. Panic visibly flashed across Rin's face as her gaze flickered towards the boulder, while Obito felt himself tense as the girl followed Rin's gaze and realized he might have to kill a little kid—

"Is someone hurt?" she asked, taking a step forward. Instinct took over and Obito quickly launched forward at her, but the girl ducked to the side to avoid him and zoomed past him in a blur of blue and green. Horror set in as he spun to see her disappear behind the boulder, and he gave chase while pulling out a kunai, really really not wanting to hurt a little kid, but he also didn't want to let Bakakashi die—

When he darted around the boulder he froze upon seeing her hunched over Kakashi, a strange look on her face as she pressed her fingers to his neck. Rin stood mere feet away, seemingly petrified clutching a kunai with both hands in a white-knuckled grip. Time seemed to slow as Obito stared at the girl, knowing that even if he threw his kunai right now she'd still have time to stab Kakashi, and there'd be nothing they could do to stop it.

"Oh! I know this poison!"

The sudden declaration jarred him to the point that he nearly staggered in place, while Rin's eyes narrowed sharply and her grip on her kunai tightened even more, her hands shaking violently. "What do you mean?" she bit out, her eyes flashing with fear and cold determination in equal parts. The girl smiled as she looked at Rin, totally ignoring Obito.

"I know this poison!" she repeated brightly. "I have the antidote in my bag!" As she spoke she gestured to the pouch on her hip, and while Obito felt his blood run cold he could see the blood drain from Rin's face, her eyes widening in horror as her mouth trembled. Assuming she wasn't lying the kid held the advantage, the key between Kakashi's life and death.

Obito dared to shoot a glance at his standing teammate as the girl began rooting through her bag, silently asking if they should try to take the antidote. Their eyes met and Rin's lips pressed in a firm line as she shook her head, but her eyes looked just as lost as he felt and he couldn't tell what she was actually thinking. He ground his teeth in frustration the child fumbled through her pouch, soon producing a plastic vial with a reddish-violet liquid. Squinting as she held it up to the sun, she
soon gave a small nod of approval and turned back to Kakashi.

Then she paused, her brow furrowing.

"...Um, his mask isn't booby-trapped, right?" she asked, shooting Obito a skeptical glance, and he nearly stumbled again.

"Uh... n-no?" he stuttered, because what the hell do you say to that?

"Oh, good!" the girl replied cheerfully—

And then yanked on Kakashi's mask and dumped the contents of the vial into his mouth.

Immediately both chuunin lunged at her, their pulses spiking as they instinctively moved to protect their fallen teammate. The girl quickly jumped out of the way and Rin skidded to a halt next to Kakashi, while Obito landed between his teammates and the stranger with his kunai tightly gripped and pointed at her. "What did you do?" he growled, his hands shaking as he squeezed the kunai. The girl blinked, tilting her head with a slightly confused look.

"I gave him the antidote?" she said, phrasing it like a question, and Obito felt his heart skip a beat. What?

"He's—he's getting better," Rin suddenly interjected, and Obito turned his head slightly to peer at her over his shoulder in disbelief. Green chakra coated her hands as they hovered over Kakashi's chest, her eyes wide. "I can feel it working already, his vitals are already starting to stabilize." The declaration made Obito's hands fall limply to dangle in front of him, his eyes wide as he spun to face his teammates in full.

"Wait, she actually gave him the antidote?" he blurted.

"Yes?" the girl replied from behind him, her voice a little high-pitch and uncertain, and Obito suddenly remembered there was still technically an enemy ninja there and whirled around to defend his teammates once more.

"W-why?" he asked, way too shaky for his liking, and she frowned, crossing her arms as she tilted her head in thought.

"...He's too important to die," she finally settled on with a nod. They just stared at her dumbly, taking a moment to process her response. Then she straightened her head and gasped, her eyes shining. "Wait! If that's Kakashi, then... You're his teammates, right?" The pair just slowly tilted their heads, their brains starting to shut down. Did... did she really just realize that...?

Suddenly she was right in Obito's face, her bright green eyes sparkling as she beamed up at him.

"What's Konoha like? Is the Hokage Monument as awesome as I think? Oh! Oh! Is Yellow Flash-san Hokage yet?"

Obito admittedly had trouble processing the random flurry of questions suddenly thrown at him, and as he stared at her large sparkling eyes he couldn't help but wonder, 'Is this girl really a ninja?' Because no cold-blooded killer could be that sweet and hyper and innocent and wow, did she really come from Kiri? Maybe she just found the belt on the ground and used it as a sash to hold her yukata closed.

Then, lowering her voice so only he could hear, she whispered, "Stay away from caves, Uchiha-san."
His entire body tensed at that, his eyes widening in some instinctive horror, but before he could even fully comprehend her words Rin spoke up. "What do you mean, is the Yellow Flash Hokage?" she demanded, and like that the trance on Obito broke.

"Wait... Minato-sensei!?" he blurted. That seemed to snap her back to reality, or maybe it was the kunai that suddenly zoomed past her head that did it. The girl leaped back rapidly to dodge it, her eyes widening with horror as an ever-familiar figure suddenly appeared between her and Obito.

"What are you doing," Minato-sensei snarled, baring his teeth as he glared down the girl, and the girl recoiled, all color draining from her face. A complicated swirl of emotions flickered across her features, her eyes snapping towards Obito, then Kakashi, then back to Minato-sensei with a dawning look of understanding, and she winced before quickly backing away.

"I-it's not—I didn't—" She flinched as he started flashing through hand signs, her eyes full of pure, unbridled fear, and Obito felt his heart sink. Enemy or not, his chest twisted with guilt as he spied the panic on her face. As Minato-sensei took a step forward he opened his mouth to yell for him to stop, she's just a kid— And then Minato-sensei tripped and fell flat on his face.

The sudden crash was so stunning Obito almost couldn't process it. Watching his normally perfectly coordinated and almost infuriatingly graceful teacher basically trip over his own feet in front of a potential enemy had to be one of the most dumbfounding things he'd ever witnessed up to that point. The second Minato-sensei began to tumble forward the girl shot off like a raging fireball, taking advantage of the team's fussing and shock over their jounin leader tripping to make her escape.

Obito expected Minato-sensei to leap to his feet and take off after her in hot pursuit, but instead the second he jumped up he body-flickered to the side, reappearing a few feet away. "What the hell?" the blond muttered, brow furrowing in confusion and alarm as he eyed the spot he'd occupied moments ago.

"Minato-sensei, what just happened?" Rin questioned breathlessly behind Obito, sounding every bit as alarmed as he felt. "It looked like you just tripped, and—"

At that point Kakashi gave a low groan, and all conversation immediately halted as they turned their attention to him. Instantly Minato appeared by his side, Rin's hands glowing green as she ran another examination on him. "What's wrong with him?" he demanded briskly.

"He got hit by a poisoned kunai," she explained tightly, and then proceeded to brief him on their mission while Obito just continued to stare at the spot where Minato-sensei had tripped. It couldn't be, could it? He swore he saw—No, he silently decided as Kakashi finally opened his eyes. It must have been his imagination.

A full half hour passed before Rin deemed their teammate had recovered enough to resume their journey. Of course the bastard didn't feel ashamed that he got poisoned and slowed them down, but Obito bit his tongue on that while Rin filled Kakashi and Minato-sensei in on their unusual encounter. "She just dumped the antidote in my mouth?" Kakashi asked, his eyes narrowing in clear disapproval.

"She asked us if your mask had a booby trap first," Obito muttered, and at that point Kakashi swiveled his head to look at him with a look he hadn't ever actually seen the bastard show before. After looking at his wide eyes trying to place a name on the unfamiliar emotion, Obito tentatively settled on utter bewilderment.
"...What." He turned his head to Rin as if seeking confirmation. Obito didn't even feel offended, the question was just that weird and random.

"She did," Rin confirmed blandly. "She gave you the antidote while we were still surprised by it." Her voice took on a note of shame at that, and Kakashi looked at her levelly for a moment before slowly nodding. Obito liked to think that Kakashi had just silently decided he couldn't blame them for being too shocked to react, but he felt too cool to actually tell them that.

"We'll... work on that later," Minato-sensei muttered under his breath, and it suddenly occurred to Obito that even he was weirded out by it considering he wasn't scolding them right away for being careless. They'd probably still get chewed out later though, after they reached safe territory. Oh, joy.

"Still, she was really weird," Rin mumbled, her mouth thinning in a pensive frown as she folded her arms over her chest. "I mean, just... I don't know. I know ninja can get pretty eccentric, but... I've never seen one go out of their way to help an enemy for no reason. Especially one from Kiri."

"You're sure she didn't slip me another poison?" Kakashi asked warily, and the kunoichi frowned. "Of course I am! I mean, that was definitely the antidote, I could sense the poison leaving your system when I was using the Mystic Palm. If she'd slipped in another poison I definitely would have noticed."

"Then why did she help me?"

"She said something about you being too important to die," Obito offered sulkily. At that point Rin abruptly staggered to a halt, her eyes wide.

"Rin?" Minato-sensei turned to her, face all serious, and she looked at him for a moment before turning to Obito.

"Obito. We—we never said Kakashi's name, did we?"

"What?" Obito asked, frowning in confusion. "No way! We're shinobi, we know better than—" He stopped short as he realized what Rin was getting at, the breath flying from his lungs. No way.

"What's wrong?" Minato-sensei demanded sharply, and Rin sucked in a breath before turning to him.

"She—she asked if we were Kakashi's teammates, using his name." The other two males tensed up at that. Kakashi wasn't bad for a chuunin, but he wasn't good enough to be a household name either. Obito had only seen a handful of bingo books with the silver-haired bastard's face in it, and they usually just identified him as "Hatake" or a student of Minato-sensei, no mention of his given name.

"How did she know that?" Kakashi demanded, and Minato released a long breath as he ruffled his hair.

"This makes two instances of her seeming to know things she shouldn't," he muttered under his breath, and all three Chuunin leveled him with sharp, alert looks.

"You've met her before?" Obito asked, voicing the question on everyone's minds, and he could see the muscles in his jaw tighten before Minato gave a curt nod.

"Her name is Ringo Sute. She's technically Kiri, but..." He trailed off, glancing the direction she'd
run with a deep frown before turning back to them with a resolute gleam in his eyes. "If you meet her again, try to convince her to come to Konoha, or at least aim to capture her alive."

The orders caught them all by surprise, even Kakashi's eyes widened a bit. "What," he bit out. "She's Kiri. She's an enemy, why would she want to come to Konoha? Why would we want her to come to Konoha?"

"I can't tell you right now," Minato-sensei replied grimly. "It's only a hunch, and Kushina made me swear not to tell anyone yet. Just... trust us on this."

The others seemed a bit unsatisfied by the vague response, especially since Kushina was apparently involved too somehow, but reluctantly agreed anyway. Obito joined in quietly, his mind echoing with her whispered warning. "Stay away from caves." What did that even mean? The entire thing unsettled Obito, left him on edge, but he soon put it out of mind. They were in a war after all, so he didn't really have time to dwell on strange girls and cryptic warnings.

(Months later, as he lay half-crushed underneath a boulder with one eye carved out and waiting for death, he devoted plenty of thought to the girl with the cryptic warning to avoid caves.)

Only one more noteworthy event happened in the war.

A few short months before its end, Sute found herself the sole survivor of her platoon. The original group had whittled down over the past two years, and by that point most of her comrades had either died or otherwise transferred into other platoons. The death of four of the Seven Shinobi Swordsmen only cemented the formal dissolving of the platoon, but on their way back to Kiri to get reshuffled they'd run into an ambush. Luck alone allowed Sute to survive, the rest of her comrades slaughtered in the ensuing battle that left her as the sole fighter of either side to walk away.

She trudged down the thickly wooded roads of Hot Water country in a daze, her feet dragging along tiredly as she made her way to the coast to hopefully catch a boat to Kiri. "Stupid humidity," she grumbled, scowling as she wiped the sweat from her forehead. She never liked hot and humid weather, in both this life and her last one, and it made her hair even more frizzy and unmanageable. Heaving a large sigh, she paused to start rummaging through her knapsack for a water bottle when a flicker of movement caught her eye in the trees.

Snapping her head upward, she narrowed her eyes as she peered into the forest, her fingers releasing the bottle and wrapping around the hilt of a kunai. Sute had minimal experience as a sensor; Ao had given her some training but she lacked the supernatural knack for it he seemed to possess. Still, she'd gotten the basics down so she tried to stretch her senses out and search for any other presences.

Nothing.

Or at least, nothing she could sense.

Paranoid and warier than before, she slowly started back down the road, much more alert to her surroundings this time. Another flash of black flickered in the corner of her eye and she spun around, flinging a kunai at the object. It sunk into a tree with a solid thunk, the mysterious black figure no longer there. Now thoroughly spooked, she swiftly walked over and yanked the kunai out, pausing as her hand brushed against the bark.

She did have one trick for sensory skills, one that she discovered by accident while training alone
shortly after Ameyuri died. She didn't use it much, it required specific conditions and she didn't want anyone to notice, but no one she knew was around to see it. Pulsing a small bit of chakra into the tree, she could feel it spread through the roots and ripple across the forest like a wave, providing an image of her surroundings in her mind's eye similar to the projections created by sonar.

The forest was rather large, and she only got to spy about a mile's worth of the area. To her relief there was no one in the immediate area, but she could sense people running on the fringes of her range. A small horde of adults, unknown allegiance, lugging a squirming form not much larger than herself over one person's shoulder. Something about the scene twisted in her stomach, and the scene faded from her mind as she pulled her hand away. Swallowing thickly, she silently turned and resumed her walk, her pace faster than before.

Those people were strangers. Sute had no way to identify them from chakra alone, and no reason to try to help. She should just forget them and go away.

So why the hell was she going towards them?

Debating with herself even as she moved, black flickered in her vision again and she winced, grinding her teeth. Screw it. She didn't care if it was her imagination, she was not walking through a forest alone with some unknown boogeyman possibly lurking in the shadows. "This better not turn out like a stupid horror movie," she hissed in English, and took off at a run. If she got lucky, some of them would be from Kiri, and she wouldn't have to go back alone.

In the end, she was right. The group were Mist ninja, and one of them even seemed to recognize her somehow. She wasn't sure if the encounter was actually lucky though once she saw their prisoner.

"Ringo Sute," the girl whispered, her face paling. And as Sute stared at her, with messy brown hair and terrified chocolate-colored eyes and purple squares on her cheeks, her face suddenly slid into place and—

Oh.

She always did wonder why Kakashi was alone. It looked like she was about to find out.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay! Yesterday I had work and was just too exhausted to edit and post the chapter. Anyways, I thought Chapter 7 would be the most fitting place for the previous Team Seven to make their grand entrance. And that cliffhanger... Muahaha? The last scene has a LOT of interesting little hints and bits of foreshadowing, I wonder how much you guys can pick up on.

Also, a lot of readers seem to assume the Yuki woman last chapter was Haku's mother. Sadly I must debunk that. All evidence suggests that his mother was a civilian and never entered the shinobi forces, otherwise I doubt she could've been killed by her husband and the villagers. She might have hesitated to kill her husband, but at the very least I think she'd kill the others to protect Haku.

Anyways, see you all next Saturday!
Chapter Summary

Exit: Team Seven, past iteration.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

In her first life, she graduated medical school at 25 and joined Doctors Without Borders as soon as she could.

Joining the organization had been one of the riskiest choices she had ever made, her work taking her to war-torn nations in Africa and Asia. Some of the hospitals and clinics she visited would later be closed due to attacks by local militias or air raids, and one man she worked with ended up getting kidnapped. More than once they'd been been questioned about whether they "sided" with governments despite the organization having no official ties to any country.

At one point she'd been part of a mission to a small island town after an earthquake—one of many towns affected by it—and arrived to find the results of a massacre. The town had been harboring some members of a rather unpopular faction, and a rival militia had taken advantage of the chaos after the earthquake to deal what they believed to be justice to the still-recovering populace.

Some of her colleagues had doubled over and vomited on the spot at the sight of the children, so still and lifeless with faces mangled beyond recognition. Others had to go back to the ship midway through just to take a moment to decompress. Even her supervisor, a surgeon who had been to the Middle East countless times as a US Marine, had to pause and take a moment to absorb the devastation.

She had just taken one look at the carnage and gotten to work, checking the bodies for pulses and rallying the others to administer aid to those who remained alive.

"How can you stand it?" someone asked her later, once they'd finished work for the night and had holed up in their temporary quarters. She had just smiled thinly, her eyes hollow as she hefted a mug of beer provided by some grateful local for saving his daughter.

"Some people are just permanently screwed up, I guess," she replied, and took a deep chug. She'd seen much worse than the horrors they'd witnessed today, this had just been on a larger scale.

Sute didn't know why she was here.

The older Mist ninja hadn't explained anything to her, just let her tag along and left her in a different area of the cavern while they got to work. Once they'd finished they'd stuck her with the barely conscious girl to monitor her over the night while, quote, "it settled." They did not elaborate on what "it" meant, but the way they phrased it was ominous enough. At one point she caught snatches of whispers, "use her to our advantage," and Sute did not know which "her" they meant, but she decided it would be safer not to ask.

Monitoring the girl over the course of that night was stressful enough on its own.
Her screams echoed through the cavern as she writhed on the ground against the steel shackles binding her limbs to stone pillars, ink markings converging upon her partially-exposed stomach and filling her with acidic chakra. Sute had to cover her ears as she sat huddled against the far wall, wishing ever so desperately the silencing seals could at least muffle the screams inside too. Part of her wanted to say those were the most gut-wrenching screams she'd ever heard, the kind that would haunt her nightmares, but they weren't.

They really, really weren't.

Every so often the girl's shrieks would taper off to pained sobs, and at those points Sute would crawl over to run a brief examination. Each time the other girl would wince and recoil, nearly launching into a panic attack as if expecting her to launch a physical attack on her. Sute knew she had a horrible bedside manner (Utakata would vehemently attest to that), and she silently cursed that particular trait as she awkwardly did her best to reassure her she meant no harm.

A few hours before dawn the girl seemed to finally believe Sute, because she stopped flinching at her every movement and instead took to babbling. "You," she started, her voice breathless and rushed. "Do—do you know what, what's going on?" Her eyes seemed to bore into Sute with an intensity that she had only seen on people in the gravest of situations, even as fear gleamed in them.

"Not... really?" Sute replied hesitantly. "I'm just..." She trailed off, not sure how to finish. "I'm just... following orders." The girl's throat bobbed as she swallowed harshly, giving a small nod.

"R-right. You... Y-you don't know..." She trailed off, her labored breathing stretching in the silence for a few moments as she tried to collect her thoughts. "You're—you're Sute, right? We—we met once, remember?"

"Yeah, I do," she confirmed with a slow nod. "You were with Kakashi-san, and that Uchiha."

"R-right. My name is, Rin. Nohara Rin." Rin offered a smile, weak and shaky and full of anxiety, but still trying to be reassuring. "And my t-teammate's name is—was, was U-Uchiha Obito." Her face twisted slightly as she fumbled with tenses, grief flickering in her eyes, but she quickly shoved it away. "Y-you, you saved him. K-Kakashi, I mean. You—that antidote. It, it saved him."

"Y-yeah, I guess so," Sute muttered, nodding slowly. She recognized this for what it was. Rin was trying to build up a rapport with her, establish some sort of bond and commonality between them, no matter how small and fragile it might be. Serial killers and kidnappers did not often think of their victims as expressly human, but as something else, something other. Very few people were truly capable of shutting down all emotions to kill another human being without any remorse. Sometimes, they just needed a little push, the tiniest common point between them and their victim, and they'd be reminded of the person's humanity and lose their will to kill.

She had seen it in action countless times before, heard countless sob stories from people silently praying for some sort of mercy. It always made her a little sick because at the end of the day she was powerless to change their fate, no matter what they thought.

(Part of her wondered if this life would be the same, if this would just be the first in a long chain of trapped people desperately bargaining for their lives.)

"Min-Minato-sensei," Rin continued, and paused to lick her lips, her mouth overly dry after screaming so much. "He—he regretted it. Trying to, to attack you. He said—he thought you, p-poisoned Kakashi. After that, h-he wanted to—to apologize. H-he, he didn't—" She stopped, taking a deep, shuddery breath as she tried to organize her thoughts.
Eventually, she resumed, "He asked us to—to bring you back."

"What?" The word came out as a breath, short and full of terror as Sute felt the hairs rise on the back of her neck. Minato, the Yellow Flash, wanted to capture her? As her mind began racing with the implications Rin shook her head, grimacing at the pain the motion likely brought.

"No, no! N-not as a prisoner, as a—a guest."

"A guest?" Sute repeated, her mind reeling even more from Rin's attempt at clarification. What the hell?

"I—I don't..." Rin bit her lip, pinching her eyes shut. "He... Minato-sensei—he and Kushina-san—they said, you're f-family."

"Kushina? Family? What?" Sute was just staring at her wide-eyed at this point, her mind racing as she tried to process the sudden influx of information. If Rin was still trying to build a rapport... well, she couldn't say if it was working, but she at least had Sute's attention. "But—how? Look at me." She grabbed a strand of stringy, muddy green-brown hair and held it up, her apple green eyes glinting with confusion. "The Yellow Flash has blond hair and blue eyes, and our facial structures are totally different. I'm—I'm probably not family."

The words felt unexpectedly bitter on her tongue as she spoke, her chest aching inexplicably. Truth be told, Sute had no idea of her heritage. She was a battlefield brat, an orphan who'd wandered across at least three countries before getting picked up by a kunoichi hailing from the opposite side of the map. She had never given her birth family much thought, but she knew intellectually that she likely had no birth ties to Kiri. If anything, she'd be more likely to be related to someone from Suna or Ame than the village whose emblem she wore now.

And Minato, the Yellow Flash, was one of the greatest heroes in the manga and anime she'd loved so much in her last life. The possibility of being related to him would be amazing, it would change her life forever, but the odds of that happening were astronomically low.

Rin just nodded, seeming to grow more determined now that she obviously had Sute's attention. Her eyes flickered to the doorway to the chamber which had been sealed with a boulder. "N-not him," she whispered, pitching her voice low to avoid being overheard by the Mist ninja undoubtedly stationed outside. "H-have you ever heard of, of Uzushio?"

Sute frowned and shook her head, her eyebrows furrowing as she leaned forward. Rin smiled at that, a bit sadder this time. "I—I never saw it. It, it fell, a few years before we were born. But Kushina-san, she—"

Whatever she intended to say next got lost as a resounding boom suddenly echoed through the room, the boulder vanishing in a puff of smoke, and within seconds Sute found herself violently slammed against the stone wall with a startled cry as fingers wrapped around her throat.

"You," a voice hissed, pure venom and ice, and she could only choke for air as she stared into a pair of mismatched red and black eyes. She barely had time to register the fringe of silver hair hanging over them before gasping for breath as the fingers squeezed, cutting off her airways and leaving her choking. Spots started to creep into her vision and she could distantly hear Rin shouting something, but she couldn't hear what and it faded as her consciousness started to flicker.

Then, all at once the pressure ceased and she collapsed to the ground with a gasp, her hands already alight with healing chakra as she clutched at her aching throat. Her vision still spun but the world gradually came into focus as she repaired her damaged airways and allowed sweet oxygen to flow
freely once more, and as it did she could now hear Rin talking to the newcomer in hushed tones, too quiet for her to hear.

As she struggled to her feet the silver-haired youth spun to face her, his eyes narrow and radiating anger. "Don't stop us," he hissed, and then grabbed Rin's now-free wrist and dragged her through the door. Sute could only stand there in silence for a moment, her mind still reeling as she leaned against the wall, but soon enough she took a deep, painful breath and staggered after them.

Maybe it had been her conscience, suddenly rearing its head after a lifetime and a half of apathetically standing by doing nothing.

Maybe she got tired of dealing pain and suffering with her own hand instead of trying to ease it.

Or maybe she just didn't want to be even partially responsible for one of Kakashi's many tragic losses.

Whatever the reason, all that mattered was that she was now on the run chasing after two should-be enemies with shinobi from her own village in hot pursuit.

"Shit! Dammit! Too close!" Sute hissed curses under her breath as she dodged a kunai, defaulting to her native English in her stress. Ahead of her Kakashi dragged Rin along at top speeds, gripping her wrist with a vice-like grip even as she yelled something that Sute couldn't quite hear. Her attention was too focused on the Mist ninja that had been her allies up until half an hour ago, and who now wanted her blood.

"Are you freaking kidding me!" she screamed as one of the Mist ninja spewed a water bullet at her, grimacing in disgust as her hands flew through seals to return it with one of her own. Ninjutsu? Not her strongest suit. She still had minimal training in it compared to her other skills, mainly because she had a natural affinity that happened to include it, and she really did not want to accidentally use that particular affinity while training.

That, and the water bullet felt like glorified spit. She might be okay with blood and torture and all, but she had to draw the line somewhere.

That said, she also didn't want to get doused by someone else's glorified spit, so she finished the seals and spewed out her own powerful spray. The two streams met head on, seeming to fight for dominance, and with an intense burst of chakra on her end her bullet overpowered the other one and blasted the man back. The second he recoiled she spun forward and raced after the others.

"—kill you!" she heard Kakashi retort just as she caught up. "There's got to be some other way!"

"Is it seriously just you two?!" Sute hissed before Rin could respond, cutting into the argument. "What the hell is Konoha thinking, sending kids into Mist territory!"

Apparently her words caught the pair by surprise, or maybe it was just her presence, as Rin snapped a startled, almost fearful look her way. Kakashi, meanwhile, just shot her a deadpan glare, made much more intimidating by his mismatched gray and single Sharingan eye. "You're what, eight?" he countered hotly, and she scowled at him.

"I'm ten." Or maybe she was thirty-eight, since she'd been twenty-eight when she died in her last life (probably, the details were fuzzy and she didn't like to dwell on it for obvious reasons), but that was beside the point. Hissing under her breath as she turned to deflect yet another kunai, she tore the kunai pouch off her leg and thrust it towards Kakashi's free hand. "Forget it! Hurry up and throw these!"
The order was so abrupt he actually seemed taken aback, just boggling at her wide-eyed. "What? Why would I—"

"My aim sucks and there's no way I can hit a bunch of ANBU while running! Everything in there is poisoned so it should at least slow them down!" Kakashi just stared at her, taking far too long to process her words for her liking, but then he shoved the pouch back at her.

"They're your weapons," he growled. "You use them."

"I just told you, my aim sucks!" Sute snapped impatiently.

"And I have no reason to trust you!" Kakashi roared back, his voice filled with enough venom to make her recoil. "You're one of them! There's no reason to believe you're actually trying to help!"

Sute flinched, not expecting so much anger, but... Maybe she should have. It wasn't like even she understood her own reasoning at this point.

Kiri had been her home. (She never called anywhere home.) The people there had been her friends. (She never knew the meaning of "friend.") She shed blood in its name. (She shed blood to protect herself.) It was all she knew. (It was an endless unknown.) Konoha was an enemy village. (Konoha was the good guys.) She had no reason to betray it. (She had no reason to be loyal.)

She would die if she left. (She would die if she stayed.)

"Sute-chan," Rin cut in breathlessly, interrupting the ongoing philosophical debate in her head. "You—You have poisons?"

"Yes!" she replied with an eager bob of her head, thrusting the pouch towards her. "Please tell me you have good aim." Rin didn't take it though, just eyed it for a moment before meeting Sute's gaze.

"Then kill me!" she yelled, and the order was so abrupt Sute nearly stumbled in shock, her face draining of color.

"W-what?" she stuttered, questioning if she'd heard right. Next to her Kakashi growled, maneuvering to position himself between the two girls as they ran.

"Don't you fucking dare," he snarled at Sute, and to Rin he added, "And stop saying that!"

"Kakashi, stop being so stubborn!" Rin shouted back. "I told you—"

"I'm not breaking my promise to Obito!" Kakashi roared, and at that point the conversation had to stop as he dodged out of the way of a water bullet. Sute shot Rin a wide-eyed look, mouthing a silent 'what the fuck,' but quickly turned to dodge a volley of senbon. Cursing, she started flying through hand seals to spit out a water bullet which quickly took the form of three water clones, and then charged at their attackers.

One man lunged at a clone and swung a long, thin katana through it like butter, neatly severing it in half. Even as the clone collapsed into a puddle of water Sute flashed through the seals for a substitution and appeared behind him, palming a kunai and raising it above her head as he turned to face her. Blood splattered onto her as she dragged it across his face, the gouge digging deep into his skull and right through his eye. He screamed in agony, the toxins on the blade causing his skin to sizzle around the wound, and Sute wasted no time in delivering a two-foot kick to his chest to send him flying.

Even as she did that she felt another man rush up behind her, and she dropped into a crouch and
rolled to avoid his blow, bowling directly into his legs. As he toppled to the ground she slashed his leg along where she knew the femoral artery would be, stabbing the blade deep into his muscle and swiping it through. People often forgot that they had a major artery connected directly to their hearts in their legs, and even without the poison he'd probably die of blood loss soon enough.

She wouldn't take any chances though, and she slammed her palm between his legs for good measure, taking a sick sort of satisfaction in the high-pitched squeak he emitted upon contact. Her victim suitably paralyzed with pain, she tossed her bloodied kunai into the air so she could jab her thumbs into his eyes. One of her clones dove above her to snap the blade before it could descend, spinning midair to slash another enemy even as it landed before lurching towards the next opponent.

As Sute jerked her thumbs out of her victim's eye sockets she distantly registered what sounded like birds chirping. A spark of light flashed in the corner of her vision, and she snapped her head in its direction to see Kakashi lunging at another one of the masked Mist nin. Lightning crackled around his hand, his left eye noticeably blazing red with the Sharingan from her current angle. The sight was enough to make her heart stop with a combination of awe and horror—awe because this was the Chidori, Kakashi's signature jutsu—And horror because Rin was leaping right in front of it.

Time seemed to slow as Sute watched the brown-haired girl lunge between Kakashi and his intended victim, her face flickering with a mixture of horror, fear, anxiety, and cold, grim resolve. Kakashi's eyes widened as he registered what was happening, but even with the supernatural reflexes of the Sharingan he couldn't slow in time. Sute's heart thundered as she lurched to her feet and ran towards them, spying her two remaining clones doing the same in her peripheral vision, but—they were too slow.

They were too damn slow.

"Ka...ka...shi..."

The name came out as a whisper, blood dribbling down Rin's chin, and the light faded from her eyes as her body slumped around her teammate's arm where it still plunged into her chest.

When asked later, Sute would honestly respond she had no idea how things turned out that way.

One minute she'd been wrenching Rin from Kakashi's rigid arm, shoving her to the ground to pump chakra into her chest while screaming for her to stop, how dare she do that, he's suffered enough without you using him to commit suicide.

And then she was waking up miles away, her fingertips crusted with dried blood and her cheeks stained with dry tears.

When she staggered back to the battle scene she found puddles of blood which had once been human beings and two figures still on the ground, one unconscious and one dead with Lichtenberg lines staggering across her skin from a giant hole in her chest. She stared at them numbly, her mind slowly processing the scene in front of her without really registering anything. Everything felt hazy, almost like a dream.

Black flickered in the corner of her vision and Sute turned her head to look, but she saw nothing. After a long while she turned and limped away, exhaustion weighing on her and leaving her silent.

Everything still felt hazy, but it wasn't a dream. It was a nightmare, the worst kind.
After one more week of trekking through the wilderness alone, Sute finally reached Kiri and got promptly tossed into T&I to go over what the hell happened. She answered the questions bluntly and concisely, offering no more details than necessary.

No, no one else from her platoon had survived. Yes, she had taken three weeks to get back when it should have taken her two, she got lost on the road of life. What? Oh, no, she meant she just got regular lost, her platoon took a lot of weird twists and turns and she didn't have the Elemental Nations memorized. Of course she looked exhausted and beaten up, she was the sole survivor of an ambush on her platoon and had to get home on her own.

No, she saw no other Mist ninja.

No, she saw no other enemy shinobi.

No, she saw no other people, just days and days of wandering the remains of battlefields alone.

After seven grueling hours of questioning they finallly released her, and she promptly went home to her bed and collapsed into a dead sleep for the next fourteen hours.

When she woke up, she found small white flowers blossoming on the formerly bare wall next to her bed. They had shriveled long before she woke up, drooping and wilting and held in place by nothing but her will.

She plucked them off one petal at a time and burned them.

(She had been three when she first donned a plain white gi with a white fabric belt.

Her old dad had her practice the kicks and punches that formed the basic foundations of taekwondo every day, motivating her to maintain her interest with the promise of ice cream. As she grew older he gave her first a yellow belt, then one split into yellow and green, and then a green. When she got two colored pieces of tape on the end used to mark her progress towards getting the next one around age five, he had her start learning judo, and soon after that she started on karate.

It got confusing sometimes, trying to keep track of all the different moves for each martial arts style. Some of them were similar so she ended up blending the styles more often than not, but her old dad never complained.

"This world has a lot of bad people in it who would want to hurt you," he told her once when she was six. "You're a little girl, so they'll go after you more. I want you to be able to defend yourself, no matter what." She nodded seriously and promised to never let herself end up in a bad situation.

After all, she only needed to look in their basement to find examples of what people might do to her.)

Chapter End Notes

Here it is, Chapter 8! Sadly, this now confirms that Rin does not survive. I'm afraid that canon won't be disrupted so early. But I think this should also confirm some suspicions about Sute's abilities and her history. I have to say, she's a fun character.
At this point, Sute's official involvement in the war is over, though the war is still
winding down. The next two chapters will cover the remainder of the war and Sute's
training up until the Kyuubi's attack, after which we'll have a time skip. See you all
next Saturday!
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Sute deals with a shadowy stalker, and later decides to wrap up an old loose end. On an unrelated note, Kisame is VERY happy to now be of legal drinking age.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The war ended without any more major fanfare for Sute after that.

She got a week furlough to recover and spent it huddled in her greenhouse, tending to the plants and just keeping to herself. Once her break ended she was shoved right back into the hospital for the remainder of the war. After the hellish ordeal that marked the end of her last deployment she had absolutely no problem with that, she'd happily take cranky patients over witnessing a stupid girl commit suicide by traumatized teammate.

What she did have a complaint about was the black shadow she kept spying. It didn't happen too often, but every now and then she swore she saw something from the corner of her eye. Weeks could go by without a sighting, and then she'd see it several times over the course of one or two days. It left her paranoid and frustrated, always on edge, especially since these sightings seemed to be most common when she was in her greenhouse.

Sute liked her greenhouse. The building had been built with seals engraved into it so that the windows appeared cloudy from condensation most of the time, but still allowed sunlight to filter through and bathe the plants in its warm glow. It gave the space a sense of privacy, and felt like her own private forest. During her earliest years in this life she'd spent so much time pretending she was some kind of weird woodland fairy who liked to flitter around battlefields, and her greenhouse had given her warm echoes of those light fantasies.

And now a shadow was invading her life and taking away her sanctuary.

She grew more hostile towards it with each new sighting, snarling curses and threats under her breath, and would then proceed to sulkily seek out Utakata because the thing never appeared when she was with other people and he was the only familiar person consistently in Kiri.

"You sound like a child," he curtly informed her once she'd explained the situation.

"I am a child!" she protested loudly. "I'm ten!" Or maybe she was thirty-eight, since she'd been twenty-eight when she died, but right now she felt like a kid.

"A child with a one million Ryo bounty." Sute opened her mouth to retort but then paused, blinking at him.

"Wait, seriously?"

Yes, she did have a one million Ryo bounty. It had been assigned by Iwa, with five hundred thousand dead and one million if brought in alive. Apparently she'd been implicated in killing a
respected elder's grandson at some point, and they wanted her blood. That was... interesting, and somewhat worrisome.

"I'm not going back to the front until this stupid war is over," she declared flatly, slamming the book shut.

"It's heading towards the end anyway," Utakata dismissed with a half-shrug. "Shishou's been talking about it for a while. He said we're kicking up my training after it ends."

"You still owe me an explanation for why you're not on the front," she reminded him, and he stiffened slightly before averting his gaze.

"...Later," he muttered, and then swept out of the room before she could respond, much to her annoyance.

Luckily for Sute, the sightings of the shadow gradually dwindled, and a little over two months after returning stopped altogether. She exhaled a large sigh of relief, and proceeded to just go on with her life.

Around this time, she decided to finally handle a certain task. After Ameyuri's dying orders to raid her bedroom closet led to the discovery of the storage scroll nearly three years prior (and wow, how time had flown), Sute had kept it stowed away under her bed safe from prying eyes.

She hadn't opened it back then, partially because she didn't feel confident enough in her knowledge of kanji to try reading it yet. Also, she had bigger problems at the time, what with her impending graduation and stress over hiding her natural affinity.

But now she was fresh off the front and likely to have a lot of downtime outside of her hospital shifts, so with a deep breath she slammed her hands onto the scroll and funneled chakra into the ink.

Hoshigaki Kisame did not know how he felt about Ringo Sute.

First off, she didn't really flee from him in fear like most kids. She was the only kid willing to interact with him willingly, awkward and weird as it could be at times. She treated him with respect and tended to treat him at the same level she spoke to anyone else, and she dutifully answered his questions as bluntly and honestly as possible. Actually, he really appreciated that part, he always did value honesty and loyalty.

Sute was just really, really weird.

Seriously, she gave him a toe. A toe she obtained by cutting it off a bully's foot with a ridiculously sharp kunai she snagged from Ameyuri's stash, way back when she was five. And then when she was eight, she gave him the most screwed up answer to the sex talk he'd ever heard. Yeah, there were probably more graphic and disturbing ones out there, but seriously, she was eight and casually talking about necrophilia. How did she even know what that was?

No, Kisame knew there was something intrinsically wrong with Ringo Sute, even among the notoriously bloodthirsty and savage shinobi who inhabited Kiri.

Now she was ten going on eleven and overdue for a wartime promotion to chuunin, and he'd been chosen to deliver the news. He had no idea why he had to be the one to do it, because seriously, there were others who'd be much better suited for the job, and he had better things to do than play messenger. But he'd been given orders by Fuguki, his direct superior, and so he had no choice but
to comply.

Still, when he knocked on her door, he really didn't expect this.

"So any reason you have a bunch of books, scrolls, weapons and corpses scattered around your house?"

Sute offered him a bland glare as she stood in the barely-open doorway, her clothing ruffled and hair even more unkempt than usual. Even with only a sliver of space between the door and wall to peer through, Kisame could still see all kinds of junk strewn around the floor behind her. Books, scrolls, loose papers, kunai, a katana, a tanto, the tip of a naginata—and also corpses.

Or more accurately, parts of corpses.

By his count, he could see at least one severed arm, part of a foot, the stump end of either a leg or arm, and—was that a tongue? Holy shit, that was a lot of tongues. Any number of disembodied tongues higher than zero counted as too many, and he could see at least three lumpy pink objects splayed across the papers.

"Okay kid, seriously, what the hell?" he asked, and Sute deflated slightly.

"Um, so I kinda found a scroll and unsealed it, and then all this stuff... poofed out?"

"What kind of storage scroll holds this much stuff?" Oh sweet mother of Sage, there was a bunch of severed toes. He was going to develop a freaking complex at this rate.

"...A book with storage seals on every page?" Sute responded meekly, and Kisame just gawked at her.

"...What."

"It was sealed in a scroll, so I guess maybe by unsealing it, it released all the stuff stored in those seals too?" Sute sounded genuinely confused, almost timid, even. "I dunno, there's not much stuff on fuinjutsu. I didn't even know you could use books instead of scrolls. It's kinda weird." Kisame just continued to gawk at her.

He had so many, many, many questions, but right now, he did not want to ask them. He did not want to hear the undoubtedly convoluted answers that would no doubt raise even more questions. His headache was already bad enough without trying to delve deeper into this mess of seals and scrolls and severed tongues, seriously what the ever-loving hell!?

"Fuck it. The Mizukage wants to see you, you're a Chuunin as of two months ago." He shoved the summons notice at her, not really bothering to make sure she had a good grip before letting go, and then continued, "Go see him to get your jacket and then grab Harusame to help clean up. He's a seal master, he can deal with this."

Sute perked up at that, her eyes lighting up. "Harusame—Utakata's shishou?"

What. She knew the Rokubi jinchuuriki—actually, know what, he shouldn't even be surprised anymore. This kid was just unpredictable in the weirdest ways, and good for her for making a friend her age. Maybe the kid could be a nice, normal influence on her, which was probably one of the weirdest things Kisame would ever think seeing as no jinchuuriki could ever be REALLY normal. "Yeah, sure. He should be in training ground eight today. Later."

With that he turned and stalked off before Sute could pull him any deeper into the web of insanity.
that was her life. He wanted a *normal* life, thank you very much.

The second she left the Mizukage's office with her new slate gray flak jacket, Sute took off at a run even while struggling to pull the bulky garment on.

The second she reached training ground eight, she unceremoniously tossed it to the ground in disgust with a silent vow of *never again*.

Seriously, why did it have that flap extending from the bottom between her legs!? It kept bouncing against her legs when she ran, and overall the thing just felt clunky and heavy. She was a speed-oriented kunoichi before a heavy hitter, no wonder Hunter-nin just wore a yukata and loose pants. Actually, she might just borrow their uniforms in general, or at least take some inspiration from them.

As she silently sulked over it, she barely paid any mind to the two people already on the training grounds. "Congratulations," Utakata greeted blandly, arching an eyebrow as he lowered his golden pipe used for blowing bubbles. "However, I don't think the Mizukage would appreciate you throwing that down on the ground."

"How do you move in that thing?" she demanded flatly, crossing her arms as she eyed his own flak jacket. "Also, side note, when the hell did you get promoted to chuunin? You weren't on the front, and hell if I know when the last Chuunin Exams were."

"I got promoted for field work," Utakata replied simply. "There are still wartime missions that don't require me fighting directly on the front, like scroll retrievals."

"Let me join you," Sute deadpanned. "*Please.*"

"Utakata's position is different from yours, Sute-kun," Harusame interjected, sounding faintly amused. He then looked even more amused when the girl suddenly spun to face him, back ramrod straight and arms at side.

"Harusame-sama?" she asked politely, and the bespectacled man arched an eyebrow at the rare use of overly-respectful honorifics on her part.

"Yes, Sute-kun?"

"Kisame says you're a fuinjutsu master. Are you a fuinjutsu master?" Unnoticed by her Utakata winced slightly at the query, but Harusame merely hummed before letting a small smile play across his lips.

"I am. Why do you ask?"

Five minutes later, the three of them stood inside her house, the two males surveying the chaos in mild states of shock. Kisame had only been able to see a sliver of the mess through the small gap in the door, but standing in the center of her living room, Harusame and Utakata had no buffer preventing them from seeing the chaos in its full glory.

Entire multi-volume collections of books littered the floor in haphazard piles, clearly summoned as stacks but quickly toppling under the weight of everything else. Weapons of every sort seemed to be scattered around the space, ranging from more traditional bladed tools like kunai to spiked iron maces. Layered among the mess were a bunch of scrolls, unfurled to varying lengths and draping over and under everything.
And then there were the bodies.

Two fully intact corpses, largely preserved save for the fatal wounds and their faces, which had been mangled beyond recognition. Four severed arms and three severed legs, each covered in swirling seals of varying complexities. Then four severed toes, six fingers, and a total of not one, not two, but four disembodied tongues, all with the same black markings etched on them. And to top it off, six severed heads.

Overall, it had to be one of the more macabre collections Sute had seen, which was really saying something. At this point she was still torn on whether or not the book's previous owner had been some kind of serial killer or a crazy packrat. Or both.

(It occurred to her as she glanced at Utakata's stunned slack-jawed stare that she should probably find this more disturbing than she did.)

(It also occurred to her that this would probably be a recurring theme in both lives.)

Harusame had been the one to finally break the silence. "Where did you get this book?" he asked, carefully hefting the tome to inspect it.

"I don't know?" Sute replied hesitantly, mindful of Ameyuri's warning not to show the scroll's contents to anyone. To be fair though, she doubted the woman had expected unsealing it to result in an explosion of scrolls and weapons and body parts, and there was no way Sute could possibly clean it on her own. "I just... had it? Ameyuri-san sealed it in a scroll when she found me, but I think when I unsealed it, it unsealed all the stuff sealed inside the book. Or... something."

Harusame just hummed, leafing through the pages with a keen eye. "You're probably right. These pages use some very intricate seals, and just glancing at some of the scrolls scattered around here I'd assume many of these objects had been sealed into those, with the scrolls then sealed into the book. Storing storage seals inside other storage seals is quite complicated."

"I didn't even know that was possible," Utakata murmured, poking at one of the heads with his bubble blower to roll it over. "I... I think I recognize this face from one of the bingo books, sort of. He looks like the Kuromaka Brothers, maybe he's related."

"Kuromaka Brothers?" Sute repeated blankly, tilting her head.

"Missing-nin from Iwa."

"That's probably the eldest," Harusame commented distractedly, still flipping through the pages. "He died about ten years ago but the bounty was never cashed." The two ten-year-olds just turned to stare at him, and then back at the head.

"So these heads are probably from uncashed bounties?" Sute asked.

"Most likely." Sute instantly sighed in relief, earning a confused look from Utakata.

"That's a weird reaction," he commented, his eyes narrowing, and Sute glanced at Harusame before scooting over to her friend to whisper to him.

"There is a decent chance this belongs to my family," she deadpanned. "I'd rather not be related to another serial killer."

"...Wait, another?"
"Don't ask. Please. And also please don't tell him about the family part because I think my family might not be liked in Kiri?" Her voice took on a slightly pleading note, but she knew Utakata would give in. She'd been around him long enough to recognize that literally everyone else either ostracized him in some form or just treated him incredibly curtly, and the human need for actual, pleasant companionship would likely overpower any conditioning he'd received to tell his teacher everything.

Sure enough, his shoulders sagged and she saw resignation flash in his eyes as he nodded. "Alright, I won't," he promised quietly, and she smiled sweetly at him.

"Sute-kun," Harusame suddenly interjected, carefully closing the book. "Would you mind if I borrow some of these scrolls after helping you clean up to study?"

"Um... maybe?" She frowned, instantly on edge at the possibility of him examining the scrolls in deeper detail. Harusame seemed like one of the more honest Mist ninja she'd met, and she thought she was a pretty good judge of character given her experiences, but she still knew too little about him. Utakata might trust him, but that didn't mean he'd have her best interests in mind.

However, as she mulled over it Harusame offered her probably the most kindly smile she'd seen in Kiri to date.

"Don't worry, if you agree I'll make it worth your while."

Two weeks later, Kisame was getting drunk at the bar with Zabuza after a particularly long patrol. "I can't believe we're stuck with grunt work," the dark-haired teen complained sourly. "Anyone can do patrols, and it's not like anyone will breach into Water this late in the game."

"Eh, a job's a job," Kisame dismissed with a shrug. "Not like we'd be sent to the front anytime soon. Kiri's spread thinner than ever after the latest round of casualties."

"Tch, tell me about it," Zabuza grumbled. "This is why that death match policy was so stupid. We killed off half our potential forces before they could even get to the field. Even cannon fodder would be better than nothing."

"You know, when you say it like that, it almost sounds like that little massacre of yours was to prove a point," Kisame remarked with a sharp-toothed smirk. Zabuza merely leered at him, his eyes narrowing.

"Don't you have sake to drink?" he snarked, and Kisame chortled.

"Good point." He chugged down a giant gulp of shochu, a brief but companionable silence lapsing over the pair.

"So did you hear Harusame took on another student?" one man commented nearby.

"The jinchuuriki's not enough?"

"No, he wants to teach someone fuinjutsu now."

"Huh. Makes sense, we don't have many seal masters left. Or, well, any at all. Any idea who it is?"

"Yeah, that 'Mad Butcher' brat from my old platoon. Ringo Sute."

Kisame promptly proceeded to spew his shochu over the counter and Zabuza's arm. "What the
hell!" Zabuza snapped, shaking his arm with a disgusted scowl. "Are you freaking kidding me?!
" Kisame ignored him, just slamming his head on the table with a groan.

What had he done?

Chapter End Notes

And so at long last the war arc nears the end, and the question of the book is answered!

It's been fun reading the speculation about the book, but I don't think anyone ever guessed it was a glorified storage scroll. With this the book's biggest secret is revealed, though it still has some smaller secrets involved which won't come into play for a long time. More importantly (and excitingly), Sute is now FINALLY studying fuinjutsu!

I've been planning to have her study fuinjutsu for a while. At this point I've made it pretty obvious that Sute's family comes from Uzushio, and she already expressed interest when talking to Tsurugi. The trickiest part was finding a master for her, because there are so few left and I didn't want to create a random OC or just have her be totally self-taught. Then I was looking at the Naruto wiki and suddenly realized Utakata's master in the filler arc is, in fact, a fuinjutsu master, and I seriously couldn't have picked a better fit myself. This is going to be VERY relevant to their futures. (On that note, I finally got around to watching that arc (I don't usually watch filler). It was an interesting story and the themes of masters and apprentices were well executed, but won't lie, I honestly found Hotaru's character kind of bland. She's not going to appear in this fic.)

By the way, I finally got around to drawing Sute! A user on FF named Shizusasori9 sent me a message asking permission to cross-post this to Wattpad (and she has!), and it gave me the kick to FINALLY draw Sute along with a cover concept I've had for a while. The link goes to DeviantArt, and if you look at my gallery you can also find two variations of the cover I made. It's of her as a teen rather than a child like now, seeing as she won't be a kid much longer.

Next chapter is the final one of her childhood arc and marks the official end of the war, and will include some MAJOR revelations, including what I consider to be one of the main twists of this story's setup. Look forward to it!

As always, thank you to all my readers and reviewers. I love reading your speculations and theories, last chapter had a lot of really good ones. Some of you are definitely on the right track, and even the ones that weren't were interesting and creative enough they could merit their own stories. I look forward to reading more of them. I'll see you all next week!
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Sute loves fuinjutsu, the war ends, international politics are actually interesting for once, and a major secret is revealed which leads to possibly the biggest twist yet.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Life number two had taken the most amazing turn possible.

Sute loved fuinjutsu.

Medicine was fun and all, but she'd been in med school in her old life and then spent two years working in the field before dying. Half the reason she went into it was just because she already had a disturbingly detailed understanding of human anatomy, both in terms of "healthy and whole," and "effects when under a metric hell-ton of torture and agony." Taijutsu fell into a similar category (thanks, old dad), and while ninjutsu and chakra were brand new to her, she still felt wary of using elemental ninjutsu since her natural affinity tended to be really finicky and dominant.

But fuinjutsu?

Fuinjutsu was new and unfamiliar territory, and she had no reason to fear showing off her passion for it because it was a learned skill and not some crazy kekkei genkai that would mark her for death.

Harusame couldn't mentor her directly too often since he had to prioritize training Utakata, so instead he gave her a bunch of scrolls, textbooks and workbooks to use—some taken directly from her own giant book of storage seals—and would review her progress at least once a week. Studying fuinjutsu could admittedly be tedious at times, requiring countless hours just copying down the same seal until she could recreate it perfectly from memory. Creating one's own seals could end disastrously without enough experience, so the early days involved much more time dissecting preexisting ones than experimenting with making her own.

But when looking at the potential applications, she found the time and occasional bouts of boredom more than worth it.

Fuinjutsu had to be the single most versatile and terrifying skill available to shinobi. One only had to look at Konoha's Yellow Flash, whose nickname rose from his ability to teleport, to understand the incredible potential it posed. Reviewing the textbooks jogged memories of other alarming feats from the original canon, like Orochimaru screwing Naruto's chakra control, or just Naruto's seal, period. Sute would probably call "hax" on it if it weren't so complicated.

As it stood, the craft was so complex that barely anyone dared tackle it, focusing instead on more direct ways to improve their battle prowess. But not Sute. She had spent her first life in a world where the average person would probably be able to live an absolutely peaceful and boring life without ever witnessing the horrors of war firsthand. Knowledge mattered more than being able to fight, so she loved the intellectual challenge fuinjutsu provided, and it helped that a lot of it just
Sute loved fuinjutsu, she couldn't say that enough. She loved puzzling out complex formulas and transcribing them into something she could actually understand. And on the occasions Harusame let her experiment with it (under his close supervision, of course), she loved pushing the limits with it to create ridiculous and outrageous things. Her work was pretty basic thus far, a mishmash of basic fuinjutsu principles mixed with knowledge she'd attained in her first life.

Really, she was so lucky she knew so much math and science from her first life. It gave her even more leeway with creating and improvising seals even in the early days when Harusame picked over her work with a fine-toothed comb.

Punches too weak? Put some force-amplifying seals on her gloves! Patients in need of constant monitoring? She could set up a seal to monitor their vitals and alert the medical staff instantly if something went wrong. Zabuza needed to practice lifting super heavy swords? Weight-multiplying seals made it so simple. Everyone smelled like fish? No one really cared but she made odor neutralizing seals anyway, which ended up being picked up by Kiri's ANBU for rather obvious reasons.

As long as one had reasonable math skills, access to decent resources, and a strong and flexible imagination, anything seemed possible with fuinjutsu, and Sute had all of those in droves.

And so her days fell into a content monotony of seals, hospital work, and training, with a few stints in Torture and Interrogation to help add some spice to her routine. All in all, life was just peaceful. Peaceful sounded like a weird word to use to describe life in a place called the Bloody Mist, but she couldn't think of a better one. Time seemed to fly by, and Sute was elbows-deep in a man's chest down in T&I one day when a chuunin entered with news of the war's official end.

In the end, her expectations had been turned on their head somewhat.

Juzo did not, in fact, die and pass on his sword to Zabuza, though Sute still remarked on his continued state of being alive every time she saw him. There were also more bloodline limit users around than she expected, but then, any kekkei genkai counted as "more" based on her limited foreknowledge of Kiri's political atmosphere. Some had managed to win their place in Kiri through undeniable heroics during the war meriting them international reputations, which... good for them, she supposed.

Shortly after the war ended, an official declaration arrived to the Mizukage's office announcing the Fourth Hokage's inauguration, a bit of news Sute relished. Nothing ever came of her brief brush with the remnants of his genin team that had whittled it down to only one member, and she had no idea how to feel about that. Konoha never contacted Kiri about it, and while word began to slowly spread among her peers about that ill-fated mission, Sute never got grilled for details by her peers or anyone higher in the ranks. As far as she knew no one in Kiri ever learned she was involved with it at all, and she'd prefer to keep it that way.

In any event, with the war finally over, the hospital no longer had such a heavy influx of injured people to heal so she got taken off the super-busy rotations. Meaning she had a bit more free time than before, which she of course spent training other skills. Sute had neglected her physical conditioning a bit with all the other stuff going on, and she wasted no time pressuring Utakata into more spars or otherwise just getting herself back into peak shape.

A couple weeks into February, she was sitting at a table near one of the training grounds eating lunch after a solo training session when she heard footsteps approach from behind. "Hey," a vaguely familiar voice greeted, and she turned her head to find a white-haired boy standing behind...
Hello, Mangetsu-kun," she greeted lightly. It had been a while since she'd seen the Hozuki boy, one year her junior; he used to visit the Ringo household before Ameyuri died, and after graduating she occasionally saw him at the hospital. Funnily enough, his clan's secret technique that let them basically melt into water if anyone ever tried to hit them did not make him impervious to other physical ailments, like headaches. Or sunburns.

(His skin boiled when he got sunburned really badly. Literally boiled. Seeing his skin with half-formed bubbles in it had been both fascinating and slightly disturbing, even for her. That... had actually been a new one for her. Which was quite disturbing to realize so she promptly shoved that thought away before she could process the implications.)

"Mind if I join you?" he asked, hefting a small bag presumably holding his own lunch, and she shrugged.

"Go ahead." He nodded at her as he plopped into the bench across from her, and for a while they just ate in silence.

"I have a brother now," Mangetsu said after a while, and Sute arched an eyebrow.

"Really? Congratulations."

"Thanks," he said, though his eyes still remained on her, a contemplative gleam in them. "His name is Suigetsu."

"That's a nice name," Sute hummed, contently biting into her grilled saury.

"Do you remember the first time we met?" Mangetsu asked carefully, and Sute smiled.

"Of course. You were banging on the door at five in the morning demanding Ameyuri train you to use the Kiba." Four year old Mangetsu had been fairly annoying, and she seriously suspected the main reason he hadn't been murdered back then was because of his status as the Hozuki clan's heir, and also the Second Mizukage's grandnephew. Killing an annoying toddler wouldn't be worth the political storm his family would raise. "I got really annoyed and threw my pillow at you to shut you up."

"Yeah," Mangetsu agreed with a nod. "You called me Suigetsu." Sute just smiled at him, perfectly placid and just a bit coy.

"Hmm, did I? How interesting." She took another bite of her sandwich, Mangetsu eying her all the while.

"...Your 'old memories.' Did I ever appear in them?" Sute paused, her grip tightening on the bread minutely, before quietly lifting it to her mouth once more.

"You should eat," she told him, and he didn't push the topic.

After that, Mangetsu always seemed a little more attentive to her occasional comments about her "old memories."

It happened in October.

News trickled into the village slowly, just rumors at first, but it quickly rippled across Kiri like a
flash flood. Soon the village hummed with whispers, the words "Konoha" and "Kyuubi" on everyone's lips, until finally the Mizukage made the news official:

The Nine-Tailed Fox had gone on a rampage in Konoha and claimed the life of the Fourth Hokage.

Already Sute could hear some of the veterans debating on the strategy of attacking now while Konoha was still weak, but she knew nothing would come of it. They had just finished one war, and no village was prepared to handle another, especially not Kiri. They had suffered heavy casualties over the course of the war, including four of the Seven Swordsmen, and their own Mizukage was expected to retire soon. Launching a sudden assault now while still recovering themselves would just lead to more harm than benefits.

She listened to the rumors with half an ear as she strolled down the street with Utakata one day in search of lunch, mindful of her friend's silent demeanor. He'd been increasingly quiet since the first rumors about Konoha arrived, more on edge. People kept glancing their way before swiftly averting their eyes, so brief she'd miss it if she hadn't been so observant of her surroundings at all times.

"Something on your mind?" she asked casually, and Utakata snapped his head to stare at her, his lone visible amber eye narrowing.

"...It's nothing."

"It's not nothing," she retorted calmly. "You're obviously bothered by something. I'm not blind."

"It's..." Utakata faltered, and glanced away with a small scowl. His bangs covered the eye facing her, leaving her unable to read his expression beyond the bitter twist to his mouth. "It doesn't matter. Just, forget it." Sute hummed in thought.

"Is it related to what happened in Konoha?" He immediately stiffened at the question, halting mid-step and standing in the center of the road rigid and tense. Sute just looked at him expectantly, waiting patiently for him to break the silence.

"...Don't," he whispered, and then continued stalking forward while pointedly not looking at her. She frowned, trailing after him at a sedate pace.

"Don't what?" she pressed. "You're being vague again. You do that a lot you know."

"Some things are private, Sute."

"Yeah, but bottling up your emotions is bad for you. Half this village is going to burn out because of this whole 'killers can't have feelings' thing, I'd prefer you weren't one of them."

"What does it matter to you?" he bit out, still not looking at her.

"Well, we're friends, aren't we?" she deadpanned and he stopped again, his back even more rigid than before. As she skipped around him he slowly turned his head to look at her, his eye wide.

"What?" he whispered, so soft it was almost inaudible, and she huffed in annoyance.

"We spend almost every day together," she pointed out flatly. "We train and spar together, eat lunch, hang out in our free time—hell, you've been to my house. I don't have much experience, but I'm pretty sure that's enough to qualify us as 'friends'."

Utakata didn't respond right away, just continued staring at her wide-eyed, but then something
harsh glinted in his face. "You're a fucking genius," he said slowly, his hands balling into fists at his side. "You're a prodigy and one of the smartest people I've ever met, you've spent the past ten months learning fuinjutsu, and you still haven't figured it out?"

"Figured out what?" Sute challenged, and his scowl deepened, his lips curling back to reveal his teeth.

"I'm a fucking jinchuuriki!" he screamed, and then froze, the rage vanishing from his face to be replaced by a look of pure horror. Eyes widening, he backed up and then vanished in a body-flicker, leaving Sute standing alone in the center of a suddenly quiet street.

"...Oh," she said lamely.

Utakata sat alone on the edge of a lake at one of the more isolated training grounds, holding his knees to his chest as he stared at the still water. Mist drifted across the surface, leaving the air damp and the ground soggy and squishy. He didn't care, just continued to stare at the water in silent brooding.

Soft footsteps padded across the soil behind him and he stiffened, squeezing his eyes shut as he sucked in a sharp breath. He recognized the smell that he inhaled with it, of herbs and spices with a slight undertone of dew dripping from leaves just after a storm. Then something cold and wet touched the back of his neck and he jumped with a yelp, jerking away to spin around wide-eyed only to find himself face to face with a can of iced tea.

"Wh-what the hell!?" he sputtered.

"In anime, people usually touch canned drinks to people's cheeks," Sute informed him blandly. "I told you, I don't have much experience with this stuff." Utakata just gaped at her, having half a mind to ask when the hell she had time to watch anime. When he didn't respond, she tossed the can which he caught on reflex more than anything, and then proceeded to plop onto the ground next to him. She pulled out another can with some stupid overly sugary drink, a small hiss sounding as she popped the tab.

"What are you doing here?" Utakata asked, finally finding his voice.

"Drinking soda?" Sute responded, lifting her can for his perusal with an arched eyebrow, and he scowled.

"That's not what I mean." The girl just shrugged, reclining lazily as she sipped from her can.

"I just spent three hours looking for you. Can't you show some gratitude?"

"Why?" he demanded, scowling. "Didn't you hear me earlier? Do you know what a jinchuuriki even is?"

"A jinchuuriki is a human vessel used to seal a bijuu," Sute replied almost automatically. "Because bijuu chakra is corrosive to humans, jinchuuriki are usually chosen at young ages based on compatibility between their chakra, so that the bijuu's chakra can safely assimilate into the jinchuuriki's chakra coils during development. This typically grants them access to the bijuu's powers, most notably nature releases typically seen only in kekkei genkai."

Utakata just gawked at her through the brief spiel, taken aback by the overly clinical description of his burden. His mouth thinned and he looked away, scowling once more. "You forgot the part about the seals potentially breaking," he bit out. "You heard what happened in Konoha. The bijuu
are constantly fighting to take control, the smallest bit of leeway can allow them to break free and go on a rampage. All that training I do is to make sure the Rokubi doesn’t break free."

"With that sort of attitude, it probably will," Sute deadpanned, catching him off-guard. "You called me a genius and a prodigy, and said I spent the past ten months learning fuinjutsu. I can’t make one, but I still know a thing or two about how jinchuuriki work. Actually, those lessons make a lot more sense now," she murmured absently to herself, slipping into that strange language she sometimes used.

"You’re using that gibberish again," Utakata muttered dryly, earning a flat look from her.

"Not gibberish, English," she corrected. "Forget it, doesn’t matter. The point is, I know more about fuinjutsu than the average person. And jinchuuriki seals? It’s pretty obvious if something’s wrong with it." She poked his stomach as she spoke, making him recoil and scramble back with a startled look. "Yours is stable, Utakata. I never would’ve picked up on it if you didn’t tell me. Now will you stop moping already? That stupid canned tea’s going to get warm."

He just stared at her in shock, his mind struggling to process it. "You... you don't care," he said slowly, and she snorted, rolling her eyes.

"You owe me, I’m going to have to change a lot of plans because of this." Her words held no malice or anger, just tired resignation, and after a long moment Utakata just slowly nodded and popped the tab on his own can. Listening to the light hiss, some of the pressure lifted from his chest in time with it, his soul feeling just a bit lighter.

Later that night after returning home, Sute went to the guest room, stripping the mattress to reveal a hole in the box springs hiding a tattered notebook. A fine layer of dust coated the cover, and she had to wipe it with a tissue before opening it to keep her hands clean. It had been some time since she’d last pulled out her notes on the Naruto canon, having little need or time for it during the war.

She leaned against the wall as she flipped through it, idly tapping a pen against her chin as she skimmed the pages full of childish English handwriting. Brief profiles of the main cast, a basic roster of the Akatsuki members, any memories related to Kiri and its residents. She stopped on a page divided into two columns, the second filled with text while first remained blank. Pulling the cap off the pen with her mouth, she proceeded to scribble in the first blank.

"Year Zero, October: Naruto born.

She steadily worked her way down the list, jotting in years and designing a rough timeline. Year Thirteen would mark the start of the Naruto canon. Before that, Year 7 or 8 would feature the Uchiha Clan Massacre, the month unknown, and Year Three or Four would have Neji’s dad die.

Her mouth curled in thought, and she flipped ahead to the next two pages to leave two final thoughts in an empty section:

Year Thirteen – Fifteen/Sixteen (Blank Period): Two Jinchuuriki dead. Utakata likely one. Stop Akatsuki.

Year Five – Deadline to leave Kiri.

She capped her pen and dropped it into her pocket, reviewing her notes briefly before quietly closing it and returning it to its hiding place. As she walked away her mind wandered back to the last item on that timeline, her expression souring for a brief moment before smoothing over once more.
Year Fifteen/Sixteen: Sasuke kills Itachi.

All other events unknown.

She had been on a boat headed to an island off the shore of Africa when she noticed one of her peers hunched over a napkin, scribbling away intently. "Oh hey, is that Obito?" she asked idly as she peered over the woman's shoulder to see a drawing of a dark-haired boy with goggles pulled over his eyes, and instantly received a giant, wide-eyed stare.

"You recognize him?" she gasped, her eyes seeming to sparkle, and she shrugged.

"Yeah, I watched Naruto all the time." The woman's face lit up with excitement, grinning at her excitedly.

"Oh my gosh, that's amazing! I never thought I'd meet another fan out here, everyone in my med program thought anime was for kids!"

"Ah, yeah, that happened at my school too," she commented with a small smile. "It kinda bummed me out. I ended up having to stop reading because med school got too busy though. I've been meaning to get back into it, especially since it's over now, but..." She trailed off and shrugged, and the woman sagged slightly but still remained smiling.

"Well, that's okay. I had to stop too, and I ended up marathoning the manga during summer breaks. It'd be nice to talk to someone about it again though, maybe I can help fill in the blanks. When did you stop?"

She didn't even have to think to remember, she had specifically chosen which point to stop reading to give herself the best sense of closure possible. "I stopped right after Sasuke killed Itachi."

(You never saw the tragedy behind Itachi's actions.)

(You never learned what lay under Tobi's mask.)

(You never witnessed Naruto befriend Kurama, saw the Five Great Villages form an alliance, learned the extent of Danzou's crimes, or saw her adopted mother briefly cameo thanks to the Edo Tensei. She never watched any of the filler arcs that gave life and breath to her best friend Utakata, showed Juzo joining the Akatsuki and working with Itachi before being slain by the Fourth Mizukage, or learned that the same Mizukage would be manipulated by Obito.)

(Her last true memory of the series was a black and white image on her computer screen of Sasuke leaning against a wall next to Itachi's corpse, blood smearing his forehead as he stared forward blankly with the words "To be continued.")

Chapter End Notes

Well, here it is, the most important twist of this whole story: Sute has an incomplete knowledge of canon.

Some people have actually picked up on this. This lack of knowledge is 90% of the reason why Sute is so casual about the world. Almost everything that happens after
Itachi's death is unknown to her, ranging from his actual motivations to Obito's identity (though she actually DOES suspect that one pretty heavily). I chose to do this because I'm sick of seeing near-omniscient SI!OCs, and I also don't want her to become nitpicky about changing and/or preserving canon. She has no idea how the future will unfold, or even a good chunk of what's going on in the present, which will heavily impact her decisions.

That said, she does know a few things from after she stopped reading. That friend from DWB and some others gave her small spoilers in the forms of fan art and photographs of cosplay, as well as the occasional accidental slip or mention. But otherwise, she is mostly in the dark.

With this though, all of the major twists regarding Sute's first life have been revealed. There are still some secrets regarding her second life—some of which have already been guessed, and one major twist even she won't predict—but at this point the major mysteries regarding her first life have been revealed. It's been fun reading all your speculations about her background, and I look forward to seeing your theories on the future events! Especially since, as Sute noted, she plans to defect by Year Five of her timeline.

Next chapter features a time skip. For the record, this chapter ends with Sute at age 11. We'll pick back up when she's 14.

Unrelated: if you guys like speculating about people's mysterious backgrounds, I recommend reading my other story, Echoes of Light. It's about an Uchiha OC (not an SI!OC) and is set in Konoha during the canon timeline, but it focuses more on the impacts his existence/survival has on canon as a whole rather than being purely OC-centric. The best way to describe it is "see how many Naruto fic cliches I can take and twist completely on their heads". It's definitely slower than this one (particularly at the start), but it's chock-full of twists and mysteries, and I'd LOVE to see some more speculation on them like I've gotten here. Especially since in the draft I'm nearing one of the biggest twists of all, and one of the scenes I've been anticipating for a VERY long time now.

...I also recommend it because I am seriously tempted to do a crossover between that and Bloody Oracle, because Sute and Ryoko would make the most terrifying and canon-breaking alliance ever even if Ryoko's dead for 99% of the story. They even both have "Bloody" in their monikers, it's a perfect match! Thing is, the plot I have in mind heavily revolves around the upcoming major reveal in EoL I just mentioned, which means it'd be spoiler-heavy for EoL.

So, yeah. If I do write it, it'd probably be more enjoyable if you'd read EoL first. Which will have Chapter 50 posted either today or tomorrow, so it's definitely not a quick read. Hence why I'm recommending it now.

Anyways, thank you for reading and enjoying Bloody Oracle so far. Next week's update will probably be on Sunday, because I usually have work on the first Saturday of every month, so don't be too surprised if it's a day late. I'll see you all next week!

And please, do leave your thoughts on this chapter's reveals. I'm eager to see what you guys think will happen from now on.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

It is now the future. The future is very boring.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sute breathed through her nose as she pressed her back against the boulder, her hands lifted into a still seal and her eyes close. Around her the world felt still, the only sound the soft whistle of wind carving its path through the gaps in the rocky terrain. A barely audible crunch of gravel sounded from the left, and she cocked her head to the side, funnelling chakra to her light. Footsteps so light they were almost inaudible, slowly padding across the ground.

Exhaling quietly, she began to cycle through hand seals, her pace slow and leisurely as she continued to listen to the footsteps. They moved slowly, circling around the larger rocks and sparse vegetation that littered her mental map of the area and taking care to avoid making too much noise. Her hands formed the final seal, her fingers pressed together in the ram seal, and the corner of her mouth quirked into a smirk.

Shruuunk!

"SHIT!" A loud curse echoed through the silence as the earth split apart, stone walls springing from the gaps to form a tight dome. Sute flipped into the air and flashed through more hand seals as she turned over to study the dome, watching the walls converge upon the startled Mist ninja. Flashing through his own seals, sparks began flickering around his hands, the man releasing a loud roar as he jabbed a knife-like hand at the nearest wall.

In elemental rock-paper-scissors, lightning beat earth. Lightning could travel through earth and break it apart—more specifically, the intense heat and energy could warp stone on an atomic level, making it temporarily more fragile and thus more susceptible to fracturing. When one added chakra to the mix, that usually meant that doton jutsu would crumble or fall apart beneath a suitably powerful raiton technique.

Which was perfectly fine by Sute.

The second his fingers made contact with the wall the rock rippled and softened, turning to mud. Confusion flickered across the man's face before swiftly morphing to horror as the mud slid downwards to reveal a barrier wall made of pure chakra, a paper tag hovering in the center.

Sute's smirk grew, cheeks puffing up as she finished her own hand seals. Water spewed from her mouth and shot through the gaps in the stone to directly strike him in the face. The sudden blast knocked him off balance, and that was all the time the barrier walls needed to finish merging, slamming into him from four sides to trap him in a pyramid-shaped barrier.

Even as she landed Zabuza and Heki materialized around the imprisoned man, the latter slapping a paper tag at the barrier. The chakra walls rippled around Heki's hand as it passed through, slamming the tag against the back of the prisoner's head. The prisoner shouted in alarm but then
froze as the writing on the tags lit up, and his eyes rolled in the back of his head before he slumped forward unconscious.

"Well, that was anticlimactic," Heki commented dryly.

"Tell me about it," Zabuza grumbled, crossing his arms with a scowl. "And here I thought we'd finally get some action for once. That other guy we caught barely put up a fight."

"Don't complain. At least we can go home early and skip the hospital checkup."

"Yeah, great," Zabuza grumbled, crossing his arms. "And then we can go right back to patrol duty tomorrow. Dammit, I was hoping for some actual action for once after the whole Cloud ninja thing."

"Then why did you hang back?" Sute asked, her voice saccharine sweet as she strode over to them. "I mean, you didn't have to sit back and wait for me to do all the work. You could have come in any time swinging that tiny katana of yours." Zabuza snorted, rolling his eyes in disdain.

"Yeah, right. We're the ones who had to actively patrol the area and actually fight. All you had to do was just plant traps and wait."


"Do I need to report you two for bickering?" Heki cut in impatiently, instantly silencing the two teenagers. When it became clear they wouldn't argue, he gave a satisfied nod. "Thought so. Ringo, what are the seals to release the barrier?"

"Just boar and ram," she responded with a shrug. "For the record, this seal is still really experimental. Don't expect those hand seals to work on future variations. When it's done, I'm going to have it set up to require people's chakra to be specifically keyed into them to activate them."

"Good to know." He flashed through the two seals she mentioned, the chakra barrier soon dissipating and the four tags fluttering to the ground. Sute snatched them with a single swipe of her hand and slipped them in the pouch on her hip, while Heki hefted their unconscious prisoner over his shoulder. "Alright, let's head back and drop this guy off at T&I. We'll probably have to report to the Mizukage, too."

The two teenagers just grunted as they followed, Zabuza still looking mildly irritated while Sute grimaced. "Do we have to see him?"

"We found a group of deserters who managed to bypass Kiri's borders with a scroll containing sensitive information," Zabuza retorted, gesturing to the pouch on Heki's hip undoubtedly containing the scroll in question. "He'll probably want to hear about this in person."

"Great," Sute grumbled under her breath, grimacing. It wasn't like she disliked the Third Mizukage, per se, but... well, talking to him always left her on edge for some reason. She'd rather not interact with him more than strictly necessary. Which might be a problem since she needed to talk to him if she wanted a mission in the field. Right now, most of her skills could be classed as support. While she'd finally developed the appropriate muscle mass needed for her preferred fighting style, she still needed more actual experience with it. Not many people besides Utakata were willing to fight her more than once, and he was becoming too familiar with her styles to be a really good test subject anymore. Sute needed some more field experience, and soon.
She sighed loudly, drawing Zabuza's attention. "What's on your mind this time?" he asked.

"Just a bit stir-crazy, I guess," she responded with a lazy shrug. "Most of my work has been in-village lately. Don't get me wrong, I love the hospital and all, but—actually, no, that's a lie," she corrected herself with a sour scowl. "The hospital is a freaking mess and I am the only person there who knows how they're actually supposed to operate. I swear, some of the trainees don't even know how to take care of bedpans and catheters."

Her nose wrinkled in disgust, sticking out her tongue as she shuddered. She'd hoped she had finished with a majority of that stuff back when she graduated med school, as hospitals usually had nurses or students around to handle those tasks. But nope, here the useless peons she had available couldn't even handle that. Hell, one of them even had the nerve to throw up after cleaning bedpans! Bloody Mist was a total misnomer. The hospital was full of wimps.

"Well, good news is you're probably good to follow this guy into T&I," their other team member interjected. "You can take out your stress on him, and then ask Mizukage-sama for a field mission."

"Eh, I think I'll ask for some time off instead," she mused. "I kinda want to focus on my own stuff for a while, maybe go on a trip."

"You mean a vacation?" Zabuza actually snorted at that. "Good luck with that."

"Not a vacation, a research trip," Sute retorted testily. "I've got some stuff I want to look into, and I've sucked Kiri's libraries dry."

"Even if it's beneficial, don't get your hopes up," Heki cautioned her. "At the very least don't expect to be allowed to go alone. Tensions are getting pretty tight lately, we're probably headed for another civil war." The two teenagers grimaced at that, growing appropriately somber. Both of them knew civil war was likely in the very near future, but it was another thing to actually hear it said out loud.

"Yeah, screw it, I'm asking for a mission," Zabuza declared dryly. "I want to get the hell away from this clusterfuck of a village." The others just grunted, not particularly disagreeing with him. Village pride had never been particularly strong in Kiri, but right now Sute was almost ready to start counting the days to her imminent defection.

Sute suppressed a sigh as she sat in the lobby of the Mizukage's office, tapping her foot in a silent rhythm to try to ease her nerves. Right now Heki was meeting with him about the deserter they'd caught, as well as the other two he and Zabuza had killed. Neither of the teenagers had been informed of what the scroll contained, but in the end it didn't matter. As long as she didn't have to meet with the Mizukage, she didn't particularly care.

At fourteen, Sute had entered Year Three of her self-made timeline of canon. Her skills had advanced a great deal during the past few years, especially in terms of her iryo-ninjutsu, poisons and fuinjutsu. Her poisons and seals had become pretty standard among the ANBU in particular, just basic barrier seals for defense and fast-acting paralytics. At this point she'd suitably established herself as a supporting pillar of Kiri.

And yet, she was still either stuck in the hospital or on patrol duty.

This time she didn't bother suppressing her sigh, allowing herself to sink into the chair. Zabuza, who was sitting next to her, obviously noticed her change. "What's wrong, bored?" he grunted.
"Just thinking about patrol," she grumbled. Patrol had to be one of the more boring jobs available to Mist ninja. Since the war's end a lot of people had been rather unhappy, and given the long history of civil war that haunted the Land of Water the village had seen fit to step up their patrol. Thanks to her foreknowledge, Sute knew that Kiri was right to be worried (see: the Kaguya clan, just... the Kaguya), but that didn't make most of the patrols any less boring. Not much actually happened on them.

"Would you prefer to work another seventy-two hour shift in the hospital?" Zabuza asked.

Sute paused. "...I'll need to think on that," she replied honestly. "They're both annoying and frustrating, and we just got a batch of trainees which makes it even worse than usual."

"Tch. If you say so." Zabuza rolled his eyes and let the conversation end there. The two fell into a brief but not unfriendly silence, each lost in their own thoughts. The two definitely couldn't be called friends, but then, Kiri wasn't known for encouraging strong bonds and friendships among its forces.

Frankly, at this point Sute considered it a bizarre miracle she'd hit it off with anyone. While being picked up by Kiri had its own set of problems, she had to admit she probably wouldn't have fit in as well in super-friendly and open Konoha, or power-hungry and highly-structured Iwa. Her previous life had left her just a bit too off to fit in with most places, and she enjoyed the general freedom Kiri provided.

Plus, she actually knew some stuff about Kiri. Her gaze slid over to Zabuza, a small smirk playing on her lips. "So, Zabun," she said, enjoying his small twitch at the nickname, "have you run into any cute little orphans lately?"

His sour look said it all. "What is with you and bringing up orphans all the time?" he snapped impatiently. "Do I look like the kind of person who'd get along with kids?" Sute opened her mouth to respond with a cheeky remark, but at that moment the door opened and both teenagers instantly straightened in their seats, turning to the door attentively. Heki stepped out with a casual saunter, a young boy with light-colored hair and purple eyes appearing behind him briefly.

Karatachi Yagura had to be some kind of record setter. Sute didn't know his age off the top of her head, but he was definitely younger than her right now, and he'd already reached jounin and become the favored candidate for the Mizukage's successor. Sute felt her own accomplishments to be kind of underwhelming compared to the blond boy, but then again he was the jinchuuriki for the Sanbi.

Even now, looking at the deceptively small boy, Sute couldn't help but remember his sealing just a year prior. As Harusame's apprentice in fuinjutsu, Sute had been present for the ritual with the expectations that she would learn to maintain and administer the seals after her teacher's inevitable demise. While she had seen Utakata's seal a few times and studied the process in theory, actually seeing it in action was a different thing altogether.

It probably would have been more shocking if not for how eerily familiar the scene felt. Her mind kept flashing back to that unspoken night from the end of the Third War, huddled in a cave with her hands pressed against her ears as Rin screamed—

Nope. Not going to think about it.

"We trust you to handle this matter appropriately," Yagura said, drawing her back to the present. His purple eyes were blank and unreadable as ever as he faced Heki, his thoughts hidden, but the bald jounin just nodded.
"We will not disappoint you, Yagura-sama," he vowed, and the young-looking boy nodded before closing his door. Heki exhaled through his nose as he turned to the teens, nodding at them. "We're done for the day. I'm going to drop off the scroll back at the archives. We'll meet up at the gates tomorrow, same time."

"Fucking finally," Zabuza grunted, rising to his feet impatiently. "I'm going to the training ground to find Juzo."

"Oh, so he came back from his mission alive?" Sute asked flatly, and Zabuza snorted, the bandages covering his mouth stretching as he smirked.

"Yeah, bastard came back yesterday. Fine by me, gives me a chance to take Kubikiribocho the classic way." Surprisingly, while he'd garnered his reputation as the "Demon of the Mist" Zabuza still had yet to actually become a Swordsman. Partially because Juzo was still alive and thus had Kubikiribocho, which suited Zabuza's fighting style best out of all the swords, but also because most of the unclaimed swords had gone missing after the war.

Funnily enough, Mangetsu had already inherited Hiramekarei though, which was hilarious in Sute's opinion since he was known as the "Second Coming of the Demon." She tactfully did not remark on this irony to the original Demon since she did want to have a somewhat cordial relationship in place for the time he eventually defected.

"Tell him I say congratulations," she deadpanned, and Zabuza snorted, knowing exactly how Juzo would receive that news.

"Yeah, yeah, I'll pass it on. Later." He nodded at her and headed off, and Heki snorted softly, grabbing Sute's attention.

"You're still teasing him about that?"

"I'm not teasing him, I'm congratulating him on his will to live," Sute informed him sweetly, though her eyes betrayed her amusement. The older man smirked, rolling his eyes.

"And here I thought you were just a stupid kid, but no, you're just crazy. See you tomorrow, Ringo." He patted her shoulder and strolled out, leaving Sute to follow at a sedate pace. Heki had been a member of her platoon during the war, though they never interacted. She only remembered him because he usually worked with Ao, who come to think of it she hadn't seen since before the war ended. Maybe she should seek him out sometime, he'd probably remember her.

Ah well. Catching up with old war buddies could wait until later, for now she just decided to take advantage of the early end to her patrol shift. She hummed as she strolled through the streets, her good mood persisting until she reached her destination. She rapped on the door three times and rocked on the balls of her feet as she waited, and soon enough it opened to reveal a certain emo-haired teenager.

"Sute?" Utakata looked only mildly surprised to see her, and she smiled.

"Hey Uta," she greeted brightly. "Have you seen shishou? I want him to review some stuff I've been working on."

"Not lately," Utakata replied with a small frown. "He's still busy." Her smile fell at that, slumping with a small sigh.

"Still?" she grumbled impatiently. "It's been two months. Dammit, how long is this going to take?"
"Who knows?" Utakata said, shrugging lightly. "You know how he gets when he's on a roll." Lately Harusame had been holing himself away to work on some secret, experimental project he wouldn't tell anyone about. It had been a good two weeks since Sute had last seen the man, and it had started to grate on her patience since she really wanted his input on some medical seals she'd made.

She sighed in disappointment, running a hand through her hair. "Oh well. Are you free tonight?"

"...You don't want to spar, do you?" Utakata instantly looked much more wary, almost grimacing at the prospect. He might be her go-to sparring partner, but that didn't mean he liked it.

"Nah, no sparring tonight," she assured him with a shrug. "Patrol duty ended early today, so I want to use tonight to unwind before having to go out."

"What would we even do, then?" Utakata relaxed marginally at the reassurance he wouldn't be spending the night in excruciating pain, though he still remained a bit on edge and wary of her.

_Smart boy_, she mused with a small smirk. Aloud she said, "I figured we'd grab an early dinner somewhere and then hang around the training grounds. Maybe stop by the Black Rabbit and listen to some stories while getting a drink, I hear the _rakugo_ performer there is pretty good." Utakata frowned.

"That's... surprisingly mundane," he commented, and she shrugged.

"Can't always be training to be a fine-tuned killing machine," she responded idly. "Everyone needs hobbies, it keeps us sane." _Rakugo_ was an unfamiliar concept to Sute—it was a traditional form of comedic storytelling that involved a single speaker portraying multiple characters—but she figured it was worth checking out, especially since she needed more leisurely activities to do with Utakata. Reading and gardening didn't exactly work as group activities.

Utakata seemed to consider it carefully, looking hesitant at the idea. Venturing into public settings rarely went well for him, people tended to react badly around their village's older jinchuuriki. Still, soon his features cleared and he nodded minutely. "Alright, I guess I don't have anything else to do tonight."

Sute brightened at his agreement, and he jumped as she snatched his wrist with an eager smile. "Great! Let's go!" She proceeded to drag him into town and he offered small noises of protest, barely managing to break free long enough to close and lock his door. Still, some of the tension seeped out of his posture and she could sense a degree of fond exasperation from her friend.

And if she noticed any particularly dark looks directed at them as she dragged him through the streets of Kiri, well, she'd just take care of them later. For now she focused on finding a decent seafood restaurant and actually relaxing for once.

Her second life had been full of nonstop working and plotting for the future so far, it felt good to take a break and enjoy a peaceful moment for once. She'd resigned herself to never being able to totally relax the moment she realized the universe she'd been reborn and where she ultimately ended up, but just for a few minutes, Sute could pretend things were fine.

Miles away from Kiri, Kakashi perched on a branch staring at the sea, his eyes narrowing behind his porcelain mask. ANBU missions usually involved assassinations or infiltration, but today's mission broke the usual pattern and served as nothing more than fancy surveillance. Nearby he could hear Genma shifting on his own branch, abandoning the usual professional demeanor...
required of ANBU to give a low whistle.

"Those whirlpools look pretty violent," he commented. "You knew Kushina better than anyone else here, did she ever give you any tips on how to get past them?"

"She mentioned a seal somewhere on the mainland that would respond to anyone with Uzushio blood," Kakashi replied. "Crane, can you see anything on the island?"

On a lower branch Crane, the sole female member of the small three-man expedition team, gave a small hum as she undoubtedly activated her Byakugan. "Status is unchanged from the previous visit. The chakra barrier is still active and shows no signs of being disrupted. Should we search for the seal on the mainland?"

"No," Kakashi decided. "Our objective is to ensure no one's penetrated the barrier."

"Well, mission accomplished, then," Genma huffed lightly. "At least the view's pretty. Sunset always looks nice, don'tcha think?"

"Mongoose, should I remind you I am married and have a daughter?" Crane responded dryly, and Genma made a choked noise before vehemently denying any insinuations that he'd been flirting. Kakashi ignored them, his Sharingan spinning beneath his mask as he studied the island across the violently churning waters. Buildings and pillars sat in piles of rubble along the shores of the glittering sea, the stone tinted orange and gold by the sunset.

The bi-annual visit to Uzushio always left him with mixed feelings, the remains of the village a sharp contrast to the colorful and lively stories Kushina used to regale his team with about her childhood. Sometimes he felt his teammates had been lucky to never see the shell of their former allied village, Kushina's descriptions of a living and vibrant Uzushio forever preserved in their memories. Under other circumstances he'd probably avoid it, wanting to preserve the images Kushina had given him, but as it stood he had a vested interest in checking on it.

He wondered how long it would be until the day he'd arrive to find the barrier gone, taken down not by an Uzumaki but by a green-eyed girl.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to Sute's teenage years! She is now 14 and deadlier than ever. Not much to say, this is pretty much a transition chapter. Got some lovely bits of foreshadowing. Also, Yagura's age is just... what even is it? I originally had him as the acting Mizukage, but decided against it last-second because it's over-emphasized in canon how young he looks (though we all know how Kishi draws way more mature-looking characters than their actual ages, so hard to be 100% sure), which gives me the impression he's probably younger than Sute. So, yeah. Mizukage's apprentice it is.

Next chapter has some more interesting stuff in it. Anyways, thanks for reading as always! I got some amazing reactions last time, and I really hope you guys continue to enjoy this story. Before I go, a question to assuage my curiosity: what animal do you think would be most fitting for Sute to make a summoning contract with? I'm not even sure if she'll have one, but I really can't think of a good fit for her. Best would probably
be snakes, but, well... you know that's not an option.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Sute introduces Utakata to her new friend, and then shows off the fruits of her training.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was a peaceful, misty morning, and Utakata had decided to enjoy a rare day off from training by relaxing and read a book at one of Kiri's few parks.

Or he was trying to, anyway.

His eye twitched as a certain figure hovered at the edge of his peripheral vision, practically radiating excitement. He hefted the book a little higher, focusing his gaze on the page intently. The blob moved closer. Utakata pointedly ignored it. The figure now hovered behind his shoulder, strands of stringy brownish-green hair dripping into his line of vision and trailing onto the page. He just moved the book slightly so it wouldn't obscure the words.

Then a snake suddenly plopped down onto the book.

"WHAT THE HELL!?!" he yelped, dropping the book. Sute leaned forward with a giggle, gingerly extending her hand towards the reddish-brown serpent which proceeded to slither up her arm.

"Hello Utakata!" she greeted.

"Is that a mamushi!?!" Utakata sputtered, scrambling back from it.

"Yep!" Sute confirmed cheerily. "Say hello, Mushi-Mushi!" She raised her arm towards him and the snake lifted its head, flicking its tongue at him.

"You have horrible taste in names," Utakata deadpanned even as he leaned away. "Seriously, what the hell!?!" Sute just laughed, plopping onto the bench next to him.

"I got him during the patrol yesterday!" she explained, gently rubbing her thumb over the snake's head. Apparently it seemed to enjoy it since it tilted its head in flow with the motion. "Aww, just look at him, he's just a widdle baby. So cute!"

Utakata had no words. Of course Sute would find the most venomous snake in the Land of Water adorable, she'd probably find the freaking Rokubi cute—"Wait, that's a baby?" he blurted, gawking at the foot-long serpent.

"Yep. Thanks to chakra enriching their genes, the Kiri mamushi tend to grow up to three feet in length!" Her eyes actually sparkled as she said that, and on that note so did the freaking venomous mamushi.

Not for the first time, Utakata found himself wondering why he'd chosen to be friends with this insane girl.
Then he realized that he essentially had no other options, and felt his shoulders slump in dismayed resignation. "Good for you," he replied emptily, his voice ringing hollow even to his own ears. If Sute noticed the vast void that had suddenly consumed his soul she didn't let on, too enthralled in cooing at the snake like it was a kitten or puppy.

After five years of friendship with the semi-psychotic girl, Utakata had come to accept that Sute had her quirks. At fourteen, the girl could hardly be described as "feminine". While her face had lost most of its baby fat, her figure leaned more towards androgynous than feminine, with a slim build and relatively flat chest. Her brownish-green hair had grown even longer and stringier, the uncontrollable mass of seaweed-like tangles tending to droop into her face and obscure her features if she didn't tuck it behind her ear.

Sute had come to embrace this "seaweed monster" aspect of her identity, not even bothering to try to tame her hair anymore, partially because it was damn effective at scaring her enemies. During their spars in the bogs of Kiri, she looked like a damn swamp monster. Speaking of which...

"So Uta, any chance I can convince you to have a friendly little spar?" the she-demon asked, plopping onto the bench next to him. Utakata leaned away from her as she slung her arms over the back of the bench, closing his book with a slight grimace.

"You're not planning to use that, are you?" he asked warily, eying the snake clinging to her arm, and she offered him a friendly smile that sent chills down his spine.

"Of course not," she assured him. "I plan to save this guy's venom for foreign missions. The Kiri mamushi are only local to the swamps around Kiri, so it'd be a pain for foreigners get their hands on one to produce an antivenom. Besides, I actually like you," she added with a casual shrug. "This stuff? It's gonna hurt like a bitch. I'm not putting you through that."

Utakata paled, and remembered the other reason he was friends with Sute: it was safer being liked by her than hated.

It was well known in Kiri that Utakata was Sute's preferred partner for sparring. Mainly because not many people were willing to fight her.

To be fair, her fighting style did include a lot of broken bones. And poisons. And torn-off noses and ears. Utakata had become her go-to sparring partner by default because of the fast regenerative powers the Rokubi granted him. Had he been a normal person, his body probably would have been screwed beyond repair by this point. When it came to taijutsu Sute still struck fast and hard, going for the most savage and brutally effective attacks possible.

Of course, when ninjutsu got added to the mix her style changed up a bit.

Like most Mist ninja Sute's most commonly used nature was water, but even then she still lacked a good deal of mastery over it. Utakata had the advantage here in terms of technical skill—the Rokubi had water as one of its natural elements—which meant she'd have to count on her creativity if she wanted a chance at winning.

Take today's spar, for instance.

Swimming through the swamp, Sute allowed her senses to stretch outwards as her eyes closed against the murky water, a small bubble of air floating around her nose and mouth to allow her to breathe. Below, she felt algae tickling her stomach through the skintight fabric of her shirt, her bare arms brushing the leafy tips with each movements. Above her she could feel each individual ripple
of water, the placid currents lapping against the multitude of partially submerged trees that populated the swamp.

A single, light footstep touched down on the surface, barely rippling. There.

Her mouth curved into a devious smirk as she swam upwards, the water currents shifting in tandem with her to pull the algae and seaweed towards her and twist it around her body. She burst from the water with a roar, the thin algae film coating the surface stretching and melding with her form to give an illusion of the water remaining whole while still rising.

Utakata spun to block the ferocious swipe of her kunai with his bubble blowing pipe, the blade clashing against the steel pipe with a loud clang. He jumped back and pressed it to his lips, blowing a small flurry of fast-moving bubbles her way. Sute ducked under the water once more before they could hit her, the surface algae smoothing over while the seaweed fell back to the bottom of the swamp. As she swam away she could hear muffled explosions from the bubbles hitting a tree behind where she'd been standing.

Thinking fast as she slowed down, she closed her eyes and began flashing through hand seals. Her chakra steadily saturated the surrounding water, the currents slowing as she altered the water's viscosity to become thicker and more slime-like. Above her the surface remained stagnant and still as ever, the algae film hiding her from view and leaving him none the wiser to the change.

Utakata apparently had started to lose his patience, because she felt the ripples of bubbles crashing into the swamp water. Sute smirked and then pushed off for the surface, the thick water taking extra effort to swim through but also slowing the bubbles' progress. She dodged them and exploded into the air with a glorious splash, finding Utakata hovering above the water inside one of his bubbles no doubt reinforced with chakra.

As she surged towards him she rushed through hand seals and some of the swamp water rose with her, coating her arm and taking on the shape of a spinning spike around her fist as she aimed a sharp punch at him. The dense water-spike collided with the bubble and it exploded, the resulting shockwave sending her plummeting downwards while Utakata flew back and caught himself on a nearby tree. Her back hit the swamp but instead of crashing through the surface the water bounced under her like jello, her body slowly sinking inwards and giving her ample time to leap to her feet. She could see a look of surprise flit across Utakata's face at the unexpected reaction from the swamp and didn't waste the opening his surprise gave her, flashing through another set of hand seals. Three whips of water shot from the swamp's surface, all three swinging towards him and slicing through nearby trees. Utakata cursed as he jumped out of the way, the branch he'd been standing on sliced to shreds by the sharp streams. Gritting his teeth, he raised his pipe to his lips to launch another attack.

However, before he could blow it twitched, and then the pipe suddenly flew out of his hands. Sute smirked as it landed directly into her open palm, smiling smugly at the shocked teenager. "So, how many spares of these do you have?" she called in a sing-song voice. Utakata just kept looking between her and his empty hand before scowling, recognizing the unspoken threat for what it was.

"I yield," he allowed grudgingly, and she smiled as she nodded in acceptance. Utakata scowled as he jumped down to the water, the surface barely rippling at his landed and strode over to her. Sute extended the pipe towards him gingerly, and he scowled as he snatched it away. "How did you do that?"

"Easy, chakra threads," she replied cheerily, waving her fingers with a grin, and he did a double-take as he saw beads of chakra form on each tip.
"Chakra threads? Like, what the puppeteers from Suna use?"

"Yeah," Sute confirmed with a nod. "I figured they can technically attach to anything, so it was worth a shot."

"Since when have you been able to make those?" he questioned warily, and at this point Sute paused.

"That's... kinda hard to answer," she admitted thoughtfully. "I only really got them down in the last year, but I've been working on them on and off since I was, oh, five or six, I suppose."

"Wait. Five or six?" Utakata's visible eye widened in surprise, his jaw dropping. "That's at least eight years. How did that take you so long?" Sute frowned, but she supposed his surprise was a bit endearing in a way. True to her supposed genius status Sute tended to pick up on most jutsu and techniques faster than average, so he probably didn't expect her to struggle with something for eight years.

"You may not have noticed, but I actually have very large chakra reserves for a normal person," she responded dryly, raising an eyebrow. He clamped his mouth shut at that, looking a bit taken aback, and she had to snort and roll her eyes. "Seeing as you have big reserves too, surely you've noticed that the more chakra you have, the worse your control is."

"And creating chakra threads require around fine chakra control," Utakata surmised, and she dipped her head in affirmation.

"Exactly. When I was a kid I was always looking for ways to work on improving it, especially after I decided to learn iryo-ninjutsu, and chakra threads seemed like a great exercise. Just making them requires a lot of precise control, let alone controlling them the way puppeteers do." Shrugging, she added, "I didn't really have anyone to teach me how to make them though, so I didn't spend much time on it. I finally managed to make some during my second deployment, but even then I couldn't really do much with them. I only got to a point where I could start thinking about weaponizing them about a year ago."

"I must admit, it's definitely unconventional," Utakata mused thoughtfully. "Same goes for changing the water's viscosity. I've only seen people do it to preexisting bodies of water two other times, usually they keep it restricted to water created by their jutsu."

"Probably because it uses up a lot of chakra," Sute suggested dryly. "Won't lie, I'm not going to be up for another spar after this."

"Fine by me," Utakata said with a lazy shrug, and the pair started heading for shore. "You're incredibly sloppy and repetitive when it comes to ninjutsu. Your current style also won't hold up in other environments. You need more variety in your arsenal."

"Says the guy who surrendered because he lost his bubble wand," she retorted wryly. Utakata didn't even appear phased by the jab, just shrugging his shoulders with a fluid grace that screamed disinterest.

"Bubble ninjutsu works fine for me most of the time. I usually kill people before they get close enough to take my pipe."

"I didn't need to get close," Sute sang, wiggling her fingers with a smirk. Her ever-emo friend just scoffed and rolled his eye.

"I'm serious, though," he continued. "You're good at improvising, but that won't always be enough.
Your poisons and fuinjutsu are fine, but you need to work on your ninjutsu more, especially if you want to become jounin like you say."

"I know," Sute sighed, shoulders slumping in defeat. "I'm trying to learn some more. I'm working on convincing Kisame-senpai to teach me this doton jutsu that lets you basically swim underground." *Doton: Subterranean Voyage* had been one of Kisame's more memorable techniques from the anime, even if she hadn't known the name then. When he'd demonstrated it for her she'd recognized it from his fight with Team Gai at the start of Shippuden, when the Samehada protruding from the ground like a shark fin.

Speaking of which, Kisame still didn't have the Samehada. Slightly worrisome, but Sute was pretty sure she hadn't broken canon yet. She remembered her friend from Doctors Without Borders once mentioned Kisame had taken it after killing the previous owner, though she hadn't gone into specifics to minimize spoilers. It had come up when she'd shown her a picture she'd saved of the previous generation of Swordsmen, though the memory of the image itself had grown too hazy to be relevant in this life and only came to Sute much later.

"Earth, huh?" Utakata mused. "That's superior to water, so it might be hard for you to learn. Unless..." He paused, a quizzical expression sliding over his face as he looked at her askance. "Hold on, *is* water your natural affinity? You seem to struggle with it quite a bit... Have you ever been tested?"

Sute paused at that, tilting her head to look at the sky through the thick canopy above them. A rueful smirk played on her lips as she watched the leaves blow in the wind, the sun peeking in and out of sight behind them.

"I have a water affinity," she responded, and hopped onto shore before continuing on her way. Utakata stood still for a moment but she soon heard his footsteps resume, the taller boy trailing after her in contemplative silence.

"Then maybe I can help you after all," he commented. "I know this one water jutsu, Wild Water Wave..."

Sute sighed as she trudged down the street, now thoroughly exhausted. Despite her low reserves from the intense spar, Utakata had made her drill that stupid water jutsu for nearly two hours before finally acquiescing to her demands to go home so she could have some time to recover before her hospital shift the next day. Under normal circumstances she would have left earlier, but Utakata was just so damn *smug*. She had pride, dammit!

As expected, she *still* did not have a natural knack for water release. Sute still despised the glorified-spit aspect of most water jutsu, and Wild Water Wave seemed only marginally better than the Water Bullet. It produced a rainbow, which... okay, even she had to admit that was pretty. But still, she didn't *like* doing it, and that made it even more frustrating trying to learn it. Which meant she made more mistakes.

"I should've just left earlier," she grumbled irritably, kicking at a small pebble in her path. The sun had already started to set, the air taking on that late-evening gold tint that seemed to only be magnified by the faint fog that constantly swathed Kiri. Time had passed quicker than she'd expected, and she still needed to work in the greenhouse before she could go to bed. Tomorrow she had an early start at the hospital, the first of seven straight days of twelve-hour shifts.

A chilly breeze blew past her and she paused to shudder in it, gnawing her lip before picking up her pace a bit faster. When her house finally came into view she decided to save some time and just
hopped over the fence instead of walking all the way to the gate, lightly tapping the wall to apply a liberal dose of chakra to disable the security seals before doing so. Her paranoia had always been high in both lives, and the possibilities provided by fuinjutsu in this one had not helped the matter.

From there it took little time to circle around to her greenhouse, applying a liberal dose of chakra to disable the security seals around the door as she passed. Pleasantly warm air greeted her while she reactivated the seals behind her, the air just a bit dryer than the constant fog that hung over Kiri. Kicking off her shoes, she grabbed a watering can and went off to start her rounds, tending to the various poisonous plants and flowers she'd accumulated over the years.

Moist soil crunched beneath her bare feet as she skipped along the stepping stones set up throughout the greenhouse, seeping through the cracks between her toes only to be washed away by stray droplets from her watering can. She paused next to a Venus flytrap, patting the teeth-like tips on the leaves with a fond smile and watching it close around her finger.

"Sorry, not a fly," she giggled, gently pulling her finger free, and sighed contentedly before turning to the plant on the opposite side of the path with a frown. The Naruto world had its own unique variation of water hemlock, one of the most toxic plants in North America in her old world. However, this world's variation was a bit harder to grow than the naturally abundant weeds she remembered. The white blossoms looked pathetic and wilted, the delicate petals brown and curling around the edges.

Sute just glowered at the dying plant in disgust, her cold eyes making her stance on its desire to die perfectly obvious. "You just have to be difficult, don't you," she grumbled. Technically, she could just get it from the swamps outside Kiri proper, but it would be infinitely more convenient to have her own personal vein. Water hemlock was one of the few poisonous substances she'd worked with in both lives, and she had three different poisons she liked to make with it.

She growled irritably as she clasped her hands together, her fingers knitting together as if praying. "I swear, if you weren't so useful—"

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lab long ago, placing one hand on the thin paper door and sliding it open to stick her head inside. The room looked undisturbed from her last visit, her notebooks still scattered about the tables and the seals locking her chemical cabinets still glowing and active. In a terrarium in the back corner she could see Mushi-Mushi coiled along a thick branch, looking rather content as he bathed under the dull glow of a light bulb.

Frowning, Sute flipped on the lights and stepped inside, absently setting the bokken on a table as she passed it. "What the hell?" she muttered as she moved towards a hanging scroll on the far wall, lifting it to examine the seal hidden beneath it. The kanji had a faint red glow to it, signaling someone had entered the room recently, but there'd be no way to get inside without crossing at least one other seal in her house.

She breathed through her nose and clicked her tongue, letting the scroll fall back in place. "A false alarm, huh," she muttered darkly, her eyes flitting towards Mushi-Mushi. "I'm guessing you won't be able to tell me if it was or not."

Of course the snake didn't respond. It was a normal Kiri mamushi, totally incapable of speech, and it wasn't like she was Orochimaru.

Sighing, Sute just strode towards the terrarium and picked up a scroll lying next to it, unfurling it and swiping her thumb across the surface to unseal its contents. A frozen mouse popped out, and she lifted the lid of the tank to drop it inside. Mushi-Mushi's demeanor changed swiftly, the serpent slithering off the branch and descending into the leafy foliage that populated the tank.

Sute left the snake to stalk its "prey" and turned her attention to the table, checking over her notebooks to make sure none had been disturbed. One had been left open to a page detailing care instructions for Mushi-Mushi in the event she suddenly had to leave Kiri on a mission. The main reason she'd taken the snake to meet Utakata that morning had been to gauge his potential as an emergency snake-sitter. Useful notes for Utakata, but hardly interesting to an intruder. The other books looked untouched, thankfully, but she wouldn't let her guard down just yet.

Quietly closing the book, she grabbed the bokken and clutched it tightly. Kenjutsu still didn't really come naturally to Sute, but since the war's end she'd trained with the remnants of the Seven Swordsmen enough to have a decent grasp on the art. Naturally she'd covered the wooden blade in seals, strengthening the material and making each blow that much more powerful. Not good enough to justify taking it into the field, but if someone had broken in it would fulfill her needs fine.

Eyes lingering on the array painted along the blade, she then nodded to herself and glanced briefly at the terrarium. Mushi-Mushi had yet to pounce on his "prey," still busy stalking in preparation to "ambush" the dead rodent, but she didn't feel like waiting to watch the show. She still had to check the house and the rest of the security seals, and after that she had to go back to the greenhouse and finish watering all the plants.

The thought dampened her mood considerably, her mouth pulling downwards in irritation. "Dammit, I better not need to reconfigure these things," she grumbled, heading for the door and flipping off the light.

As she closed the door and trudged through the halls with a sour glare, she failed to notice the shadowy figure hidden in a tree just outside the long window lining the hallway, a single red eye watching her stalk out of sight from behind a striped mask before disappearing in a swirl of air.
Busy chapter. Fun fact: this is basically a Frankenstein chapter, where I had a lot of these scenes as snippets from different chapters before merging them together. This underwent a LOT of rewrites. I'm not 100% satisfied with the sparring match, though it does work a bit better than it did originally. The main point of this chapter is to give everyone an idea of how Sute's advanced over the past three years. Still has some struggles with water ninjutsu, but she's creative about it.

And also, yes, that IS Tobi watching her at the end. For reference, he's wearing the mask he had in the flashbacks to the Nine-Tails Attack and his meetings with Itachi. On that note, it just occurred to me this is my second story where Obito is secretly stalking the main character.

So last time I asked about potential summons, and I was honestly blown away by all the responses! Everyone had so many ideas, I even learned about animals I've never heard of before. (Did you know there's another category of amphibians called caecilians, which look like snake/worm hybrids? Also, pine martens are a thing, and the word "sable" probably comes from the animal sable.) It's seriously been awesome reading all your thoughts on what animals suit her best, and I'm now basically off the fence and will probably give her a summoning at some point. I'm currently leaning towards two options suggested by readers, though it'll be a while before summons will appear.

Anyways, as always, thank you for reading! This chapter was a bit messier/busier than I usually like, but I think it turned out pretty well. I'll see you next week!
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Hospital work is boring. And a bit graphic. But mostly boring.

Working in the hospital had its ups and downs.

On the one hand, Sute had to appreciate the stability and routine it provided. Shinobi hospitals had no shortage of work for the medics, especially in Kiri where the academy preached violence above all else. "Shinobi" was really just a glorified term for "hired killer and soldier," a value especially true in a place called the Bloody Mist. Iryo-ninjutsu, useful as it was, simply wasn't as appealing to a bunch of budding sociopaths as epic death matches.

Which, to be fair, hospital work could get boring and tedious at times. But in reality, the hospital could be home to some of the most violent and gory images people would ever see.

Take today, for instance.

"Okay, kid, just... calm down," she muttered, trying not to sound too exasperated. "Just take a seat, or... something. And stop staring!" The trainee next to her didn't seem to hear her, his wide eyes focused on the still form being carted away by her fellow medics.

This guy's death had been one of those inevitable ones. Combat-oriented chuunin, carted in two days ago with severe third-degree burns after running into enemy forces on a mission. Bad prognosis, not expected to survive the week, kept alive only long enough for T&I to try to get information about his mission from him even though any medic could tell them there was no point. Not exactly a common occurrence, but certainly far from rare either. They'd at least taken pity on him and kept him on the nice pain killers.

The trainee who currently looked ready to hyper-ventilate had been doing his rounds delivering lunches, and unfortunately stumbled into the room right before the patient went into cardiac arrest. Poor kid had then tried to attempt standard CPR procedures—which, horrifying to do with someone with burns of that level—before other medics arrived and declared the time of death.

With a sigh she grabbed his shoulders and gently steered him out of the room, pointedly heading in the opposite direction from the morgue while silently bemoaning the loss of one of their few trainees. Seeing as all Kiri medics had spent their lives up to this point training to actively kill people, she'd expect them to be able to handle a dead patient better. Even if a trainee went straight to the hospital, they'd have seen a corpse at some point during the academy.

Alas, that was not the case though. It seemed even here Sute was an anomaly because she couldn't form the necessary levels of attachment to necessitate the sort of shock from losing a patient, especially cases like this trainee who was about to have a breakdown despite being absolutely inculpable for the death of a guy who seriously should have been declared dead on arrival.

Or maybe it had to do with the fact some of the guy's skin had come off during CPR and stuck to his hands. Sute could sympathize with that reason, at least. Gross.
After siting the kid in one of the break rooms with a medic from another division, Sute quickly made her escape and took off to find a different trainee to handle the rest of the cleanup. The patient might be dead, but there was still plenty of work to be done in the now-empty room. Floors needed to be scrubbed and disinfected, the sheets had to be stripped and washed... Or burned. Burning them would work too.

Either way, that work was too menial for the fully trained medics to bother with. Knowing the lunch rush was on hand, she headed for the kitchen and pushed open the door while skimming the room for the gray smocks reserved for trainees. Sure enough she found one of the two remaining trainees (because let's face it, that other kid was guaranteed to drop the program and enter regular forces now) hunched over the dishes away from the cooks. Sute wasted no time crossing the space towards him, calling sharply, "Oi, trainee."

The boy stiffened at her commanding tone and spun to face her, standing at stiff attention. He looked just a little incredulous when he saw her, no doubt wondering about her young age—he looked like he was only two or three years younger than her—but he showed no outward signs of disrespect. "Yes, ma'am?" he asked.

"Drop the dishes and follow me," Sute told him briskly. "Patient just coded in Room 114." The cooks looked a bit disgruntled at having one of their lackeys pulled away, but the disapproval faded upon hearing the room number. Everyone had been aware of the lost cause in Room 114, and no one envied the poor soul that had to clean his room.

Her orders given, she turned and stalked out, and she could hear the clatter of dishes as he scrambled to follow her. He had to run to catch up to her, trailing close behind. "Any special tasks beyond routine procedure?"

"Strip the bed. Separate whatever sheets can be salvaged for laundry, set aside the rest for disposal." Pausing, she glanced at him sideways and asked, "Just to check, have you eaten lunch yet?"

He seemed a bit startled by the question. "Uh... yes?"

"Then grab an extra bucket from the janitor's closet. Be prepared to follow standard disposal procedures for bodily fluids. If you feel upset, do not come to me," she added with a pointed look. "Grab Sagawa or Mio instead."

The trainee looked very incredulous at that, and just a little pale. "Uh, y-yes, ma'am... Understood." He nodded and quickly scurried away, looking a bit more apprehensive now. As he ran off he nearly bumped into another trainee just walking around the corner, jumping to the side to skirt around the other boy before continuing on his way. The new arrival watched him dart out of sight and then turned to look at Sute curiously.

"Amuro-san seems on edge," he commented. "Is something wrong?"

"He's just off to clean one of the rooms," Sute replied with a nonchalant shrug, silently filing away the name of the other boy for future reference. As she spoke another medic—Sagawa—turned the corner where Amuro had just disappeared from, his blue eyes instantly lighting on her.

"Ringo," he greeted. "There's a patient asking for you."

"...Seriously?" she asked, staring at him in mild disbelief. Not many people specifically requested her. Running over the brief list of patients who didn't mind her brisk bedside manner, she guessed, "One of the Swordsman?"
"Nope," Sagawa denied blithely, and while she puzzled over that he glanced at the trainee. "And you, if you're not doing anything right now, get to laundry duty. There's a backup."

"Yes, sir," the boy said with a nod, and quickly turned and headed off to get to work. As he left Sute watched him closely, her mouth tugging into a small frown. Something about him felt... familiar.

For the time being she shelved the thought, turning her attention to Sagawa who gestured for her to follow. "So if it's not a Swordsman, then who is it?" she asked curiously as they walked down the hall.

"Eh, I don't want to spoil the surprise," he responded with a wry smile, and she pouted at him but didn't press him further. After working with together for the past five years, Sute knew Sagawa wouldn't tell her if he didn't want to. She'd developed a pretty good rapport with the black-haired man despite their ten year age gap, and he'd been the one to take her under his wing when she first started between deployments.

"Can you at least tell me how bad it is?"

"Nothing major, just typical post-mission checkup," he summarized. "Shouldn't take too long." Sute hummed in acknowledgment and decided to drop the line of questioning for now.

"By the way, any idea what's going on with Maki-san?" she asked. "His office was empty this morning." Maki was one of the higher-ranking medical ninja in the hospital, her direct supervisor and a career medic who'd had this office longer than she'd been alive.

"You haven't heard?" Sagawa asked blandly. "He decided to retire." Sute paused, considering that. People did not just suddenly "retire" from being medical ninja. Maybe in her old world doctors would suddenly decide to enter early retirement due to medical malpractice or lawsuits, but in the shinobi world? Shinobi hospitals needed every damn medic they could get, even the shoddy ones could at least be trusted to do some petty menial tasks to lighten the work load for the others.

And in Kiri, "retire" took on an especially unique double meaning.

"He tried to steal medical records and run, didn't he?" she asked flatly, and Sagawa merely arched an eyebrow.

"I am not at liberty to say what transpired, exactly," he responded simply, which was basically as blatant as he could get in confirming it.

"Yeah, yeah, I know," she sighed, running a hand through her hair. "No speaking bad of the military dictatorship and all that." As Sagawa shot her a slightly alarmed look she just sourly resumed her march, grumbling under her breath, "I swear, why do all the best ones turn out to be traitors?"

Considering she had plans to desert Kiri within the next two years or so, Sute was perfectly aware of how hypocritical that statement was.

Still, that wouldn't be for some time yet, so for now she focused on her job and pushed open the door to the examination room Sagawa had been steering her towards. Her sour expression lifted though when she saw who was waiting for her. "Mei-chan!"

"Hello, Sute," the auburn-haired woman greeted, dipping her head with a small smile. Terumii Mei had to be one of Sute's favorite people in Kiri. Beautiful and deadly, she fit the image of the *femme fatale* perfectly, the kind of woman with an eye-catching face and body outshined only by her
lethal skill on the field. Sute always felt frumpy and ugly with her, just like that one Yuki woman from her platoon, but she didn't particularly mind. "It's been a while, hasn't it?"

"More than two months," Sute agreed as she closed the door. "Last I heard you were on a long-term mission in Hot Water for another two weeks." Currently the beauty was leaning against the exam table, wearing a beaten-looking uniform suggesting she'd just come fresh from the field.

"I was. We found the target rather fast so it didn't take as much time as we expected, though I took a nasty blow during the fight. It's still sore, so I thought it'd be safer to check it out after reporting to the Mizukage."

"Smart woman," Sute mused as she walked over. "So, where'd you get hit?"

"Let me show you," Mei responded, and even as she spoke she began peeling off her shirt, making Sute's eyebrows disappear into her bangs. Modesty didn't really matter to medical ninja, but it was still a bit surprising to see someone acquiesce so easily to stripping in front of her, especially someone as jaw-droppingly beautiful as Mei. When she removed her shirt it just made her curves all the more obvious, her torso probably the thing of wet dreams save for the ugly bruising below her right breast.

"Ah, yeah, that looks bad," Sute commented wryly, eying the dark patch with a critical eye. "You probably have a fractured rib. Shouldn't be too hard to fix."

"Thank you, Sute-chan. You're a life-saver." Mei smiled at her kindly, and she huffed but didn't object as she raised glowing green hands to Mei's ribcage. For all her beauty Sute knew she'd never have any competition for the right to tend to Mei, all because the older woman had been born into a clan of kekkei genkai users.

Mei was one of the rare bloodline users who hadn't been chased out of the village. Not only that, she possessed not just one, but two kekkei genkai, giving her the ability to both produce lava AND create corrosive acid mists that could melt just about anything it touched. And more than that, she knew how to use them. Which was the main reason she hadn't left yet.

At this point Mei was one of the very few Mist ninja to sport an S-rank in the bingo books—a feat claimed by even fewer kunoichi from any village. Her mere presence in their ranks added weight to Kiri's name, which, combined with some of her undeniable heroics during the war, made her safe from the majority of the purges. Sadly though, that didn't spare her from the prejudices. While Mei had definitely earned plenty of respect, Sute was one of the few medics willing to treat the woman.

Mending broken bones took a bit more effort and training than other forms of healing, due to all the complicated scientific knowledge needed about how bones formed and mended. Larger, messier breaks could be near-impossible to heal with chakra alone, Tsunade had earned her reputation for good reason. Fortunately, Mei's rib had only a minor fracture, just a partial crack with no bone chipped away, which would be rather simple to fix.

While Sute couldn't see Mei's rib she could feel the bone respond to her chakra, subtly shifting and repositioning so the broken edges lined up perfectly and pressed together. It took only about ten minutes of intense concentration before the bone had fully recovered, and after that it didn't take long for the purple bruising to fade too. "All done," she declared as she lifted her hands from Mei's now perfectly unblemished skin. "Congratulations, your potential career as a bikini model is still intact."

Mei barked out a sharp laugh, her green eyes twinkling with delight. "Oh, Sute-chan, you're too cute," she giggled, pulling her shirt back on. "Thank you again, I feel better than ever, as always. I
should repay you sometime."

"I'm literally doing my job," Sute deflected with a shrug. Then, "But I wouldn't be opposed to a spar."

Mei smirked at her, her eyes taking on a more dangerous gleam. "Sweetie, you might be good, but I'm S-rank. I don't want to accidentally break you."

"Worth a shot." Sute shrugged as she headed for the door, and Mei smiled.

"Really, though, I do want to thank you," she mused. "Maybe a spa day? We could go to the onsen and get massages afterwards."

Sute paused, and then smiled thinly. "Thanks for the offer, but I'll have to pass," she said with a small bow. "Unlike you, I am currently caught in the throes of puberty and I do not want to show off my naked body to any strangers."

"Blunt as ever, I see," Mei hummed, giggling into her hand. "Alright, cakes at that little bakery by the weapons district?"

"Much better. Next time we both have a day off?"

"It's a date," Mei agreed, and Sute opened the door with a smirk.

"Funny, I didn't think I was your type," she replied dryly, referring to the older woman's common moaning about marriage. The older woman playfully batted her shoulder.

"Ha ha, very funny. I'll see you later, Sute-chan." She waved as she headed off, leaving Sute to watch her disappear down the hall while rubbing her sore shoulder. Only after Mei disappeared did her smile fade, shoulders slumping with a sigh.

"Damn, now I really want to try a hot spring," she grumbled, slipping into English almost unconsciously. Fourteen years of living in Pseudo-Japan-Ninja-World, and Sute had yet to engage in one of the most popular Japanese amenities. Visiting an onsen sounded so appealing, especially after hearing other kunoichi talk about how relaxing it was to spend time there with friends, but she just couldn't.

Ameyuri's words echoed in her mind, softer and smoother than the quiet rasp her voice had been reduced to in her final hours. "Never show your bare back to anyone."

Sute still didn't know what made her bare back so special—she'd never been in the mindset to look at it when she had access to a mirror, and she couldn't see anything when turning her head—but she wouldn't ignore her guardian's warning. Ameyuri's other final words told her she had known and kept perhaps Sute's greatest secret, and that alone gave her reason to trust her.

After Mei took her leave, the rest of the day passed pretty uneventfully. A few more patients trickled in over the course of the day for reasons varying from training accidents to old battle wounds flaring up, but all in all it was a standard shift with nothing particularly worth noting.

Sute ended up feeling pretty good when her shift ended, having a bit more energy than she'd expected. Good enough to maybe do some fuinjutsu experiments tonight, she'd gotten a few new ideas from one of the cases. She was halfway home and mentally bemoaning Kiri's pesky policy about wanting access to any experimental seals and poisons when a familiar voice drew her from her musings.
"Ringo." She turned to find Zabuza leaning against a stone fence, one of those default "cool guy" poses that males in this world seemed to adore so much.

"Momochi," she greeted, raising her hand in greeting. "Yo." He pushed off the wall and strode towards her, falling in step as she continued on her way.

"We have a mission tomorrow," he informed her gruffly, and she snapped her head to look at it.

"A mission?" she repeated, looking at him with renewed interest. "As in, an actual mission and not patrol?" Zabuza snorted and rolled his eyes.

"Yeah. The Mizukage just briefed me on the basics. There's been reports of possible foreign ninja entering the Land of Water. We sent a team out to investigate last week but they haven't sent any word back. The Mizukage is sending a second team to follow up on it."

"Let me guess, I'm on medical detail in case we find the first team?" she surmised dryly. Kiri did not really care about its forces' well-beings like Konoha did, but it did need all the manpower it could get. They'd lost too many shinobi during the Third War, and with the constant looming threat of civil wars they couldn't afford to waste any of their resources.

"That, and we don't know what we're up against," Zabuza confirmed with an incline of his head. "Don't know who all was sent out, but the Mizukage seems spooked. This team has three powerhouses on it." Of course he included himself in that count. "Far as I can tell, the only reason we're setting out tomorrow instead of now is because the other guys just got back from a mission and he wants everyone to be properly rested."

"What, no mention of my hospital shift?" she asked dryly, and Zabuza snorted.

"Yeah, that too. He sent a messenger to the hospital to let them know you're off the roster. We meet at the gates tomorrow at dawn, so go home and get ready."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm on it. So what, did you look for me just to tell me we're working together?" She eyed him curiously as she spoke. Sute and Zabuza didn't exactly have an overly close relationship. They worked well together and had a decent professional relationship, but they didn't really seek each other out to grab lunch or just hang out. Most of their interactions were strictly professional, and it was strange for him to find her even if just to inform her of their upcoming shift instead of letting a messenger do it.

Come to think of it though, they'd been working together a lot lately... She perked up at the thought, eying him curiously. "Hey, don't tell me..."

Zabuza scoffed at her implied query, recognizing the direction her thoughts went and rolling his eyes. "Tch, yeah right. I haven't been asking the Mizukage to work with you if that's what you're thinking, it's just been working out that way. The only reason I'm the one telling you is because I happened to see you on my way home, you'll probably find a messenger waiting for you at your place."

"Oh, fair enough." Sute nodded, and then added thoughtfully, "Hope he didn't trigger any of the traps. It'd be a pain to have to drag them to the hospital when I just left."

"Don't waste any chakra healing them if they did, save your energy for tomorrow. Like I said, the Mizukage's spooked enough to delay the mission so we're all in top shape."

"That's definitely a bad sign," Sute agreed lowly. Kiri normally did not particularly care to keep its forces in fighting condition before sending them on missions. If the Mizukage wanted them to be
properly rested, he must have a good reason to suspect dangerous enemies. "And you said we don't
know what we're up against?"

"No idea. Like I said, the initial reports suspect it's foreign agents. The higher-ups want us to do
refreshes on the big names just to be safe."

"...I don't have a bingo book," she pointed out flatly. After the war ended Water had largely closed
its borders with most missions restrained to the country, so most Mist ninja hadn't really needed
them. The only ones she'd seen were a special edition listing local missing-nin, and even then
usually only hunter-nin had those but Kisame had let her glance through his.

Zabuza scoffed. "Right. Forgot you're not ANBU. Forget it then. Doubt another village would send
someone big enough to get in one anyway."

"Good point." Infiltrating Kiri easily translated as a suicide mission. Everyone knew Kiri did not
return prisoners, getting captured meant a death sentence. All visitors to the Land of Water
received intense scrutiny, even (and sometimes especially) harmless-looking civilians. It'd be wiser
to send someone unknown to infiltrate it, but at the same time, the more talented shinobi tended to
be the ones who ended up in bingo books.

At this point, if Sute managed to identify someone undercover in Kiri, she had half a mind to leave
them alone just out of respect for their survival skills.

"One more thing," Zabuza continued. "If there are any, we'll be aiming for live captures though so
we can pump them for information." Sute perked up at that, flashing a sharp grin of her own.

"Live captures?" she repeated, green eyes glinting with anticipation. Live captures had been one of
her earlier ideas for specialization before she'd graduated, and she still relished the idea of being a
capture specialist. Naturally, Zabuza knew this perfectly well since he'd submitted to her request to
test her knot-tying skills on him during their first meeting. His arrogance had been his undoing
back then, though to be fair no one would expect a six-year-old to know how to securely hog-tie a
person, including their thumbs.

...She'd carried over some really weird skills from her first life.

She had a feeling Zabuza still hadn't gotten over that incident. Even now, eight years later, the
older teen seemed to cringe and grimace. "Yeah. That's the other reason you're on this mission,
you're probably one of the only people here crazy enough to train in non-lethal takedowns. Just...
don't go overboard, I guess."

"No promises," Sute sang, grinning at him excitedly. Zabuza just scoffed and stalked off, leaving
Sute to return home alone in a much brighter mood. She still had a lot to do before she could leave
—finding a greenhouse-sitter on short notice was always so annoying—but she didn't care. For the
first time in three months she was finally getting out of Kiri and back into the field. She didn't
know what the mission would entail, but she was already relishing it.

At the same moment in the hospital, a certain trainee walked down the halls, pushing a fabric-sided
cart full of dirty sheets. He slowed to a halt as he spied an open door, turning his head to look inside
curiously. Another trainee knelt on the floor with a bucket of water, busy scrubbing down the tiles
with an intense look of concentration. The bed itself was bare, the sheets piled atop the mattress.

Smiling, the boy rapped lightly on the wall next to the door and poked his head inside. "Sorry to
disturb you, Amuro-kun, but I'm here to collect laundry," he announced cheerfully. The other
trainee jolted slightly in surprise and quickly straightened, turning to face him with a nod.

"Oh, of course. I just stripped the bed, give me a sec to wash my hands and I'll just toss them over."

"No need to wash your hands. It's going to the laundry anyway."

"...Good point." Amuro nodded and grabbed the crumpled-up sheets from the mattress, tossing it towards the cart. He misjudged his aim and the mass started to descend short of its goal, but the other trainee quickly shot his arm forward to catch it before it could hit the newly-cleaned floor.

"Careful, you don't want to start over," he chided good-naturedly as he dumped the load of sheets into the cart. Amuro laughed sheepishly, flashing a gap-toothed grin.

"Heh, yeah, starting over would suck balls. This stuff is so lame, I want to get to the good stuff."

"I know, laundry is such a bore. But I guess everyone has to start somewhere. I should get back to my rounds, hopefully you can finish the room soon. You should probably wash your hands one more time now that you've touched the sheets."

"Yeah, I should." Amuro nodded, sighing as he turned to the attached bathroom. "See you later, Kabuto."

The silver-haired boy just nodded and continued on his way, pushing the cart with a pleasant-looking smile.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

The mission happens. Some old faces make a reappearance.

Chapter Notes

WARNING: This chapter contains descriptions of gore and dead bodies. Reader discretion is advised.

Zabuza hadn't been lying about Yagura pulling out any stops with assembling this particular team. Sute raised an eyebrow as they ran along the road, studying the two larger members of their team idly.

Just on their own, Kisame and Fuguki stood out from the crowd. Suikazan Fuguki was best described as a giant, towering above the already noticeably tall Kisame by nearly two feet for a grand height of eight feet. Combined with their unusual coloring, the two men cut very imposing figures. It made perfect sense that these two would be the ones to inherit the monstrous and sentient Samehada, easily the most terrifying sword of the Seven Swords.

The shorter of the pair (and wasn't it weird that Kisame could actually be called short for once?) turned his head slightly, his eyes flitting her way briefly before turning back forward. "What's with the staring?" he muttered.

"Just thinking how awesome it is to be on a mission with you, Shark-nii-san," Sute responded cheerfully, and Kisame winced at the old childhood nickname she'd given him while Zabuza loudly snorted in amusement. Once they turned their attention away her smile faded, her expression taking on a more thoughtful slant as she studied her largest teammate.

The presence of Suikazan Fuguki on this mission rang all sorts of alarm bells in her mind. As one of the four remaining Swordsmen, he held a rather lofty position in their ranks and did not get sent on missions needlessly. Not for the first time she wondered about the first team that had been sent out, because if the Mizukage felt the need to send out Fuguki then he must have good reason to believe their enemies were fairly powerful.

Sute was perfectly aware that she was the weakest member of this team. All the others had advanced to jounin well before this point, Zabuza the most recent one to reach the rank after getting promoted two years ago. Sute had yet to rise above her chuunin rank, and while she'd advanced her skills a fair amount she didn't delude herself in believing herself to be anything close to equal with Kisame or Fuguki. Her last evaluation had her combat skills classed at a high-level B-rank, though it had been a year.

With luck, this mission would change all of that.

She exhaled softly through her nose, pushing the thought away. They'd been moving since dawn,
traveling for a steady five hours now, and would have another four hours of running before reaching their destination. Three, if they pushed themselves, but it would be best to pace themselves to avoid getting exhausted in case of fighting. Fuguki seemed to be thinking along the same lines, because he suddenly slowed and signaled for a break.

The group slid to a halt instantly, taking their time to amble to the trees to sit down and rest. Zabuza pulled out a water bottle from his bag and took eager chugs from it, while Kisame just reclined against a tree trunk lazily. He eyed Sute as she plopped down in front of the neighboring tree, shifting the knapsack off her back. She didn't really bother carrying a weapons pouch on her leg anymore, aside from an "emergency" kunai kept in a lightweight pouch on her hip.

Sute had taken her cues from Hunter-nin when selecting her mission outfit, choosing to wear roomy and billowy pants that ended just beneath her knees with a more closely fitted dark teal top. She still wore the standard shinobi sandals in black instead of sandals though, and the only "armor" she wore were dark blue wrist guards, though everything had naturally been reinforced with seals. Her fighting style still depended on fast and fluid movements above everything else. Any extra components like flak jackets or even leg warmers would only serve to weigh her down and potentially lower her effectiveness on the field.

Even her tiny knapsack reflected that mindset. Kisame made a loud choking noise when she opened it and pulled out a bokken more than twice the bag's length, even Zabuza startling and nearly dropping his bottle. "How the hell did you fit that in there!?” he demanded.

"This bag's pretty much a glorified storage scroll," Sute responded with a shrug. "I can fit as much in here as three standard packs." She'd conceived the idea of making a bag-based storage vessel from that giant book she'd formerly tugged across three countries. If a book could be used to store multiple objects—including other storage scrolls—then a bottomless bag seemed just as feasible.

Granted, actually making the damn thing had taken a lot of work and time. She'd destroyed no less than ten bags in her experimentations, losing numerous dummy kunai to the void where all items vanished when stowed in storage scrolls. It had taken her close to two years of on-and-off experimentations and closely working with Harusame to finally get it working, and it still wasn't exactly perfect.

She set aside the bokken and continued rummaging through the knapsack, pulling out a few more weapons and two bulky scrolls before finally holding up a water bottle. "I should've packed this last,” she muttered as she unscrewed the lid to take a sip.

"Ringo, you should rearrange your bag's contents now if necessary," Fuguki said bluntly. He'd taken up perch closer to the path, sitting cross-legged against a thicker tree and staring down the road with keen eyes. "You can't afford to waste time rooting through that for weapons."

"I know, I know," she deflected with an easy shrug, chugging down some more water before shoving the bottle back inside.

"What are we looking at, anyway?" Zabuza questioned while she started packing everything back up. "The only thing I heard about them is that they seemed to be shinobi, nothing on why they might be foreign. Any chance they're just rogues?"

"It's possible, but unlikely," Fuguki responded. "The initial reports came from a restaurant owner who's intimately familiar with Mist ninja. He reported a group of five unfamiliar men entered his establishment and showed typical shinobi behaviors, and found it suspicious they wore no hitaiate. A second report from a nearby village noted a similar group had been witnessed using chakra to cross a stream by a local child."
"So they got sloppy then," Sute summarized. "How long has the other team been gone?" If they were going to go over the mission anyway, she might as well gather all the information she could.

"Six days as of today," Fuguki grunted, and she hummed in thought. She knew the team's original destination had been in an area called Hirame-wan, a coastal region full of small fishing villages and most notable for being close to a road connecting Kiri to one of the major ports in the Land of Water. Sute had passed through the region once before, back during the war on her first deployment, so she knew that for shinobi speeds it would take at most a day to travel the distance.

The number of scenarios where the team would take six days to return were few. Even if they ran into trouble, it should take one, two days at most to handle the situation. Mist ninja didn't typically spend time on reconnaissance, they embodied the phrase "shoot now, ask questions later." If they had felt a need to observe the enemy for some reason, they would have sent a report back to Kiri to alert the village.

"How many people were on it?" she asked.

"It was a five-man unit."

"So basically, we're looking at a potential minimum of four people in critical condition or otherwise unable to move," Kisame interjected lazily, and Sute nodded in mute agreement. The only scenario that explained the team's delay would be a battle going south and wiping out the brigade. If even two people had been able to move, they would have sent one to Kiri to retrieve back-up and leave the other to tend to the other survivors or fend off the invaders.

Best case scenario, they'd find one of their agents crawling along the road towards Kiri to report on four people in critical condition and all hostiles dead.

More likely, there wouldn't be anyone left alive.

Two hours later, the suspicion seemed to be confirmed when they stumbled across the corpse of a Mist ninja sprawled in the middle of the road, a trail of blood behind him and arms stretched out front in a position that indicated he'd been crawling. Sute took lead right away, darting forward to turn the man over. The skin felt cold, the body resisting movement as she flopped it over, and she gripped the jaw and met less resistance.

"Rigor mortis is already starting to fade," she reported, moving on to his hands. Tugging on the fingers one joint at a time, she mentally reviewed all the other factors—environment, subject's age and physical condition, strenuous exercise from crawling—and declared, "I'd estimate his time of death to be about ten to fourteen hours ago."

"Any notable wounds?" Zabuza asked, crouching next to her to inspect the body. She pulled the kunai from the emergency pouch on her hip and used it to slice through his jacket above a particularly large bloody gash, pulling it apart to expose his pallid torso. All of them paused to stare at it.

"Are those his intestines," Kisame asked flatly.

"Not gonna lie, I'm impressed he managed to move that long without them spilling out," Sute hummed, idly poking at the off-color internal organs with the tip of her kunai.

"You know if he's the scout, the others are probably dead," Zabuza commented blandly.

"Oh, definitely," she agreed blithely, getting up and turning to face Fuguki. "Do you want me to do a full autopsy?"
"No, there's no point in it." His gaze drifted upwards to the sky, his already beady eyes narrowing further as he studied the dark clouds beginning to gather in the distance. "There's a storm moving our way. If we move now, we should be able to follow the blood trail before it gets washed away by the rain."

"So no more pacing ourselves then, huh?" Kisame asked, turning to look at the trail of blood left by the man. The others followed his gaze, their faces serious and shoulders set in determination.

"Go," Fuguki said simply, and they shot forward.

They reached the end of the blood trail to find two corpses, one belonging to them and the other unfamiliar. Sute grimaced as she looked at their guy, lips pulling back in distaste as she eyed the patch of greenish skin visible on his abdomen beneath his shirt. "Do I have to touch that?" she whined. "Putrefaction's already setting in, that's gross."

"You're turned off by the weirdest things," Zabuza commented dryly, and she shot him a sour look.

"You've never seen a body go through the full decomposition process, have you?" she asked dryly, and he looked at her strangely.

"...Okay, seriously, what the fuck did you see on those battlefields?"

"Many things," she responded vaguely. Probably better to let him believe that's where she'd seen it. Seriously, she had the most twisted childhood in her old life.

Kisame, who'd at this point grown desensitized to Sute's random references to absolutely messed-up knowledge, easily ignored them and turned his attention to the other body. It didn't have any particularly identifying features, the jaw maybe a bit broader than average, and it wore rather bland civilian-style clothes. The head had been nearly shorn from the body, its neck a rather gory and disgusting sight as the beginning stages of putrefaction began to set in.

Unlike Sute, Kisame had no hesitation about touching the corpse, turning it over so he could rifle through its clothing. Lifting the jacket, he rooted inside and pulled out a small leather packet, opening the flap to slide out a small stack of folded papers. He unfolded one and skimmed it before holding it up. "Oi, Fuguki-san, I found something good," he called, and the taller man snatched it out of his hand.

"These are identification papers," he said as he read over it. "Likely a forgery, the village of origin listed here changed its name after the war."

"He's got multiple versions with different names," Kisame added as he glanced over the other papers. "Probably all fake. I don't recognize his face from any bingo books, think he's a mercenary-nin?" Trained shinobi with no existing village affiliation were rare, but they existed.

"If he was, he's good," Sute commented idly. "I don't know his name, but our guy was a jounin. I saw him at the hospital a few times, pretty sure he was wearing a Hunter-nin uniform at least once." It went without saying that Kiri had strict requirements for the Hunter-nin division, they wanted to guarantee that whoever tracked down missing-nin could take them down once and for all.

"Damn," Zabuza breathed. "I think this settles it, the others are probably gone."

"Which means it's our jobs to kill the rest," Fuguki said simply. As they turned back to the road the air had a subtle tension to it, all of them gearing for a battle as they began marching. Soon enough
they could begin to see growing signs of a roving battle, kunai embedded in trees and sections of ground either overly smooth or roughly churned up in a telltale sign of being blasted by high-power water jutsu.

After an incredibly tense hour of walking they found another body hastily kicked into the bushes by the side of the road. One of the foreign agents since they didn't recognize him, probably killed shortly before the others. That put the confirmed casualties at an even two and two.

They moved slowly, carefully observing the area. At one point Fuguki stopped them and pointed out signs of a trap that had yet to be triggered, one of obviously non-Kiri design. A quick inspection of the area revealed a third corpse from the enemy faction, showing clear symptoms of a lethal poison Sute knew to be popular among Hunter-nin, but this time they had a name.

"This man's a known missing-nin from Iwa," Fuguki declared shortly. "He defected after the war ended with two others, all members of a team known as 'Scourge of Stone.'" Sute started at the name, her eyes widening.

"I heard of those guys back then," she said. "They were part of a division composed of powerful kekkei genkai users." She hadn't faced them, but she'd seen victims rushed back from the field during her time at the hospital. Iwa had access to some of the more destructive kekkei genkai, namely Explosion and Lava Releases, among others. Naturally, the survivors were not in pretty conditions. She remembered one patient had screamed a colorful rainbow of curses upon hearing that the trio responsible for burning off his hands had fled Iwa.

"Kisame, go to the river and send one of your sharks to alert Kiri," Fuguki ordered briskly, and the blue man nodded as he took off while Sute boggled him.

"Messenger sharks?" she said incredulously.

"Only in Kiri," Zabuza scoffed quietly, and Sute just slowly nodded. Weirdness of messenger sharks aside, she needed to focus. They had only confirmed one man's identity, and the other two members of the Scourge might still be around.

Two of the original investigation team had seen fit to try to crawl to Kiri. If the team had succeeded in wiping the hostiles out, they would have just left a message detailing the mission complete at some point. Most likely they'd left at least one of their teammates in battle with the enemy at some point—which meant there might be surviving hostiles after all.

When Kisame rejoined them they proceeded even slower than before, falling into a silent rhythm and wariness. It didn't take too long to find another battle site, this one even larger and more obvious than the rest. Small craters littered the ground and dented the trees, telltale signs of the Explosion Release, eliciting a quiet curse from Fuguki. Apparently the body they'd found in the bushes hadn't been the one responsible for this, which meant they had a pseudo-Deidara on their hands.

They found blood, but not enough to indicate a fatal wound. There were no bodies either, so either their guy was blown to smithereens, or he'd managed to escape battle and get pursued. Zabuza took lead, recognizing signs of someone fleeing in some nearby woods, and they followed him quietly until they reached a trail with two diverging paths.

"There's traces of people going both ways," he declared tightly. "I don't know which one's our guy." Fuguki scowled, lips curling back in distaste. Eliminating the enemy took priority, but naturally they also wanted to retrieve their agent alive if possible. Either way they'd have to split up.
"Ringo, Kisame, you two head that way," he ordered, inclining his head to the left path. "Momochi, you will lead me down the other path."

"Right." The group nodded and then split up, a heavy tension filling the air. For once Sute and Kisame didn't bother with their usual banter, both of them hyper-focused on the heavy atmosphere hanging over them. Kisame took lead, being the more experienced of the two, and Sute slid her knapsack down her shoulder just enough to reach inside and pull out her bokken. It was smaller than most standard-issue bokken, clearly designed for a child's hands, but all the same it still felt familiar and comforting in her hands.

Kisame glanced her way as she slid her hands into position, nodding at her in quiet acknowledgment. He knew that Ameyuri had given her that very bokken years ago, back when she tried to teach Sute kenjutsu before declaring she had no aptitude for it. She felt glad the woman had given up on training her so swiftly, because by the time Juzo had cajoled her into trying again she'd learned enough fuinjutsu to reinforce it. In a way it was one of the only gifts she'd received from her guardian, and holding it gave her a sense of security.

Now new seals decorated its length, barely two days old, and depending on how things went she might get a chance to test it today.

Her heart pounded as they slowly walked down the path, feeling more on edge than she'd felt since the war ended. After a few minutes Kisame stopped, his lips pulling back in an open grimace. He glanced at her over his shoulder and gestured to his nose—a silent signal saying I smell blood—and then held up three fingers, making her wince.

Three people, all bleeding. Kisame's sense of smell had always been sharper than most, particularly for the coppery tang of blood, but he couldn't identify specific scents like a dog. They had no way of knowing which of those scents belonged to their men. More importantly though, the blood had to be relatively fresh, Kisame couldn't detect anything older than a few hours.

Meaning they were likely still alive right now.

Her mind raced. Both sides started with five people, making for a total of ten. By her count they'd found bodies of two of theirs and three of the enemy. That meant at a minimum, one of those blood trails Kisame detected had to belong to one of theirs. Best case scenario, all three would be Mist ninja, but she wasn't counting on their luck to be that good.

She matched his own grimace, nodding at him to continue, and he nodded before turning forward and resuming. Sure enough, after a few minutes they found the signs of yet another skirmish, this one a bit messier than the last. Exploded stumps of once-towering trees filled the space, shards of wood scattered everywhere. In one area the shower of splinters outlined a noticeable gap in the rough shape of a human, suggesting they'd all hit a victim.

Near that human-shaped gap was a trail of small blood splatters, and Sute only had to take one look to know that it hadn't been there for too long. Definitely less than five hours judging by the color. The sparse trail led away from the battle scene and into the woods, but at the same time they could see a different blood trail heading another direction. The battle had not ended well for either side, and for whatever reason both parties had chosen to flee.

Once again, no bodies were present.

"Two people headed that direction," Kisame informed her quietly, inclining his head to the smaller blood trail. "The other one has one guy." She gnawed on her lip, pressing a hand against a nearby tree and squeezing her eyes tightly shut. They'd likely to have to split up.
Kisame didn't sense the small spark of chakra under her skin, pulsing down the length of the tree trunk and following the roots into the ground.

He didn't feel it spread outwards in a wide net across the network of roots filling the forest, spreading far and wide and mapping everything for three square miles.

Sute's eyes snapped open, two chakra signatures pinging on her awareness. She didn't use her sensory trick often so she couldn't normally identify people with it, but one of those signatures had been familiar enough that recognition instantly curled in her stomach. Her fingers balled into a fist as she pulled her hand away from the tree, her face becoming set with determination.

"I'm going this way," she declared, her voice holding no room for argument, and she took off before Kisame could respond.

Her earlier nerves vanished, replaced only by cold, steady determination as she ran. That brief sensory check had mapped the entire forest to her brain, allowing her steps to be smooth and confident as she wove through the labyrinth of trees. Turn left here, right there, jump over that rock —she leaped over a bluff overlooking a river, chakra burning in her feet as she skidded down the cliff side and kicking up dust and stone in her wake. A quick hop near the bottom and she landed on the water, racing along the surface at a swift and steady pace.

Cliffs boxed the river in on either side of her, the gap growing more and more narrow before finally splitting apart as the river opened up into the sea. Sute hopped onto the rocky shore and darted onwards, not caring for the noise she made. Finally the stone wall next to her receded inwards to reveal more trees, and she slid around the corner before skidding to a halt, her breaths rough and ragged.

Her exhaustion faded quickly, her face schooling into a blank mask when she saw the man waiting for her. "Oh, you're still alive Juzo."

"Fuck you too, Sute," came the flat retort. The Swordsman stood just inside the mouth of the forest, one hand on the hilt of Kubikiribocho with the blade's tip planted firmly into the ground. He looked tired, his chest heaving with each breath and his sleeveless black top full of small rips and tears, but he was still standing and in one piece.

Sute's posture relaxed as she looked him over, cataloguing his injuries. The gray sash usually draped around his waist had been torn and tied tightly around his right bicep, the fabric stained a still-damp dark red, while he sported a new cut below his left eye which had stopped bleeding. It could wait, she decided. "How deep's the cut on your arm?" she asked as she trotted over.

"S-Sute..." She froze as she heard the crunch of twigs from the trees followed by a low groan, her blood chilling as recognition triggered in her brain.

"Ao?" she whispered, her stomach lurching as she turned to face him.

The Hunter-nin who had spent so many hours teaching her to throw senbon lay sprawled in the thick undergrowth blanketing the ground next to the trees, his face twitching in pain as he moaned. Short splinters and jagged chunks of wood littered his back almost like a porcupine, dried trails of blood staining his face beneath either nostril, and his one eye had barely avoided the range of a heavy bruise darkening his right cheek.

He grimaced as he dragged himself forward, reaching towards her weakly with a red-tinted hand. Almost instantly she was at his side, dropping to her knees as she tossed her bokken aside to grab his hand. "Stay still!" she snapped, pulsing healing chakra through his hand even as she spoke.
Fresh blood dripped onto her fingers from his palm, the skin completely shorn off to leave only muscle, and she bit her lip as she started trying to mend the skin only for him to suddenly cough.

"R-run," he ground out, and she stiffened, snapping her attention to his face. His lone blue eye bore into her, squinting and narrow with pain but full of a stony seriousness she'd never seen even during the war. "G-go, now..."

She didn't respond, just stared at him before her eyes slowly drifted past his face and towards his body. Thick splotches of blood trailed behind his feet, a steadily growing stain pooling beneath his stomach. Beneath a tear in his shirt she could glimpse the end of a long cut, wide and deep and curling around the width of his body. Her blood chilled, her green eyes widening as she recognized the shape of the cut from her time in the war.

A rush of air behind her, a looming pressure now directly behind her back.

Slowly, Sute turned her head, and found herself eye level with the hooked end of Kubikiribocho.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

There's a time for words, and a time for action. Kiri does not believe in a "time for words" though.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Juzo peered at Sute down the length of Kubikiribocho, looming taller than ever over her kneeling form. Part of her felt numb as she stared up at him, her line of vision cleaved in two by the hovering bulk of the hooked blade so she could only see what lay above the glinting metal surface. Clouds blotted the setting sun behind his head and cast a gloomy air over the forest, quiet rumbles in the distance signaling a violent storm steadily heading their way.

"You have bad timing, Sute," the Swordsman declared gruffly. Dark shadows covered his face, shrouding his eyes from view and rendering them unreadable.

Something caught in her throat as she stared at him, her brain still slowly parsing the image before her. Only her grip on Ao's partially skinned hand, still steadily seeping blood into her own palms, kept her anchored to reality.

"D-dammit!" The blue-haired man coughed behind her, a wet noise signaling he'd coughed blood. She didn't respond to him, didn't even breathe as she kept her gaze trained on the Swordsman.

Once upon a time, Sute would call Juzo her favorite of the current Swordsmen. She had known nothing about him in her previous life, and the second she saw Kubikiribocho strapped to his back she knew he would die at some point. Even before she saw Raiga and realized the death sentence his existence meant for Ameyuri, before she saw Fuguki use Samehada for the first time and recognize the blade's true owner, she knew that Juzo had a definite expiration date so Zabuza could inherit the blade.

Yet even so, even knowing he would die one day and that she would let him in order to preserve Canon and the little value her knowledge of it gave her, she considered Juzo her favorite of the living Swordsmen.

For nine years the man had been a constant presence in her life, always grunting at her greetings and hurling half-hearted threats they knew he would never carry out. He had always been the one to drag her out when she got in over her head back during the war, like when the Yellow Flash nearly killed her. He'd survived when nearly all the others died against Maito Dai, he'd been the first to find her after the war ended to congratulate her for surviving, he had been the one to first shove the bokken back into her hands and tell her to give it another shot—

Biwa Juzo was not a friend. He was safety and security, always present in her life in some capacity and signaling everything would be okay.

And now, he had turned his blade towards her.
She swallowed quietly, blinking slowly as she stared up the blade's length. "Get up," he ordered gruffly. Sute sat still for a moment, just staring at the familiar man she called ally, but then she gave Ao's hand a tiny squeeze and let go. Juzo backed up half a step to give her space to clamber to her feet, the end of the blade lifting in tandem with her until finally settling to point at her neck.

She didn't turn her eyes away from his face, even as his gaze seemed to focus behind her. "Move," he ordered, but Sute remained in place. Her hands clenched into fists at her sides as she stared at him, smearing Ao's still-warm blood across her fingernails as they dug into her palms.

"You're defecting," she said. It wasn't a question, barely even an observation, just a fact.

"I am," Juzo confirmed shortly, still glaring behind her at Ao's crumpled form.

"Y-you," the Hunter-nin growled, his lone eye burning as he glared up at the swordsman.

"Move, Sute," Juzo repeated, glaring right back, and she slowly breathed through her nose.

"If I do, will you kill him?" she asked, and he scoffed, his eyes still too shadowed and dark to read his intent.

"Of course. You see that uniform, he's a Hunter-nin. Do you know what he's got under that eye patch?" When she gave her head a tiny shake, he continued grimly, "He's got a damn Byakugan there. Do you know what the Byakugan can do?"

"I do," she confirmed blandly. Just hearing the term "Byakugan" conjured memories of pale-eyed cartoon characters who could see through walls and skin despite having eyes that looked blind, able to read a person's chakra network like a book.

"Then you get why he's a threat."

Sute didn't bother responding to that comment. Her gaze shifted slightly to peer over her shoulder at the crumpled man below her, bright green eyes trained on the black eye patch. Ao's uncovered eye flickered and briefly met hers, full of a raging fire so much hotter than the cool blue hue seemed capable of possessing.

She wondered, briefly, what that other eye might be seeing right now. If it saw anything, or if he even had the chakra left to use it.

Sute turned her gaze back to Juzo. The wind picked up, a chilly gust blowing from the sea and sending her hair whipping around her face. She didn't bother trying to grab it though, just steadily stared up at him through the waving strands trying to obscure her vision.

"I can't let you do that, Juzo," she informed the Swordsman blandly, and for the first time since standing his gaze seemed to finally move from Ao and focus on her.

"You're kidding," he said flatly.

"D-dammit, Ringo!" Ao cursed behind her, and she could hear the crunch of mulch as he scrabbled against the ground to lift his torso. "J-just, get the hell out of here!"

"And leave you to die?" she quipped dryly, still staring Juzo dead on. "In case you haven't noticed, Juzo has the Kubikiribocho. And I'm pretty sure he doesn't plan on leaving it behind to pass onto the next generation."

"I don't," Juzo confirmed, eyes narrowing at her.
"And there you have it. I have every reason to stop him now."

"Dammit Ringo," Ao repeated, sounding more exasperated with her. Juzo just glared at her as his face twisted into a scowl, the red bars tattooed along his jaw stretching and pulling with the motion.

"Kid, are you really trying to play the hero now of all times?" he grunted, thoroughly irritated. But something cracked inside her at those words, and Sute threw back her head and laughed.

Her hysterical shrieks echoed through the ominous quiet, sharp and crisp and ringing over the thunder rumbling in the distance. Juzo stiffened at the abrupt outburst, looking ever so slightly more tense and wary, while she could feel Ao's gaze burrowing into her back. She ignored their wary looks as she ducked her head and ran a hair through her messy hair to try to smooth it out.

"Me? Play hero?" she cackled, peering at Juzo through her fingers. A manic grin stretched across her face, her eyes sparkling with a humor only she could understand. "That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard." Her laughter started up again, full of equal parts morbid humor and self-loathing.

She had never been the hero.

A hero would have told the police about what her father did in their basement. A hero would have tried to save them instead of sitting next to them taking meticulous notes of how their suffering. A hero would have done something—anything at all—tried to make things right somehow, even if it was something as small as sneaking them small treats to try to make their agony just a little less painful.

A hero wouldn't have sat by watching Nohara Rin get covered in scrawling seals to prepare for whatever ominous fate those men had in store for her.

Her giggles died out as she removed her hand from her face, her features shifting into a blank mask. "Let me assure you, my motivations are purely selfish," she told him bluntly, cold and emotionless. "I'm not a hero by a long shot." She'd long since accepted her lot in life. Sute would never be a hero, not in the last one, and most certainly not in this one either.

Juzo's eyes narrowed, his lips curling back. "You just have to make this hard, don't you," he grumbled. Raindrops began falling around them softly, one drop at a time spaced a few seconds apart. Storms didn't just dramatically roll in and release the heavens' pent-up showers all at once, they gathered strength gradually, drop by drop by drop. Some of them hit her, some missed her entirely.

A single drop landed on Sute's face and slid down her cheek, leaving a shiny streak like a tear.

Then Juzo moved, disappearing in a blur of movement.

Sute leaped into the air as Kubikiri bocho sliced through the space her ankles had occupied, tumbling forward to press her hands on the flat of the blade while twisting and spinning to kick at Juzo's face. He leaned back, the soles of her sandals barely skidding across the edge of his cheek, and she pushed off the sword to tumble to the ground. She rolled into a crouch and grabbed her bokken as she tumbled past it, swiftly rising to her feet while gripping it in a standard kenjutsu stance.

Juzo was upon her within seconds, swinging his blade down with the blunt edge facing her. Sute swiftly raised her bokken horizontally above her head to block the blow, her left hand sliding along
the shaft to support it and funneling chakra into the seals as it passed over them. The writing lit up bright white just before Kubikiribocho made contact, the force of the blow nearly enough to send her flying back if not for the chakra anchoring her feet to the ground. As it stood the sudden displacement of air shot outwards like a shockwave, Sute gritting her teeth as she stood her ground.

Above her the bokken remained strong and steady as it blocked Kubikiribocho, the wood perfectly firm and unyielding beneath her palms.

"Tch, you didn't play around with those seals," Juzo growled, and she grunted, her arms wavering as she continued to support her bokken. While the seals kept the bokken from being broken by the larger sword, that didn't change the power he put into the blow, and when it came to brute strength Juzo had the advantage.

"Not at all," she ground out, and then she twisted the bokken and ducked away from him, calling up a substitution with a nearby rock to escape the sword's range before it could crush her. The sudden lack of resistance on her end sent Juzo staggering forward, the giant cleaver swinging downwards and crashing through the small boulder with nearly no resistance. Sute leaped into a tree and jerked her emergency kunai from the pouch on her hip, squeezing the hilt and sending chakra into it before throwing it into the air while leaping to another tree.

Sute had designated the emergency kunai as such for a reason. Black writing appeared on the bandages wrapped around the handle even as it soared into the air, and the blade sparked white before exploding. A giant burst of light nearly as bright as the sun flashed above them, the world tinted painful featureless white for several long seconds before finally fading.

Even as the flash faded Sute landed on a branch and kicked off to jump to the next one, neatly dodging the barrage of water-based projectiles that flew her way and shattered the bark upon impact. Juzo cursed loudly below her, yelling, "Did you just use a fucking glorified flash bang!?"

She didn't bother responding, too busy jumping from tree to tree. She had never tested that particular variation of the seal before, but she knew the light from the massively overpowered flash bang would be visible for miles. Fuguki, Zabuza and Kisame should all be able to see it, and while the Swordsmen and Kiri as a whole may not particularly care about saving comrades in need, they would still come to clean up the mess because they never shied away from a fight.

It would still take time before any of them would arrive though. For all she knew they could all be caught up in battles at that very moment. At the very least Sute expected a minimum of five minutes before Kisame would arrive, which meant until then she had to survive against Juzo on her own.

Her gaze flitted to Ao briefly as she dropped from a tree to touch down on the ground, finding his eye focused on her. Their gazes locked for a brief moment, a silent understanding passing between them in the span of less than half a second. His face firm with resolve and he began to drag himself deeper into the dense undergrowth even as she spun and took off, flashing through a rarely used set of hand seals.

*Suiton: Hiding in Mist.*

The rain had started to pick up by this point, casting a thin misty sheen over the forest that left the surroundings hazy. She pulled upon it and the mist thickened as her chakra permeated it, the air quickly filling with a foggy white hue even thicker than the natural fog in Kiri. Just as it filled out she heard Juzo's footsteps directly behind her, and she had to skip and twist her body to duck away from the swipe of his sword, the sharp hook on the blade's tip tearing her shirt but not touching her skin.
She surged forward, jumping onto the blade and swinging her bokken at his head. He jerked Kubikiribocho to fling her away, easily causing her swing to miss, and as she flew she tossed her bokken away and flipped through the air. Her hands clasped together for a brief moment before parting to rush through hand seals with her right hand, while simultaneously cupping her left around her mouth. A violent burst of water spewed forth, surging towards Juzo with the force and pressure of a fireman's hose.

Juzo shifted to dodge but then jolted in place, a startled expression flickering on his face briefly as his head snapped downward to stare at his feet. He barely had time to register the sight of roots loosely looped over his toes before the water hit him, the force of the blast tearing out the roots as his feet flew out from under him. Sute charged forward in the same moment, the bokken flying back into her waiting hands with a pull of chakra threads and the seals lighting up once more.

She remained perfectly silent as she leaped into the air and swung her blade down on him, the thick fog hiding her movements until the last second. Juzo barely, barely managed to duck out of the way this time, his grip on his sword going slack for the briefest of seconds. Seeing this, Sute wasted no time and kicked at the flat of the blade with both feet, the sharp edge scraping the soles of her sandals until she could nearly feel it, the edge just barely separated from her feet by a thin layer of rubber.

The kick was enough to tear the hilt from Juzo's hand, Kubikiribocho flying away. However, in a single fluid movement he redirected his body towards his blade and snatched up the hilt once more, twisting and swinging it at her with a roar. Sute landed and jumped back, but this time she didn't get enough distance and could feel the blade just barely bite into her right side for half a second, sharp and stinging as it drew a line of blood before she pulled out of its range.

She grit her teeth as she slid back several feet, muting her footsteps as she dodged to the side and leaped to the trees. As she jumped to another branch she felt an unconscious twinge of chakra near the cut, and then her flesh transformed for the briefest of moments. Her whole body went numb as she felt the injury seal shut, her skin returning to normal seconds later.

She winced slightly as she landed, eyes widening because shit, she did NOT mean to do that—

A rush of air ruffled her hair and she twisted her head just in time to see Juzo's blade swinging down at her, the metal cleaving through the mist as it descended.

Then brown filled her vision, and she heard the distinct sound of metal crashing into wood.

"What the hell?" Juzo sputtered. Neither of them moved as they stared at the obstacle suddenly separating them, a brief silence washing over them as he pulled back his sword. Through the thick fog she could spy glimpses of wooden grain, an interconnecting grid of bars blocking his sword without any sign of giving under its weight.

Stomach sinking, Sute's gaze flickered to her bokken to find wooden bars jutting out from the blade and vanishing into the mist, and everything below her wrists transformed into wood and melding directly with hilt.

"Of course. Fucking Mokuton just HAD to activate and save her life.

Swallowing harshly, she flared her chakra and just like that her hands returned to normal, the wooden protrusions sharply receding back into the bokken as it snapped back to its original shape. At the same time she took a single step backwards and fell from the branch, throwing the bokken away as she flipped to the ground.
She flew through more hand seals and shot a high-powered burst of water where she knew Juzo had been, even more powerful than the last. She couldn't see him but she could hear Juzo curse as it caught him mid-fall, unable to reorient himself enough to dodge the spray before it hit. His grunt quickly faded into the distance as he was presumably shoved back, but she wasn't taking any chances.

The second her feet touched the ground she was moving again, this time racing towards the bay. Fighting in the forest had become too much of a liability now. The thick mist may have been able to keep Juzo from seeing what had stopped his blade—Kubikiribocho was ridiculously long, and the angle it'd been embedded suggested he would have been positioned just outside visual range of the wooden net—but Sute couldn't risk another unintentional flare-up of her mokuton. Especially with help on the way.

She grit her teeth as she broke through the tree line and reached the shore, the fog much thinner here and allowing her a perfect view of the sea. The storm had clearly placed its claim on it, the water tinted an opaque gray as waves crashed against the shore. Seashell fragments snapped and cracked under her sandals with each step as she ran, the dull roar of the sea ringing to her right and the silence from the forest to her left almost deafening.

She heard him before she saw him.

Metal suddenly appeared in her vision and she skidded to a halt, once again eye level with the end of Kubikiribocho. Behind it she could see Juzo glaring at her, his eyes narrowed and his jagged teeth almost glowing against his shadowed face.

"That's enough," he spat, and for the first time since the battle began Sute didn't move to flee or attack. She just felt her shoulders slump and stared back at him stonily, her eyes turning hollow and uncaring.

"Is this the part where you kill me?" she asked, voice light yet rimmed with a blunt edge void of any particular inflection.

"It's tempting," he replied, his tone not quite the same flat and unmoved quality hers held. "But I've wasted enough fucking time with you." He rotated the blade slightly, the change in orientation allowing the metal to obscure his face from her line of vision. "Turn around."

"Can't you even look at my face while killing me?" she questioned blandly, knowing full well she was walking a thin tight rope right now, but for once she felt apathetic to the risk. Now that she'd stopped moving the battle high which had fueled her had finally begun to fade, the adrenaline seeping away and letting the brunt of her exhaustion seep through to her awareness. Every part of her felt tired now, from her legs to her arms to even her own mind.

Juzo just scoffed, eyes dark and angry. "Do it," he growled, and after a moment she obediently turned. Straight ahead of her she could now see a dark silhouette rushing towards them from the distance, the waves churning more violently as it drew closer. "You're an annoying kid, Sute," Juzo grunted behind her. She felt the edge of his blade press against the side of her neck, the metal cold against her skin but not pressing deep enough to draw blood. "More annoying than Kiri. Hurry up and come to your senses and get out of this shit hole while you still can."

Sute stood perfectly motionless, acutely aware of the unspoken threat. She heard a yell from the approaching figure and then a large tidal wave suddenly sprouted from the ocean, the fringe bulging and convulsing as it rushed towards them.

Sharks made of water soared over her, crashing into Juzo and digging their teeth into him. A loud
splash sounded and Kubikiribocho suddenly collapsed into a cascading shower of water that drenched her entire right side, and at that moment she felt her body sag. A water clone. Of course.

A loud curse sounded as the figure ahead of her zoomed forward with a sudden burst of speed, becoming little more than a blur. Within seconds a pair of familiar blue hands gripped her, beady white eyes boring into her.

"Sute, what the hell happened!?!" Kisame demanded, squeezing her shoulders. Sute blinked and smiled up at him tiredly, her eyes devoid of any warmth or feeling.

"Shinobi Swordsman Biwa Juzo has defected from Kiri and taken Kubikiribocho with him."

And with those words, reality came crashing down upon her and her face crumpled, her eyes widening as a sudden chill washed over her.

*She just fought Juzo.*

Goodbye Canon.

Chapter End Notes

Farewell Juzo.

Fight scenes are still tricky to write. Not 100% satisfied with this chapter, but I think it mostly turned out okay. More importantly though: congratulations to everyone who managed to predict/guess that Sute has mokuton! If anyone finds this development random and suddenly inserted, I've been dropping hints since the first chapter. If you go back and reread it, you'll find a LOT of places with her subtly using it. With this, only one major twist in Sute's backstory/abilities is left, and I can guarantee even she'll be surprised.

As always, thanks for reading and leaving reviews. I'll see you all next week!
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Everyone reviews how the mission went wrong, and then Sute starts preparing for the future.

Chapter Notes

Heads up: Important news at the bottom of the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"So Juzo left."

Fuguki glowered at Sute as he spoke, his eyes full of disdain and anger. She just nodded tiredly, gaze trained on the roaring campfire in front of her.

"He did," she confirmed flatly. "I tried to stall him as long as I could. After our last clash I took off for the shore, he must have switched out with a water clone and had it pursue me while he ran away."

Zabuza hissed an angry curse under his breath, while Fuguki made his displeasure known through the subtle leakage of killing intent. Sute knew it wasn't directed at her so she didn't care, just let her head loll to the side as she stared out the mouth of the cave at the pouring rain.

Barely half an hour had passed since her encounter with Juzo. Not long after Kisame found her Fuguki and Zabuza had also shown up, having already doubled back after finding the corpse of one of the intruders when they saw her flash bang. The group had relocated to a small cave to get shelter from the rain and go over their findings thus far. Naturally, they hadn't been too pleased.

With Juzo gone, the Seven Shinobi Swordsmen—already a measly four at this point in time—had been reduced to an even more scant three. Of the group that had found Sute on the battlefield, only Fuguki remained now, everyone else long dead. It truly felt like the end of an era, Sute thought distantly, but at the same time she couldn't say whether she mourned it or not.

Juzo was gone.

Gone from Kiri, probably miles away by now, and taking Kubikiribocho with him. Her throat felt dry as the implications settled in that she might never see him again, and that if they did it might be as enemies. That Zabuza might now never receive Kubikiribocho, never become one of the Swordsmen. He might not ever end up going to Wave and facing Team Seven, never sacrifice his life in a fit of grief after watching Haku die for him.

Canon was changing. Was it changing? She didn't know. She had no knowledge of what was supposed to happen to Juzo in Canon, only that he Did Not Exist and that Zabuza had the giant meat cleaver of a sword instead.
Maybe that should scare her, but really, she didn't care. For all Konoha liked to whisper about her being a "Bloody Oracle," she had the most limited knowledge possible. She had a scant few concrete plot points to work from, her knowledge limited and hazy due to several years since her last foray into the Naruto franchise, and she knew that the smallest of shakes could ruin it.

Trying to preserve Canon would be stupid and pointless. Maybe if she'd been in Konoha she might have tried, but out here in Kiri miles removed from the main plot, it didn't matter.

All that mattered to Sute was that she survived.

They heard a crunch outside, all three of them jolting to alertness and turning to the mouth of the cave. They relaxed when they saw Kisame's familiar form stagger into the range of the fire's glow, another familiar figure draped over his shoulder.

Seeing Ao's state in full for the first time, Sute couldn't help but wince. The man had been even more battered than she'd realized; his right leg had a giant bloody gash that had been wrapped with a long strip of fabric torn from his yukata's hem, and his left ankle was clearly bruised and swollen. The yukata itself hung slightly looser than she remembered, allowing her to glimpse the tips of something white and red wrapped around his chest.

"Sorry we took so long," Kisame said as he half-dragged, half-carried the other man inside. "Figured I should at least try to stop the bleeding long enough to get him here without dying." He knelt down and eased Ao to the ground, and Sute quickly joined them to pry his yukata off to begin her examination. Sure enough she found multiple layers of soggy bandages swathing his torso, damp and full of splotchy red and pink stains from his open wounds.

"There's a reason people don't try to patch up wounds in the rain," she commented dryly as she started unwinding the bandages. "Points for actually trying first aid though." Ao grunted as she slowly peeled away the bandages, gritting his teeth in a pained grimace.

"At least tell me the Scourge responsible is dead," he muttered.

"Eh, not yet but close enough," Kisame replied blithely. "I found him passed out not too far from that last battle site. Pretty sure only Tsunade could save him at this point. No offense, Sute-chan."

"Focusing," she hissed quietly, eyes critically assessing Ao's wounds as she waved glowing green hands over his torso. She decided to start by just checking his internal organs and making sure nothing would randomly explode or deflate in the immediate future; no point healing him if his heart would just randomly give out. Ao just leered at her quietly as she got to work, his eye narrow.

"You have surprisingly good chakra control for reserves that size," he observed, voice tight in that way people had when trying to block pain.

"I have been training in chakra control from day one," she responded flatly. "Half the time you saw me in the war I had a bunch of leaves stuck to my skin under my clothes. Now hush, I need to focus because your spleen should NOT be so close to your intestines." Seriously, it was so impressive how much she could "see" with healing chakra alone, she didn't even have to cut him open. Too bad she couldn't always get away with just this, she didn't really care for looking at pancreases. Their texture was just... bluh.

While she silently got to work Fuguki scoffed. "If you can talk, you can report what happened," he said gruffly, and Ao grunted before acquiescing, his voice smooth and unhindered even as his face occasionally screwed up with pain as Sute subtly nudged his spleen back into its proper place with her chakra.
"Our unit made contact with the enemy, but they had a sixth member who had not been included in the reports, and he got the drop on us. We lost one of our men almost immediately, and managed to down one of theirs before having to retreat. We identified three of the enemies as high A-rank threats. Of our remaining team members two had only B-rank skill levels, so we decided to send them to alert Kiri while Biwa Juzo and I remained behind to fend the hostiles off. However, three of them managed to get past us and chase them."

"For the record, they didn't make it," Zabuza interjected at this point. "We found one dead in the road, and after that we found the second one dead along with an enemy's corpse. The other hostiles croaked too though. Found one of the Scourges dead from poison—same symptoms as the one in the woods half a mile from here, so I'm guessing we got you to thank for that."

"What happened with Juzo and the other two?" Kisame asked. "I get the feeling you guys retreated from the battle site and managed to split them up to try to look for you, but what I don't get is why none of you died during the second fight."

"Partway through the battle with the bakuton user, he exploded a tree next to me which pelted me with fragmented wood, including a large piece embedded in my right thigh," Ao responded gravely. "At that point, Juzo turned sides and attacked me while revealing his intentions to defect, forcing me to retreat."

He paused to hiss in pain as Sute went to examine the gash he just mentioned, peeling off the makeshift bandage to reveal a noticeable chunk had been cut from the fleshier part of his leg. "Damn, that's ugly," she muttered, more to herself than anyone else. "Won't be walking on that anytime soon." As she began pumping numbing chakra into the wound he slowly relaxed, sucking in a small breath before continuing.

"I should note that before our final fight with the bakuton user, we had managed to cover enough distance to feel secure enough to rest and recoup our strength for a few hours. Juzo had asked me to take first watch so he could sleep, citing my implanted Byakugan as making me most suitable for the position. In retrospect, I suspect he had already planned to defect then, and had wanted to maximize my exhaustion so I would be easier to eliminate."

"Definitely sounds premeditated," Kisame mused. "This side of the island is the closest to the mainland, and there's plenty of fishing boats around here. If he managed to conserve enough chakra during his fight with Sute-chan, he should probably be able to run across the ocean long enough to find a fishing boat to hijack." Not many people could manage the chakra necessary to cross all the way to the mainland by foot alone, the distance was just vast enough to make it unfeasible.

"Ringo," Fuguki said, knowing she wouldn't speak up on her own in her current state of concentration. "Did he use a lot of chakra during your fight?"

"Mostly he just swung Kubikiribocho," she said with a small shrug. "He never really threw around hand seals that I can recall, up until the water clone at the end."

"That brings us to another point," Kisame interjected, eyes narrow as he peered at her. "What the hell made you think you should go up against a Swordsman?"

"I didn't expect to win a blaze of glory if that's what you're thinking," she responded dryly. "I'm not delusional. I know my strengths and weaknesses. I also know that it'd be better to try to keep Kubikiribocho in Kiri. I knew I had the flash-bang in my pouch and you would still be pretty close, so I figured I could at least stall for time."
And beyond that, she knew Juzo wouldn't kill her.

If he had wanted to kill her, he would've just cut her down the moment she turned to look at Ao rather than order her to move out of the way. His first move had been to slash at her ankles, a definitively nonlethal target, and she'd been able to tell the swipe had been shallow enough that it would have only sliced the tendons instead of severing them. It would have crippled her, but Sute could have healed that before it caused permanent damage, a fact he knew.

She understood then that the fight wouldn't be intrinsically dangerous, and that she could focus on biding her time. All of his cuts had been purposely shallow or aimed at areas he knew she could heal. The only time he ever came close to a lethal one had been after she'd created the thick mist, when he swung down Kubikiribocho on her from above. Visibility had been incredibly limited then, and she'd been very quiet when she landed on the branch so he could have easily misjudged her location. She felt certain his surprise had come from more than just his blow being blocked by an obstacle he couldn't see.

Her hands stilled briefly, her fingers strangely numb as she recalled the sight of peachy flesh replaced by solid wooden grain and fused together with the hilt of her bokken.

A small shudder ran down her spine, and she swallowed before she resumed cleaning out Ao's wound. "By the way, did you see my bokken?" she asked, grabbing her bag to pull out a med kit and a roll of bandages. "I kinda threw it away in the middle of the fight."

Kisame responded by tossing the wooden blade her way, the bokken hitting the rocky ground and rolling a few feet to stop next to her. "For the record that was really stupid," the blue man remarked blandly, and she snorted and rolled her eyes.

"Hey, you KNOW that thing has ridiculously short reach. I decided it was better to have my hands free to do hand seals." And also to minimize a chance of a repeat of her mokuton unintentionally activating.

"I'd say she made the right call," the man in question offered gruffly. "She managed to survive the battle without any major injuries, which is the main detail. That said, you threw around several powerful ninjutsu today. I'm surprised you have the energy to heal me."

"Oh, I'm not REALLY healing you right now," Sute corrected him cheerfully, packing away her med kit. "I'm just doing enough to make sure you don't keel over before backup gets here. You'll need to get treated back in Kiri for sure, but none of the damage should be permanent and I got you started on fighting the infection. Now that I know you're not at risk of suddenly dying, I think it's time for me to pass out."

She had to admit, the shocked look on everyone's faces as she then slumped over was pretty funny.

In the end, she got to ride back to Kiri piggyback on Kisame instead of walking. That was a thing.

Chakra exhaustion was also a thing. A horrible, exhausting, annoying thing.

Sute moaned pitifully as she lay in the hospital bed, staring at the plain white ceiling with unmasked disdain. Making it to fourteen without experiencing chakra exhaustion was actually pretty impressive, all things considered, but still. Bed rest was not fun, even if she could acknowledge it to be necessary.
At least she had it better than Ao. Reinforcements had arrived after Kiri received the notice from Kisame's messenger shark, including another medic who had finished what she'd started with Ao and stabilized him long enough for transport. According to Sagawa he'd be stuck in bed for two weeks, and then on crutches for even longer while his leg healed.

Compared to that, she had it good. She'd only had to stay for one night, and even that was more to keep her under observation. As long as she didn't over-exert herself after getting discharged, she'd be back in fighting condition by the end of the week.

Still, it was weird to be the one stuck in bed for once. And also slightly annoying.

"Are you just going to sit there?" she asked. Next to her Utakata just sat in the visitor's chair reading a book, showing her absolutely no sympathy to her boredom and misery. When he didn't respond, she huffed and muttered, "You could at least try to talk."

"Talking would distract me though," he responded blandly, turning a page. "And this book is very interesting."

Sute glared at him sourly. "Is this revenge for me teasing you about getting hit so much back when we were kids?"

No response, but the faintest twitch of his lips confirmed her suspicions.

"Why are we best friends again?" she questioned flatly. She noticed Utakata stiffen slightly, fingers tensing around the book and squeezing a little tighter. She didn't know whether to feel smug or pitiful that he still reacted to her casually calling him "best friend" with surprise at this point. It had been five years since they first met, and he still seemed to have trouble wrapping around the idea of anyone spending time with him willingly.

"I don't know," he said, pointedly not looking at her. "You tell me."

In most fictional works, Sute thought this should be the point where she'd start listing off his awesome qualities and make him blush or something. She considered doing that briefly, then dismissed it because that sort of sappy scene really did not fit her personality at all. "Probably because we're both outcasts who wouldn't be able to make friends with our age group otherwise," she mused.

This time Utakata did wince, finally raising his head to regard her with a small grimace. "You really don't pull punches, do you," he muttered.

"Guess not," she agreed with a half-hearted shrug. A knock on the door drew their attention, and they both glanced to see a trainee open it and poke his head inside. It was that gray-haired boy, the one who gave her that strange sense of déjà vu, though she still didn't know his name.

"Sorry if I'm interrupting," he greeted, pushing open the door further before turning around. "I brought a delivery for you." He pulled in one of the supply carts, and both Utakata and Sute went slack-faced at the sight of the vase of flowers sitting on top.

"What," Sute said.

"Who sent her flowers?" Utakata asked incredulously. She didn't take it as an insult, because people in Kiri just didn't bother with flowers.

"I don't know," the trainee said with a shrug, picking up the vase. The arrangement looked pretty, consisting of soft pink roses mixed with violet verbena and white camellias. Overall, a very soft
and gentle-looking arrangement, in very sharp contrast to Sute's brash and sharp personality. Setting it on the table next to the bed, he picked up a card from the vase and held it up. "According to this card, it's from a secret admirer."

Sute and Utakata both just stared at him in mild disbelief. "What," Sute repeated.

"Who would like her!?" Utakata sputtered, dropping his book and jumping to his feet. Once again, she didn't even have reason to be offended because she was just as baffled.

"Gimme," she ordered, holding out her hand. The trainee complied, handing over the card, and Utakata quickly crowded around her to read it:

'To Ringo Sute,

May your health improve swiftly, and you find the strength you seek.

Signed,

An anonymous admirer'

She just stared at the card blankly. "There's no way it's my looks," she declared bluntly, grabbing a strand of hair and rubbing it between her fingers. It looked even more stringy and seaweed-like than usual due to being unable to wash it since the mission ended. And that was just her hair, her face wasn't that pretty either. She had three moles under her right eye, three. Combined with her hair it just made her feel kinda dirty and slimy, so yeah, looks were out.

While she silently puzzled over this turn of events Utakata just stared at the card. "Maybe they just respect your skills?" he offered quizzically. "People are attracted to strength... right? Because I mean, it's definitely not your personality."

"I love you too, Uta," she quipped sarcastically, and he snorted and rolled his eyes.

"See?" he drawled. "Charming. Men must be fighting over you all the time."

The trainee watched their exchange with a small amount of bemusement. "I'm sorry I can't help you with this. But that said, I'm afraid I need to ask you to leave, it's almost time for Ringo-senpai's checkup so she can be discharged."

"Alright, alright, I'll go," Utakata sighed, putting the card back and grabbing his book. "I need to get back to training anyway. Shishou said he'll visit you at home either tonight or tomorrow after you're discharged."

"Finally," she sighed. "I've been wanting his input on this new seal for a while now. Actually, I've drawn up a bunch of other ones while waiting for him. What the hell is that secret project he's working on, anyway?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," he said with a shrug. "I'll see you later."

"Later, Uta." Sute nodded at him as he left, and then turned to the trainee, tilting her head. "So out of curiosity, did Amuro and the other kid quit while I was gone?"

He seemed startled by the question. "Er... Amuro-san didn't, but Suzuki-kun did transfer to the general corps."

"Figures." She didn't know who Suzuki was—no point in learning names when trainees tended to
leave so fast—but process of elimination made it pretty obvious it was the boy who'd seen the burn patient code. She pushed the thought aside as she sat up. "Anyways, Mio-san is the one in charge of my pre-discharge checkup, right?"

"Yes, she is," he confirmed with a nod, and she glanced at the clock.

"Then we've got a good hour before she'll head over here. She always takes late lunches around now. Do me a favor and grab a wheelchair."

"Pardon?" The boy (she should probably ask for his name) seemed surprised and confused by the order. "Why do you need—"

"Because I'm not allowed to walk until I get the all-clear, and I want to go on a field trip," she cut in bluntly. "Now, be a good trainee and get it." He looked a bit off-put by the order, but nodded and left to oblige.

Five minutes later, Sute was rolling herself down the hall alone, having released the trainee to the care of another medic. It didn't matter much, since she knew exactly where to go, and soon she was knocking on a door.

"It's open," a tired voice called, and she easily opened the door and rolled inside. Ao lay sprawled on the bed inside, his torso and hands swathed in bandages. The bruising on his face had been mitigated by another medic, leaving his face much healthier-looking than before, though he still lacked some color due to blood loss. His eye narrowed as he saw her, sitting up a little straighter. "Ringo."

"Ao-san." She nodded at him. "Did you always have the Byakugan under there?"

He looked a bit surprised by the question, his stern expression briefly replaced by a blank look before schooling back into that cool mask. "Did you seriously come all this way to ask me that?" he asked dryly, and she shrugged.

"I'm getting discharged in about an hour. I have time to kill."

The look on his face made it clear he didn't believe her. "Why don't you skip straight to the point?" he suggested, and she nodded, taking in a deep breath.

"I want to start training my accuracy again," she told him bluntly. "Fighting Juzo made it clear I have a lot of weak points and I need to work on them." As she spoke she folded her arms over her lap, leaning forward. "Lately I've been working on a new strain of poisons. Recently I modified the seals on the that bokken to store it and release it on contact."

Poisoning the bokken had been both a simple and complicated process. She'd inscribed a basic storage seal onto its side and filled it with the poison made with Mushi-Mushi's venom. By flaring her chakra into two symbols on either side of the hilt, it would release the poison and the bokken's edge would sharpen enough to cut someone. Not enough to do much damage, but just enough to let the poison transfer. It had been tricky to make it work with the pre-existing double-reinforcement trigger, but she'd done it.

"I couldn't hit him though," she growled, eyes narrowing as she looked down. "I couldn't get in range long enough to touch him."

Her hands balled on her lap, her teeth grinding in irritation. If she'd touched him even once with it, he would have been poisoned. It probably wouldn't have killed him, but it would have affected him enough. The impact wound would have swollen, the surrounding tissue weakening and liquefying.
The pain from it would have hindered his mobility, which would have given her an edge. But obviously, that didn't happen.

"Back during the war, you once told me that I was wasting my poisons by only using them short-range. I still think that bokken is a good idea, but it wasn't the right choice to fight someone with a six-foot-long sword. I would've been better off with a volley of senbon and kunai."

"And you think I'm the best one to help with that," Ao finished for her, huffing softly. "Stop beating around the bush. I know you didn't save my life just to pick up our training three years ago." Sute raised her head to smile at him, thin and humorless.

"You picked up on it, didn't you?"

"You said you wouldn't let Juzo kill me, and then laughed hysterically and said you weren't a hero," he told her coolly. "And despite your claim, you were definitely angling to keep me alive. That tells me you want something specific from me, and helping you with your accuracy isn't good enough incentive to fight a Swordsman."

"Smart man." Sute hummed and her smile faded, her face stony and serious as she leaned forward. "You're right. I do want something from you, I've actually been meaning to track you down. The 'life debt' thing is just a good bit of bonus incentive. This whole situation just makes things a little more convenient, actually, seeing as you'll be out of commission for at least a month."

"Then out with it," Ao ordered, and she nodded.

"I want you to train me to become a Hunter-nin."

Later that night Sute sat in her study in contemplative silence, flipping through the great book of storage seals she'd had since childhood. A good three and a half years had passed since that first fateful day when she accidentally unsealed everything in it, and Sute still hadn't checked out even half of its contents. Each page contained a storage seal with some kanji in the center describing its contents: Spear, Arm, Astronomy, Botany... She idly turned the pages, her mind wandering even as she searched.

Sute did not fight Juzo "just" to protect Ao.

She fought Juzo to survive.

One day, she would leave Kiri. She would need to abandon it and never look back, to cut all ties with it if she wanted to live. Every day she spent in the Bloody Mist was a day closer to death, to being discovered and slaughtered for having a kekkei genkai. Staying in Kiri was a death sentence, and maybe someday it would change but that day would be far away, and she knew that in order to live she must leave.

But to do that she needed to be strong. Kiri had Hunter-nin dedicated to tracking down their rogues, eliminating them and disposing of their bodies as swiftly as possible. Sute had already established herself as a particularly useful resource with her fuinjutsu, poisons and medical expertises. Kiri would not let her leave easily, they would execute her before she could ever work against them.

Right now, Sute was too weak to survive, her skills too unrefined. She needed every advantage she could get, to use every moment and resource she had to prepare for her eventual departure.

And what better resource would she have than joining the very people who would eventually hunt her down?
She paused at this point, her eyes lighting upon one page in particular. "Memories," she read lowly, humming in thought.

Memories. Such a powerful word for one living a second life. Knowledge was power in this world, and limited as it may be, her knowledge of the Naruto series gave her a serious edge. Somewhere in her memories she had fights and battles showcasing each of the Akatsuki's abilities, and a detailed look at most of the Leaf ninjas' future fighting styles. They might have been the main characters from her old life, but now she would be more likely to face them as enemies.

Time had dulled that knowledge though, leaving her with only hazy images of black and white panels on her computer screen and small snippets of colorful cartoon characters speaking on the television. She never even got around to watching Shippuden, save for a few episodes her friend in Doctors Without Borders recommended. She hummed, a small smirk playing across her lips.

Fuinjutsu had so many useful applications. She may as well try to maximize her limited resources.

With that in mind, she pressed her hand to the seal and flared her chakra.

Chapter End Notes

And scene.

So today I have a couple things to talk about. First, Bloody Oracle has officially reached over 1,000 followers on FF! I'm blown away by the popularity, and I seriously can't thank you all enough. My only wish is that FF had a decent reply system for reviews like AO3 has for comments.

Secondly, if you haven't checked it out, I seriously recommend reading my other story, Echoes of Light. It's at Chapter 55 now, and I just had the biggest twist yet. That is seriously saying something considering I A) had the main character intentionally fail his genin test, B) gave Kakashi an extra dose of PTSD in Wave, C) provided Gaara some extra motivations and incentive in the invasion besides blood lust, and D) found a way to get some of the Akatsuki into Konoha for the Chuunin Exams. Those are my attempts to explain it with as few spoilers as possible, but I think that should tell you that I go for huge twists in there. I'm seriously really giddy about the twist I just had, so now's a good time to check it out!

It's also a good time to check it out because of this:

**I am going to put Bloody Oracle on a brief hiatus.**

Right now we're almost caught up on the draft, and I want to tweak what I have written of the next couple of chapters. Between writing these two stories and my summer class, I don't have time to get a satisfactory version done. I feel like this chapter is a perfect time to go on hiatus. My summer class ends on June 19th, so the next chapter will be **June 23rd**.

So yeah. Not much else to say. See you all on June 23rd!

(Also: today is Itachi's birthday. Happy birthday to him!)
When Sute asked Ao to train her, she expected him to help her with her accuracy and then just stalk off to wherever he went during his downtime.

She did not expect him to take over nearly every facet of her training.

"Suiton: Water Fang Bullet!" she yelled, her hands pressed together in the tiger seal as she faced the lake. A twisting pillar of water began to rise, spinning slowly and carefully, but its form began to waver and it collapsed back into the lake with a giant splash. She groaned in frustration as she let the resultant wave wash over her, staring at it sourly through drenched bangs. "Dammit, again?"

"Your grasp on your chakra is wavering," Ao interjected gruffly. He sat on a boulder on the edge of the training field, his crutches leaning against the stone and his worse leg slightly propped up with a smaller rock. "You keep molding it fine in the initial stages, but once you start to apply it to the water, your control slips."

"Gee, thanks," she quipped dryly. "That is so useful. Still kinda surprised they cleared you to use your Byakugan."

"I was banned from physical activity, not chakra usage. Now try again."

"Yeah, yeah," she grumbled, turning back and closing her eyes as she began molding her chakra again.

Over a month had passed since that fateful mission where Juzo defected, and nearly every day of the past three weeks had been spent under Ao's supervision. Accuracy had just been the tip of the iceberg. Ao had critiqued everything from her taijutsu forms to her chakra output in her ninjutsu. At one point he even forced her to work on genjutsu, despite her abysmal aptitude for it due to her large reserves. When asked about his thoroughness, he pointed out that with a full month off duty and a ban on physical activity while his leg recovered, he had literally nothing better to do.

Naturally, she had made great leaps and bounds in some areas, and frustratingly stalled in others. Namely, ninjutsu.

"Dammit!" she growled as the water spire fell again. This time it had barely reached half the height of the previous one before falling apart. She could almost feel the derision from Ao as she glared sourly at the lake.

"You're getting sloppier," he observed flatly.

"I know!" she snapped, whirling to glare at him instead. He remained unfazed by her reaction, if anything he looked intimidating due to the veins from the Byakugan bulging around his eye. Sute flinched and averted her gaze with a scowl, her teeth grinding in mild apprehension. She understood now more than ever why people hated fighting the Hyuuga clan. Knowing the Byakugan was watching her, able to detect the moment her chakra would subconsciously try to shift to mokuton— Needless to say, it set her heavily on edge.

"Is now a bad time?" The pair turned to see Utakata standing on the edge of the training ground,
"Uta, what are you doing here?" Sute asked, shoulders slumping as she frowned at him. Normally she had no problems with her friend randomly popping in, but today she was in a particularly bad mood for obvious reasons.

"A messenger told me to come here."

"A messenger?"

"I sent one," Ao interjected, and the teens turned to look at him. "There's only so much I can get from watching you practice ninjutsu on your own. I need to see you actively using it in a combat situation with a similarly-skilled peer."

"And I'm the only one willing to spar with her," Utakata finished flatly, grimacing. "Fine, let's just get it over with."

Sute didn't respond, just squinted at Ao sourly. "This feels like a trap," she muttered sullenly. He didn't bother responding, just folded his arms. Veins bulged around his concealed right eye, signaling the Byakugan under it to be active. The thought sent a shudder down her spine, her teeth gritting once more.

"Well?" he pressed. "I'm waiting."

In the end, the sparring match proved to be her worst one yet. She stuck to the more familiar Water Bullet and other ninjutsu she'd used in the past, even throwing in that earth one Kisame had taught her, but overall she found herself struggling to keep up with Utakata. Her most creative contribution had been a net made of chakra threads, and even those had been largely ineffective since he'd managed to create a new type of bubble that basically dissolved them on contact. He'd also made a point to grip his pipe with a thin film of chakra on his fingers, making it impossible to just yank it away like their last sparring match.

Ultimately Sute ended up finally landing a direct hit only for Utakata to pop and reveal himself to be a bubble clone, at which point she got pinned from behind by the real Utakata.

"That... was bad," he summarized as he climbed off her and let her get up. Sute said nothing as she clambered to her feet, pointedly avoiding looking at Ao. The entire time they'd fought she felt hyper-aware of his gaze on her, and even without taking the Byakugan into account she swore she could feel his stern disapproval throughout the battle.

"Clearly, you won't be making any more progress with ninjutsu today," the Hunter-nin observed bluntly. "It's close to sundown so we'll stop here and pick back up tomorrow." He reached down to grab his crutches, pulling them up as he carefully hobbled onto his better foot. Sute didn't bother offering to help him, knowing he'd refuse out of stubborn pride, and just headed back to town in silence with Utakata trailing behind.

Her sour mood persisted when she got home and promptly cloistered herself in one of the house's many studies with the Great Book of Seals, as she had taken to calling the giant book she'd lugged around since childhood. Fuinjutsu had become a lifelong obsession in this life, and fortunately for her the book came equipped with plenty of resources for a budding fuinjutsu master. It had seemed like an adequate distraction from her bad mood, but instead it ended up making it worse because of what she chose to focus on this time.

"This is so gross," she hissed to herself with a grimace as she carefully prodded the severed tongue.
with a small metal rod. Of all the body parts collected in the book, she would never get used to the tongues. Over the years she'd periodically summon the various limbs stored in the book in order to examine the seals tattooed onto them. Severed hands and legs could be a bit weird to touch, but she'd handled them enough in both lives it barely phased her anymore.

Tongues, though—she had actually only ever seen three outside a human body.

And now she had four.

Had it not been for her past life, she probably would have been nauseous having to handle them. As it stood, she just compromised by touching them as little as possible while studying the seals, using the metal rod to nudge its position for a clearer look.

At first glance, the seal made no sense. Three stacked solid black bars, followed by two broken bars split down the middle. It had none of the complicated writing which usually accompanied seals, making it seem more like a tattoo than anything. Only someone well-versed in the complexities of fuinjutsu would identify it as a collapsed seal.

Fact was, fuinjutsu tended to be complex and required a lot of writing to function; the most complicated ones could fill entire rooms, though those were exceedingly rare. Even the simplest ones included a good bit of writing though, so anyone looking at a seal would be able to identify it as a seal on sight even if they couldn't understand its intended purpose. Collapsing a seal circumvented this by making it appear compact, restricting it to a single character or symbol to hide its true nature.

Even so, collapsed seals were rarely used since they involved a lot of preparation to create. It involved designing another array specifically designed to collapse them, which could take hours to draw out at a minimum. According to Harusame, other methods also existed, but most had been lost over the years and only a tiny handful knew any now. Not many people specialized in fuinjutsu anymore, and the art tended to be too meticulous to use mid-battle, so the ability to collapse one at will—while convenient—seemed largely unnecessary.

All that said, breaking down a collapsed seal could be infinitely complicated. There were no set procedures on how to reverse the process in order to study the actual seal under it, and Sute decided trying to figure it out would just waste time. Instead, she focused her attentions to studying the symbol. The trick with collapsed seals was that they couldn't use just any symbols or kanji; it had to be related to its function in some way in order for the creator to focus on it properly.

As she pored over one of the many books pulled from the storage book, she barely registered the sound of the door opening behind her. "You seem quite focused today," the visitor commented and she instantly snapped to attention, spinning around with a dark scowl.

"Shishou! It's been ages!" she snapped at Harusame. At this point Sute had not seen him since the day after her discharge, and before that it'd been more than a month, so she felt rather justified in her irritation with his extended absence. The man looked rather amused at her annoyed expression, just smiling softly at her.

"I apologize for being away so long, Sute-chan. I've been working on finalizing some details of my project."

"You still owe us an explanation on that," she said flatly.

"Sometime later," he deflected. "Since I'm here now though, why don't you tell me what you've been working on lately? You seem to be making progress with the collapsed seals." If he wanted to
distract her from her irritation at his prolonged absence, he'd succeeded.

"Well, I think I finally found something," Sute allowed, turning back to the book. "I think it's based on a hexagram."

Hexagrams, according to the Taoist philosophy book she'd found, featured six stacked lines, with the lines either whole and called "yang," or else split in the center and called "yin." Given chakra had its own classifications related to yin and yang, it seemed like an easy connection. Even better, they also utilized combinations of the eight trigrams, which was based on sets of three lines. Trigrams had clearly been established as something chakra-related in canon thanks to the Hyuuga clan, so altogether it made sense.

"Is that so?" The older fuinjutsu master arched an eyebrow at her claim, peering over her shoulder at the tongue. "An interesting theory. However, that only has five lines, not six."

"I thought so too, but you can still kinda get two trigrams out of it," Sute said. She grabbed a notebook and flipped it to an open page, drawing three full lines. "The top three lines can be one trigram, chi'en. Then, if you start from the third line and draw the two below it..." She drew one full line with two broken lines beneath it, continuing, "Then you can get this one, ken. Apparently when people read these things, they start with the bottom trigram, so it's the most important one here anyway."

After delving into the Taoist philosophy book, Sute noticed ken had a lot of connotations regarding staying still and not moving. Chi'en had some more complicated notions involving creativity and strength, but it also tended to be referred to as the "strongest" trigram since it had no breaks. So, by combining that particular meaning with the stillness part...

"Together they basically mean force something to stand still," she surmised. "So I think the seal is meant to paralyze the person if they do... something. Or maybe keep them silent, by forcing their tongue to go still?" She shrugged. She'd only delved into this particular book recently since her old life had taught her to avoid all things pseudoscience, so she hadn't studied the subject too much yet.

"I see," Harusame hummed. "I don't use them myself, but hexagrams and trigrams are actually fairly common in some forms of fuinjutsu. If I remember correctly, the two together form Tun, or Retreat. That matches up with your theory, and would make sense." Sute paused, slowly turning back to him.

"...Wait. If you already knew about trigrams and hexagrams, then how long have you suspected this?"

"Since the first time I saw them," her teacher replied primly. "I considered mentioning it, but decided telling you would have deprived you of an opportunity to learn for yourself."

To his credit, Harusame had no issues dodging the giant book. He also didn't hesitate to catch the tongue when she threw it, though he did grimace a bit. "I'll admit, this is a first for me. You shouldn't throw around tongues, especially when you have an incredibly limited number of samples."

"It would make a pretty effective battlefield tactic," Sute mused thoughtfully. "People would probably go into shock if I randomly throw limbs at them..."

"Let's discuss something else," Harusame suggested as he carefully put the fleshy pink object down on the desk. "How are your seals coming along? It's been a while since I looked at them. I know the test-run of your barrier went well and you mentioned you were planning to modify it last time."
"Yeah, I did," Sute confirmed, perking up. "The guy thought it was a doton jutsu and tried to use lightning to break it, so I thought I'd build off that. I got it to the point where the earth won't wash away with a high-power suiton jutsu, but I'll need someone with a raiton affinity to test it more."

"Ho? Impressive. Can you show me?"

"Well, maybe later. There's something else I wanted to show you..." She sealed the tongue back into the book and flipped through the pages, quickly summoning a short stack of books and notebooks. "I'm trying to work out some stuff dealing with memories. I want to improve my recall and ability to sort through them, so I can use the information I have to the best of my abilities." Harusame's friendly smile faded almost instantly, his face becoming much more serious and grim.

"Messing with the mind is a dangerous thing, Sute," he warned lowly. "If you make a mistake, it can potentially kill you."

"I'm aware. That's why I want your help." She grabbed the notebook on top of the stack and flipped through it, turning to show him a page full of complex diagrams and rough seal prototypes. "Whoever owned this thing before me had been studying this stuff for a while. This notebook has a bunch of schematics for theoretical seals that can do stuff like improve memory retrieval, block them, and also stop their formation entirely. I want someone more experienced to look over this and give me their input."

His eyebrows rose in surprise at that, but he took the notebook and began idly flipping through it. "These are detailed," he murmured, his eyes critical. "Just skimming it, I can see an evolution in the formula as it was refined. Clearly, there was a lot of effort placed into it."

"Yeah. Lucky me. I guess whoever owned this book before had the same thought process I did." Sute's voice took on a quieter note, more somber than she'd expected. She never thought much about the book's old owners, but it wasn't a stretch to assume it belonged to her parents in this life. Finding the notebook already full of notes and rough drafts of experimental seals had been surprising, but then, the book contained many other resources on seals. Apparently fuinjutsu ran in the family.

"I suppose so," Harusame agreed softly, bringing her out of her thoughts. "If you don't mind, I'll need some time to take a look at this."

"That's fine. If you're going to take a while, take this, too." Sute turned and grabbed another notebook from the desk to hand him. "I've made a couple designs of my own based on those notes, but I don't want to test them until I get a second pair of eyes to review them. Take however long you want, I'm probably gonna be stuck training with Ao for another few days anyway."

"Alright, I'll try to finish up by the time your training ends. Then we can spend a full day reviewing this together. Does that sound fair?" He smiled at her, and despite her earlier bad mood Sute felt herself smile back. She and Harusame had never developed a particularly close student-teacher relationship like he had with Utakata, but she still had a healthy respect and admiration for the man, and a yearning to learn from him.

"Yeah. That sounds great."

A deep breath, and a flick of the wrist.

Five senbon flew fast and true, slicing through the air before embedding in the five human-shaped targets. Not quite center with the bull's-eyes, but still close. Sute huffed as she looked at it, folding
her arms. "Dammit," she grumbled with a scowl. Personally, she felt satisfied she was improving at all, but just because she did, didn't mean—

"You're still off," Ao interjected gruffly. He looked thoroughly unimpressed from his perch on the boulder, his gaze critical as ever. "You keep gripping it wrong. I'm not correcting it again."

"At least I'm making some progress," she grumbled to herself. She really had. Under his supervision she'd improved her accuracy by leaps and bounds, though it also helped she'd finally gotten over the mental block about tossing away projectile weapons thanks to her chakra threads. A twitch of her fingers and the threads receded, jerking the senbon out of the wooden post and back into her hands.

"Your chakra threads will be useful," Ao commented as she prepared to throw again. "If you can increase your flexibility with them, you should be able to control your weapons' trajectories and change them midair."

"Yeah, I've considered that." Thunk. Five direct hits, three in the inner ring and two right on the rim of the bull's-eye. "Manipulating them takes ridiculous amounts of chakra control though, and control does not come naturally to me. I'm better off improving my aim first and then working on it. For now I'm just satisfied being able to attach them to stuff and pull it back."

"Your reserves are quite large," Ao commented, and she carefully kept her face blank as she reeled the senbon back. She could sense the probing undercurrent to his tone, so subtle and hidden she likely would have missed it had she not been looking for it. "You mentioned in the cave you trained your control from early on, but even so it's impressive you can perform medical ninjutsu."

"I had my goals, and I knew what I had to do to achieve them."

"Still, why iryo-ninjutsu?" Ao pressed, sounding perfectly conversational by his standards. "That's not a common goal for a kid. Your reserves would be more suited for a ninjutsu specialist. And I know you didn't go into it because of a basic empathy," he added dryly.

Sute paused, flexing the senbon between her fingers. She knew he wanted something, that he had an ulterior motive for asking. But she couldn't figure out what he wanted because her attention focused on the question.

"I don't have a good answer for that," she admitted, and threw again.

"You're kidding," Ao said. "You have a reason for everything you do. Dedicating yourself to an entire branch of shinobi studies isn't done on a whim."

"It's not," she agreed with a shrug, reeling back the senbon once more. "I chose it because I already had a knowledge base suited for it, and it includes a bunch of sub-skills that fit my fighting style. Besides," she added wryly, her voice taking on a more rueful note, "I think we've established I won't be a ninjutsu specialist anytime soon."

Ao didn't respond right away, just seemed to study her thoughtfully. Then he huffed a small sigh and unfolded his arms. "That's enough projectile practice. I want to try teaching you a new ninjutsu."

"Let me guess, practice makes perfect?" she quipped dryly. He didn't take the bait, instead grabbing his crutches to balance himself as he carefully hefted himself off the rock.

"I'm going to demonstrate the hand seals for you, and then I want you to try it." Sute sighed but nodded, watching intently as he knelt and began flashing through seals. He did it slowly, making
sure she could see each one clearly. *Boar, Ram, Snake, Horse, Dragon.* When he reached the last one he turned his hands towards a nearby stone—

—And then a rippling arc of lightning sparked from his hands and surged at the rock, shattering it on contact.

Sute jumped in alarm at the result, snapping a wide-eyed look between the debris and the Mist jounin. "What the hell—is that *raiton!*?"

"Raiton: Electromagnetic Murder," Ao confirmed with a nod. "The seals are Boar, Ram, Snake, Horse, and Dragon. I'm giving you until the end of the day to get it down."

Chapter End Notes

And I'm back! Thanks for your patience everyone, I finished my class so now I'm free for the rest of summer~ For the record, the class was about designing creatures. It was a lot of work but also a lot of fun, I learned a lot of interesting things and got a chance to start building the world for a story idea of mine. Bonus: I was able to write a story with a favorite OC of mine and explore her backstory a bit. It's the first time in a while I've written something that *isn't* fan fiction, and I'm pretty happy with it. I might post it to my Deviant Art sometime soon.

So today's chapter features I Ching hexagrams. I found out about them by looking up the Root seal on the Naruto wiki, and after researching it a bit I think it's DEFINITELY the basis for the seal's design. As stated in the chapter, hexagrams feature multiple elements that are also used in relation to chakra in Naruto, particularly the Eight Trigrams. Plus, the interpretation "Tun" fits the seal's purpose so well. I'm usually not one for stuff like this, but reading the interpretations of hexagrams is pretty interesting. I might end up using it some more in the future for fuinjutsu, who knows?

Other than that, not much to say. Except, does anyone watch Juuni Taisen? Because I might be seven chapters deep into a fan fic for it. (Editing this chapter was so weird because hand seals use the Chinese zodiac too.) I highly recommend watching it if you haven't, I thought it would just be a battle royale-style story that focuses on fighting, but it's actually a lot deeper than I expected. I'm already looking forward to the sequel.

One last thing: Magdaleria on Deviant Art did some **AWESOME** fan art of Sute from Chapter 15 when she had that mini-meltdown at Juzo accused her of playing hero. This is the first bit of fan art I've gotten for Bloody Oracle, and it's just amazing! Magdaleria deserves so many more watchers than she has. Please go check out her profile on DA and give her a watch if you have an account!

Anyways, see you all next week!
"Ah, how boring. Those guys barely posed a challenge at all."

Five-year-old Sute just blinked as she listened to Ameyuri, her bright green eyes trained on the battle happening in the field below them. The other Swordsmen swung their blades and mercilessly cut down their enemies, their faces contorted into demented grins of sadistic glee or cold scowls with icy concentration. Next to her Ameyuri casually wiped the blood from the Kiba blades, a rather disappointed frown on her face as she stood next to her own pile of corpses.

"Hah, these guys weren't even worth the chakra," the kunoichi scoffed. "I could've cut them down with just a kunai." Sute hummed, glancing at the nearest body. His clothes looked singed around the edges, his face contorted in pain and his limbs sprawled in varying directions with unnatural positions.

"Lightning is strong, isn't it?" she said, and Ameyuri smirked, sharp and jagged.

"You got that right. Raiton is the most volatile nature transformation there is, it's harsh even on the user." As she spoke she rolled up her sleeves and then tugged down the hem of her gloves, exposing her arms. Branching patterns of red and pink mottled her skin, lines stretching and curling around her arm like a ghostly tree.

'Lichtenberg lines,' whispered that voice in the back of her head, while Sute tilted her head and stared at the scars with a sudden sense of awe. "Those are really pretty," she breathed, transfixed by them, and Ameyuri laughed, her grin spreading wider and exposing her jagged teeth in all their glory.

"Heh, knew I liked you for a reason!" she declared, ruffling Sute's hair with her other hand before tugging the glove back into place. "Raiton's a real pain to learn, but I love it. It's the reason I got the Kiba, only one here who can use it. Your chakra coils are too weak for it right now, but who knows? Maybe someday you'll use it too."

In the present Sute just stared at Ao, wondering if she heard right. "You're kidding," she said, and the blue-haired man arched his eyebrows.

"Do I ever joke?" The answer was no. Grimacing, she reluctantly raised her hands and began going through the seals, slowly just to make sure she had the sequence down. She knew she'd fail, but she had to try anyway. Ao would allow nothing less.

Raiton was vastly different from the elements she'd been working with. More than that, it was the superior element to doton, her other natural affinity, which would make it even more difficult to learn. She couldn't tell Ao that though, because having two natural affinities typically meant one
had a kekkei genkai, and he already knew about the suiton.

"How does raiton even work?" she asked as she repeated the seal sequence again. She'd only ever used suiton, doton and mokuton, she had no idea how to do any other nature transformations—hell, she barely understood how she even did those.

"Lightning is a volatile element," Ao lectured. "As you know, nature transformation is an advanced form of chakra control, dealing with changing your chakra's properties. Raiton is based on your chakra's frequency. In other words, high-frequency vibrations makes lightning. The higher the frequency, the faster the attack."

Sute nodded slowly. "Right... vibrations." Her mind flew back to her college days, when she took an interesting class on sound as an elective which briefly covered vibrations. Vibrations were the core feature of sound, whether it came to producing sound waves, or allowing humans to perceive sound when those sound waves caused their ear drums to vibrate.

Thinking about it made Sute relax, a sense of calm washing over her. Science was familiar. It operated under strict rules and guidelines she had studied her entire first life. Some of those rules still had yet to be discovered, leading to theories perpetually evolving as new research rewrote or enhanced their understanding of the preexisting rules and how they connected, but it had a much more solid foundation than the spiritual mumbo-jumbo usually surrounding chakra.

Ao said raiton came from vibrations. That meant Sute just had to find the proper frequency.

She closed her eyes as she focused on her chakra, concentrating not on molding it but instead how it felt. It began to shift under her skin, thrumming softly at first in an uneven pattern and then steadily gaining speed. She cycled through the seals once more, pouring her chakra into them.

Nothing.

She felt her chakra's vibrations jitter and halt before it could fully mold in her hands, like a broken record. Too unsteady, then. She focused again, trying to steady the frequency so it would follow a more regular rhythm. Once she held it for a few seconds she tried the hand seals again, but received the same results. Maintaining a constant pattern took effort and concentration since she had to manually induce the vibrations, so she decided to slow down the frequency and work her way up to a faster pace gradually.

From there, Sute fell into a pattern. Try to steady the vibrations, utilizing her years of chakra control training to its fullest extent, and try to maintain it for an extended period of time before speeding up the pace. At some point she stopped even bothering to make the hand seals, just focusing on manipulating her chakra as the rest of the world faded from her senses.

Time had no meaning. All that existed was Sute and the energy flowing deep within her.

"Try again," Ao called, breaking her deep concentration. She started, snapped back to the real world, and blinked before quickly regaining her focus. Once she found it she began slowly cycling through the hand seals.

Boar, Ram, Snake, Horse, Dragon.

Sute could feel her chakra pulsating steadily as she worked through the hand seals, fluctuating faintly and vibrating harder as she directed it to her hands. Electricity crackled from her fingertips and shocked her palms right as she reached the final seal, making her hiss in pain and abort the jutsu. "Shit!" she hissed, grimacing at the faint pattern of branching red marks now curling around
her palms and fingers.

She scowled, her hands glowing green as she began reflexively healing the marks before they could scar, only to freeze when Ao lightly clapped. She looked up to find him nodding in approval, a rare smirk replacing his typical stern frown.

"Congratulations, kid," he said. "You managed to convert your chakra into lightning in four hours."

Sute stared at him, then at the still-fresh scars on her hand. Lichtenberg lines, she thought, thinking back to that day on the battlefield with Ameyuri.

"Did I just actually use raiton?" she said slowly, and behind her Ao huffed quietly, nodding in approval.

"You did," he confirmed. "The recoil damage is undesirable and no way ready to use ninjutsu, but that's normal for someone just learning raiton. What matters is that you managed to successfully convert your chakra into lightning after only four hours of trying."

Sute didn't respond, just continued to stare at her hand in shock. Four hours. Four hours to transform her chakra into lightning. A messy, incomplete form she had absolutely no control over, and definitely not something she could use in the field anytime soon, but she still managed to tap into raiton. Raiton, which should be the single most difficult element for her to learn because it was superior to her earth affinity. That was...

"Holy shit," she breathed, feeling strangely numb for reasons besides the temporary nerve damage in her fingers.

"You should heal that," Ao suggested flatly, and she whirled to face him, not bothering to mask her utter bewilderment.

"How did I do that!?" she demanded, gesturing wildly to the marks on her hands. "I don't have a lightning affinity! I've never even used raiton!"

"No, but you have a natural grasp on chakra," Ao retorted. "I've been watching how you use your chakra with the Byakugan, and you have a genius-level grasp on how it works, though I doubt you're aware of that. Chakra control and practice only does so much. Nature transformations involve a strong intuitive understanding of your own chakra, which can take years to develop. You, however, have it naturally. The only reason you've been struggling with water jutsu is because you have a mental block."

Sute just gawked at him in disbelief. "What?" she croaked, feeling a bit faint. She had a mental block against suiton?

Suddenly, little bits and pieces slid into place, knocking the breath out of her. It made sense. Mokuton always came naturally to her, so naturally she could recall several instances she likely used it unconsciously even as a toddler. Every time Sute used a water jutsu, she could feel her earth chakra straining to join it and merge together to create mokuton—vice versa if she used earth.

In Kiri, having a kekkei genkai translated to a death sentence, so she'd been trying to hide it her entire life. She was always hyper-conscious of it, and being around Ao—who had the Byakugan—had made her even MORE wary. During her spar with Utakata yesterday, and all the training before then, she'd been struggling precisely because Ao was watching. Her thoughts had been focused on keeping her two affinities as separate as possible, to the point that she hadn't been able to focus on the actual ninjutsu properly.
Raiton was the most removed she could get from her two natural affinities save for fuuton. Because it had no risk of accidentally fusing with another nature to create mokuton, Sute had been able to completely focus on it with no concern about what Ao might see in her chakra.

"Holy shit," she repeated, even weaker than before.

"Your potential has been wasted." Ao informed her dully. "With those reserves and your intuitive understanding of chakra, if you had actually proper training in ninjutsu, you would have been jounin by now. Hell, you might have even beaten out that Hatake kid in Konoha for the youngest promotion record. Definitely would have been able to go toe to toe with him by now."

She winced at the mention of Kakashi, instantly recalling their last (and only conscious) encounter. Kakashi had been one of her favorite characters in her old life, he had become a familiar face in her imagination, sort of like an old friend. Though she didn't really know him now, the obvious distrust in his eyes and voice had still been more hurtful than she'd expected. Such a shame he would likely be her enemy whenever they next met.

Also, did Ao just say she'd surpass him!?

"Ao-san," she said slowly. "I'm actually very terrifying, aren't I?"

He just snorted. "Not yet, but you will be. That said, don't bother working on raiton anymore. You might have converted your chakra, but that's only the first step. Don't expect to get it to a workable level for battle anytime soon. I only had you do it to make you aware that the block exists, which is the first step to getting over it." Sute nodded, still feeling a bit numb as her mind continued to reel from the revelations.

The fact was, ninjutsu came naturally to Sute.

Of all the skills available to ninja, she expected it to be the hardest simply because chakra did not exist in her last life. It was an entirely new sensation, like an extra sense that simply hadn't been there before. And yet looking back, she had always been aware of the chakra inside her body. Even as a toddler wandering battlefields she instinctively recognized its presence was what caused the plants to respond to her will, and had even managed to use it a few times without knowing what caused it. It had been a driving part of the "forest pixie" image she'd given herself.

Directing it came naturally to her. Shaping it came naturally. Changing its nature—that came so naturally it was almost laughable, sometimes her mokuton still acted up without her conscious thought. Like the battle with Juzo.

...Sute decided to stop thinking about how her hand randomly transformed.

"Okay," she said slowly, breathing out and letting the tension seep out of her shoulders. "How do I get over this block?"

"That's up to you," Ao replied briskly. "I can't help you with it, I don't know what's causing it. But once you get over it, your growth should be exponential." He shifted and reached for his crutches, carefully lumbering to his feet. "We'll stop here for today and resume tomorrow."

"So you're relieving me for the day?" Sute asked, turning to arch an eyebrow at him. "It's barely even lunchtime."

"Right now you need more time to think than to train. Besides that, I need to go back to my team and spend some time working on my own conditioning." The comment made her stand straighter, her eyes narrowing as her medic-nin instincts kicked in.
"You're still on crutches," she pointed out mildly.

"And I have the Byakugan," he replied plainly. "I've been off-duty long enough, they won't leave me alone forever. It's better to start prepping now." She winced in mild sympathy. Ao wouldn't be in fighting condition for some time yet, but as long as he had other uses Kiri wouldn't hesitate to utilize them.

"Just be careful," she said. "Tell your teammates that if they dare make you put weight on that leg, I'll put the responsibility on them." The unspoken threat hung in the air, her neon green eyes flashing darkly, and Ao flashed another rare smirk.

"I'll pass it on." He turned and limped away, only to pause. "Right, one more thing. I can't help you, but there might be some people around who can. Don't be afraid to ask for help." She perked up at that, regarding him with obvious curiosity, but he offered no explanation and just continued limping away. Sute huffed and rolled her eyes as she turned to the lake, though she felt no animosity over him avoiding her question.

More importantly, now that Ao was gone, she could finally get to work on her suiton. She had to overcome the mental block somehow, and she'd rather have some privacy in case of another slipup.

As she raised her hands she paused, her eyes resting on the fresh scars. Ivy-like markings curled around her palm, a ghostly pink impression of a small tree engraved in her palm. She hesitated, knowing she should heal it, but...

"Those are really pretty," she breathed, transfixed by them, and Ameyuri laughed, her grin spreading wider and exposing her jagged teeth in all their glory.

After a long moment, she turned away and went to work.

"That's an interesting scar. I don't think you'll be able to hide your shinobi status with it, though."

"Didn't we already confirm I can't ever go undercover?" Sute snorted, rolling her eyes as she picked up her fork. "Hair's too unruly to do anything with it." Across from her Mei smirked, her dark green eyes glinting with amusement.

"I still can't believe that brush broke."

"I can. You should have seen it when I first got here, Ameyuri dragged me to a photographer right after getting to Kiri just to get it on record forever." Sute speared the cake with her fork and stuffed it in her mouth, savoring the sweetness.

After spending three largely unfruitful days working on getting over the mental block somehow, and she'd rather have some privacy in case of another slipup.

After spending three largely unfruitful days working on getting over the mental block, Sute had decided to cut her losses short and sought out Mei to collect on the older woman's promise to go to the small bakery together. Their schedules had never really meshed, between Sute's training and Mei's missions, and their only regret was not coming sooner. The cake tasted heavenly, and Sute already knew she'd be a regular for the rest of her time in Kiri.

"I suppose we're both lucky in that way," Mei mused aloud. "Undercover work for kunoichi tends to include honeypot missions more often than not." Sute shuddered, grimacing at the thought of having to have sex for a mission. She opened her mouth to say as much, but then paused.

"Wait, you don't do honeypot missions?" With anyone else the assumption would probably be taken as an insult, and Sute did see Mei's eyebrow twitch in mild annoyance, but the woman kept her cool.
"Unfortunately, my face is too memorable," she responded dryly, lips quirking into a humorless smirk. After a moment's thought, Sute conceded it made sense. Mei happened to be one of the most beautiful women in the world, at the very least the prettiest she'd seen in Kiri. Combined with her S-rank listing in bingo books, most high-ranking foreign shinobi would probably be able to recognize her on sight.

"Huh," she said thoughtfully, leaning back in her chair. "Never thought someone could be too pretty to run honeypot missions." Mei's smirk bloomed into a genuine smile, clearly pleased with the compliment.

"I suppose that's one way to look at it. Now, if only I could find a man who cared about more than looks..." Sute rolled her eyes as she turned her attention back to her cake, ignoring the remark. In her opinion, Mei's one greatest flaw was her overwhelming drive to find a romantic interest. She could appreciate wanting to find a partner, even if she didn't care for romance herself, but sometimes Mei's interest bordered on obsession.

"By the way, do you have any advice for ninjutsu training?" she asked, changing the subject, and the older kunoichi raised two perfectly manicured eyebrows.

"That depends. There's a large difference between our skills, so my own methods might not work for you. Besides, aren't you training with Ao-san?"

"I was. Today he told me he got cleared to go back to sensor duty." Despite being aware of the possibility, it came much sooner than either of them expected. He still couldn't do anything too physically intensive for another couple weeks, but his sensory skills with the Byakugan were too valuable to keep him off the field for long. There was plenty of work he could do without having to move too much.

He had also declined her request to meet his team to make sure he didn't move too much.

"I suppose we don't have enough men to spare for proper rest periods," Mei sighed, shaking her head. "I'm surprised you've been allowed off hospital duty so long."

"It's probably because of the shortage," Sute said with a shrug. "Combat medics are ridiculously rare, so I guess the Mizukage wants me to be in top shape, especially since I'm angling for ANBU."

Mei's gaze sharpened at that, her eyes taking on a more calculating gleam even as she kept her voice and posture casual and relaxed. "ANBU? That's a lofty goal."

"I'm aware," Sute replied, biting on another forkful of cake. "Ao says I have a good chance though, he plans to recommend me." Ao had told her that since ANBU needed combat medics in general, she wouldn't get accepted directly into the Hunter-nin unit like she'd hoped, but she'd still get to go on missions with them sometimes. Medics were invaluable to all fields, especially ones with combat experience, and Sute had proven herself to be one of the best Kiri had to offer. Between that and her fuinjutsu, Ao claimed the Mizukage would probably have her inducted as soon as he gave the recommendation.

The thought she might be training as a member of Kiri's ANBU this time next week felt intimidating. She had no idea what to expect from it, canon hadn't touched on even Konoha's ANBU forces very much. It would definitely be difficult, but she couldn't back down now. Joining ANBU would be her biggest step yet to her plans to defect from Kiri, if not the biggest of all. Once she understood how it worked, she'd be able to disappear for good—and that was the scarier thought.
For nearly her entire second life Sute had been planning to leave Kiri, but now for the first time that goal was finally in sight. If all went well, she would be able to leave by the year's end, which was just... intimidating. She hadn't left Water Country or even gone much further from Kiri's borders since the war. Defecting would mean entering an unfamiliar world full of uncertainty and unknown factors, one where her previous knowledge would be even flimsier.

And most likely she'd have to face it alone.

Despite her fondness of him, she couldn't justify taking Utakata. His jinchuuriki status made him too much of a target, both for Kiri and the Akatsuki. Meanwhile, right now Kisame would be far too loyal to agree; if anything, he'd kill her if she gave him the tiniest inkling of her plans. Aside from that, the only others she felt remotely close enough to ask would be Mangetsu and Suigetsu, but like Utakata, a former Swordsman would be too big of a target, while toddler Suigetsu was too young to be useful.

But despite the loneliness and dangers, staying meant a near-certain death sentence. Sute had already died once, and while she couldn't remember the circumstances behind it, she had no intentions of dying again.

"Any advice you have will be helpful," she said, giving Mei a meaningful look. Darting a glance around for eavesdroppers, she leaned forward and lowered her voice as she added, "Like, for example—"

"Yo, Sute!" Both women turned as two familiar figures approached, Sute's face schooling into a blank mask to hide her brief flare of irritation at being interrupted.

"Hello, not-Suigetsu."

"Really, Sute?" Mangetsu looked vaguely offended by the nickname, but wiped it away as he glanced a little uncomfortably at Mei. "Terumii-san."

"Hello, Hozuki-san," she greeted with a nod, ever polite and used to people's discomfort around her. "Is that your brother?"

"Ah, yeah, it is." He patted the shoulder of the small toddler next to him, who just remained silent. Three-year-old Suigetsu looked nothing like the snarky teenager Sute remembered following Sasuke around, still way too round and pudgy to resemble his older counterpart, though he had started to develop some of that arrogance. She'd encountered him a few times, following his brother like a little duckling, and had been treated to a lot of boasts about being better than all the other kids in Kiri.

Today though he looked subdued for once, just staring at his arm with a glazed look in his eyes speaking of unknowable horror. His skin had taken on an unhealthy red glow, but worse than that she could see several half-formed flesh-colored bubbles embedded in his arm in the center of the patch, just sort of frozen in place.

Sute arched an eyebrow at the sight, glancing at his older brother. "First sunburn?" she guessed, and Mangetsu nodded.

"Yeah. That obvious?"

"The look in his eyes gives it away," she said blandly, and sighed. "Lemme guess, you want me to fix it up?"

"If it's not too much trouble," Mangetsu agreed with an almost sheepish look. "We were on the way
to the hospital actually, but then I saw you. You're more familiar with our biology than most medics, so I thought maybe you could...?" He trailed off, and she sighed.

"You're kinda interrupting us," she grumbled.

"I don't mind," Mei commented, an amused lilt to her voice as she rose. "I have another meeting anyway, so this is a perfect opportunity to leave. We can pick up our discussion later." She offered Sute a mildly apologetic look, and the younger girl wilted a bit as she nodded.

"Fine. I should be off-duty for the rest of the week unless I get picked up for training, so..."

"I'll find you if I have time," Mei agreed lightly, gracefully rising from her seat. "Until then."

"Until then," Sute agreed reluctantly. Mei smiled and offered a soft goodbye before sweeping away, leaving Sute to sigh and kneel next to Suigetsu. She patted his head and the toddler startled, snapping large violet eyes her way. She smiled, unusually gentle given her reputation for her atrocious bedside manners among adult patients.

"Don't worry Suigetsu-chan, it only looks bad. I'll fix it right up and your arm will be good as new. Okay?"

He swallowed and slowly nodded, muttering a quiet, "Okay..." Sute wasted no time in getting to work, her hands glowing green as she pressed them over the burn. Healing Hozuki clan members tended to be a bit different from other patients, due to the effects of their hydrification technique. From what Mangetsu told her the technique was first "activated" on their third birthdays, at which point they'd be susceptible to the boiling-sunburn issue until they reached adolescence and their chakra coils settled more fully.

The Hozuki clan hadn't chosen the Hidden Mist as its home just because of the water thing. The constant fog provided significant cover from the potentially boiling sunlight for their younger members, and plenty of condensation in the air to keep their bodies properly hydrated. They had more motivation to defend Kiri than any other clan, because no other village could give them the resources they needed to thrive.

As her chakra began to flow into his arm Suigetsu's skin began to shift under her fingers— which felt so weird, its consistency much more liquid and fluid than normal skin—and slowly smooth out. His eyes widened and his mouth formed a little 'o' as he watched his skin return to normal, awe visible on his face. When Sute finished she pulled her hands and tapped his head. "There. All done."

"Thanks, Sute," Mangetsu said with a nod, and then lightly bopped Suigetsu's head when he didn't speak. "Oi, thank her, pipsqueak."

"Thanks," the toddler said, shooting an annoyed look at his brother as he rubbed his head, while Sute shrugged.

"Just doing my job. Speaking of which, I'm off-duty. Next time, just take him to the hospital."

"I kinda prefer you do it," Mangetsu deflected with a shrug. "Can't really trust any of the other medics with this stuff."

"Can't or won't?" she asked, raising an eyebrow, and he smirked.

"Both. Some of them get really pushy about our clan's secrets beyond what they need to know to heal us. Like that one trainee, Kabuto I think, was just hovering in the exam room last time—"
"Kabuto?" Sute interrupted, her voice suddenly blank. "Did you just say Kabuto?" Mangetsu looked a bit surprised at the interruption, and frowned.

"Yeah, the kid with the gray hair and glasses. Last time I was in there for a checkup he was sort of dawdling in the room until Mio chased him out. I'm pretty used to that happening with trainees though, everyone's real curious about the clan that can turn itself into water."

Sute didn't respond right away, her lips forming a tight line. "I see," she said slowly, and turned to pick up her empty plate. "Well, it was nice seeing you, but I must be going now."

"Are ya gonna find that Kabu-guy?" Suigetsu piped up, looking at her curiously. "Is he in trouble?" His voice took on a slightly bloodthirsty edge for a toddler, clearly excited at the prospect of violence befalling someone despite likely having never met the person in question. Sute just smiled at him, sweet and cheery.

"Maybe. I'll see you later." She nodded to them and turned to stride off, dropping the plate in the trash can as she passed it. _Kabuto, huh?_

In retrospect, it should have been obvious. There had only been one significant character in Naruto with glasses and light gray hair, and top of that he'd even been a medic. However, at the same time, Sute couldn't explain why a guy who worked with Orochimaru would be in Kiri of all places.

He was ten. Maybe he was a little older than that, but Sute knew the guy didn't have one of those eternal baby faces since she remembered him as an adult. At this age he'd either be an academy student, or one of those geniuses who managed to graduate early. Even if he'd already met Orochimaru, she couldn't imagine how the Sannin could spirit a kid away from Konoha for a few years, place him in Kiri undercover in their hospital as a trainee, and then get him back to Konoha no questions asked.

It didn't add up. Either canon had changed somehow, or there was something she didn't know.

Sute's musings were soon interrupted though, her steps pausing before she glanced over her shoulder. "Hello, Yagura-sama," she greeted with a polite nod. The Mizukage's blank-faced apprentice stood behind her, his eyes ever dull and near-lifeless as he returned the nod.

"Hello, Ringo Sute," he intoned dully. "The Mizukage requests your presence immediately." She arched an eyebrow as she turned to him, recognizing the meaning.

Well, looks like she'd be starting ANBU training sooner than expected.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter still feels a bit iffy to me. I don't want Sute to feel like a Mary Sue or overpowered, and having her change her chakra to raiton in one day toes the line. My only justification is that just because she can convert her chakra to lightning, doesn't mean she can USE it. As Ao said, that's only the first step. It will take weeks, if not months, of heavy and intense training to be able to use it to perform combat-worthy ninjutsu. And even then she wouldn't use it much, at most I see her using it to support her suiton jutsu.

The main purpose is just to explain the mental block. Sute DOES have a natural knack
for ninjutsu, but for obvious reasons she's wary of using it. I've always intended for her to become S-rank, and ninjutsu will be one of the key components of her fighting style. She won't be perfect at it, but trust me, she'll need every advantage possible for what I have planned for her.

...That said, I agree with Sute. Lichtenberg lines make really pretty scars.

See you next week! (Also, for the record, I'm just gonna gloss over ANBU training. Not really interested in showing it in full, training arcs can be really boring, and there are many more interesting things to show~)
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

A deadly dance of deceit begins.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Wakahisa Kabuto had been born, his family had been fleeing their devastated village.

Civil war had always ravaged Kiri, and not even the Third Shinobi War could quiet it completely. His father had been one of the few Mist ninja to properly retire due to battle injuries, and had thus been assigned to live outside Kiri to handle the ever-present discontent. The small village where their family lived had been burned down by a small band of rebels, but the potential rebellion had been quelled by his swift intervention.

They had not been so lucky five years later when another band of rebels attacked their small family.

Young Kabuto had been helpless to do anything but watch from his hiding spot under the floorboards as his mother had her throat slit by the rebels in front of his roaring father, the man's arms cut down to little more than gory stumps. Hours of torture had stolen his legs and remaining arms bit by bit, leaving him only able to scream his wife's name as the light faded from her eyes. Kabuto could only stare as the rebels slashed his father's throat, blood dripping through the gaps in the floorboards and staining his face.

Four hours would pass after they left before one of his father's old friends finally arrived at the grisly scene, prying the floorboards away to find the shell-shocked boy. The retired kunoichi swept him up in a tight embrace and carried him away, but the scene had burned itself into his mind. Out of an unknown debt to his father, the woman would take him in and teach him her ways as both a shinobi and a medic, calling herself "Kaede" and swearing to tell him her true name when he grew older. Alas, he never did learn her name, the woman ultimately perishing from a stroke while collecting herbs.

A tragic, heartbreaking story, made even more tragic by the fact that the real Wakahisa Kabuto had died at the hands of Konoha's ANBU Root the same day as his parents.

The imposter who'd taken on his role grunted as he pushed the cart of dirty laundry down the hall, his nose wrinkling in mild disgust at the ugly stains marring the sheets on top. Blood he could handle fine, but the latest patient had soiled his sheets with a number of other fluids from multiple orifices.

It's for Mother, he told himself as he entered the laundry room where Amuro waited. Everything Kabuto did, he did for Nonou. Joining Root had been one of the most grueling decisions of his life, and in the past year he'd been forced to do near-unspeakable acts in its name. However, he did not regret his decision, not when it helped Nonou. Kabuto owed everything to the kind woman who had given him his name, and if being a spy would guarantee her beloved orphanage funding and support, he would do it.
Still, he found it a bit hard to stomach at times. Root had not succeeded in wiping his emotions to a blank slate like so many of his other compatriots, so he felt plenty of revulsion. He at least fared better than Amuro, who made a retching sound when he saw the sheets at the top of the bin. "What are those?" he gasped, stepping back.

"The patient began leaking fluid from his ears," he replied with a grimace, and Amuro ogled first him, and then the sheets, and then quickly blanched and went back to staring at Kabuto.

"What kind of fluid leaks from there?" he whispered in horror. "Why did he leak fluid?"

"I don't know." Kabuto had never seen someone leak fluid from their ears before. He didn't know what could cause something like that, and he wasn't sure he wanted to.

Too bad he'd probably find out.

"Any chance we can just burn them?" Amuro asked with a grimace, and Kabuto sighed.

"I don't think so. The stains are just another body fluid, technically, so they should be able to come out." He mirrored Amuro's face as he spoke, not looking forward to it. Laundry had to be washed and scrubbed by hand, and as the two sole trainees that responsibility fell to them by default.

"I think I hate Suzuki for chickening out," Amuro grumbled as they began pulling the sheets out of the bin, and Kabuto grunted in quiet agreement.

They were elbows-deep in the metal washing bins, halfway through the pile of dirty sheets and scrubbing away various stubborn stains, when the door opened. Both turned to look at the newcomer, and Kabuto had to suppress the urge to flinch as he recognized the teenage female standing in the door.

Kiri's "Mad Butcher" had been one of many boogeymen in the orphanage. Older children loved scaring him with stories about the girl who would gleefully tear apart her enemies and then fix them so they would survive, but forever bear scars from the encounter. Rumors even stated one of the orphanage workers with only one arm and a nasty purple scar on his face had been one of her victims.

Needless to say, Kabuto had plenty of reason to fear Ringo Sute.

So far, Kabuto had very limited interactions with her. He felt glad for that, because his observations suggested her to be a mildly feared entity even within Kiri. Her absence the past six weeks had left the hospital much quieter and calmer without patients screaming in her less-than-delicate care. Her gaze roved over the room, and he felt his blood chill as apple green eyes settled on him.

"Wakahisa Kabuto, right?" she asked, and he stiffened, swallowing harshly before nodding.

"I, ah, yes?" he stammered hesitantly, and she smirked.

"Drop the sheets and come with me." He nearly recoiled at the order, his hands tightening their grip as his eyes widened.

"P-pardon?" he managed.

"You heard me," Sute said with a shrug. "You have one minute to wash your hands and get out here." She turned and stalked away from the door, leaving Kabuto to sit in shock for about five seconds before scrambling to his feet and darting to the sink. Amuro shot him a pitying glance as
he quickly washed his hands and fled, which wasn't surprising. Sute had earned her respect at the hospital through blood, sweat, and tears—and not particularly her own.

Kabuto mentally tapped into his Root training, systematically shutting down his emotions one by one and replacing them with cold logic. Right now he had nothing to fear; Ringo Sute might be infamous even within Kiri, but she did not randomly attack or harm allies. And right now, she had no reason to suspect him to be anything else.

After all, even if those fantastic, whispered rumors in Konoha of her being a "Bloody Oracle" actually held a grain of truth, surely an orphan in Root wouldn't be important enough to appear in such visions.

Sute leaned against the wall outside the laundry room tapping her foot rhythmically, counting the seconds it took for Kabuto to appear. "Forty-nine seconds," she informed him when the boy finally barreled into the hall. "I assume you did a thorough job washing your hands?"

"Yes, Ringo-senpai," he replied, nodding. Sute arched an eyebrow at the honorific but filed it away for later contemplation.

"Good. Let's get down to business." She gestured for him to follow as she began walking, Kabuto dutifully trailing behind her. "I was looking at the trainee files, and I saw you already know how to use the Mystic Healing Palm."

"I do," Kabuto confirmed with a nod. "Kaede-san worked as a healer in the village where we lived and taught me about medicine. She thought I might have a knack for it, so she taught me as soon as my coils developed enough."

"Ho? So you just left a village without a healer?" Sute asked casually, and Kabuto bit his lip in a calculated display of nervousness.

"I considered taking her place after she died, but then the village got attacked by bandits, so... I had to leave anyway." His voice took on a tinge of sadness, carefully calculated to tug at people's sympathies and hopefully stop further questions. Of course, those sorts of emotional appeals rarely worked on Mist ninja, but most would stop asking anyway if only out of disdain for his apparent show of weakness.

Sute had to admit, the kid was good. Anyone else probably would have fallen for it. His acting just couldn't stand a chance against a recently-minted ANBU and the former daughter of a serial killer who knew he was an imposter.

Her investigation into the Kabuto mystery had been put on temporary hold due to her ANBU training, having finally finished just the previous day and given a week to rest before her first mission. She needed the rest, as the past fifteen days had been even more grueling than her time with Ao, literally all of her time spent either conditioning her body to meet ANBU standards or else learning about common tactics and strategies.

Thanks to that training though, she found her investigation into the spy going much smoother as the lessons gave her new insight about the files she'd found. Wakahisa Kabuto did exist at one point. Sute had found old medical records for the boy's father recounting his career-ending injury, with a minor note in the margins noting he'd had a child named Kabuto when the medic had checked him again. After receiving word of his death, his grave had been investigated and his death by torture easily confirmed.
From there, the facts gave way to a believable fiction. With no formal records of Kabuto's existence beyond a note in the margins of his father's file, it would be easy enough for a stranger to slip into his place. Even the story about the mysterious unnamed kunoichi who taught him medical ninjutsu wouldn't raise questions; with Kiri's history of civil war, even the few legitimately retired Mist ninja often took on false names and minor disguises to avoid being found by enemies.

No, Kabuto had crafted a perfect identity to enter Kiri with minimal questions. Even Sute only had the thought because she already knew Kabuto to be an infiltrator.

The question was, who did he work for?

Considering she had not heard an uproar over it yet, for some reason Orochimaru had yet to defect from Konoha. While her memories suggested the Sannin seemed to be operating separately from the village anyway, she couldn't explain how he'd get Kabuto away without drawing some kind of attention. Given the clear advance preparations that went into his fake identity, it seemed more likely Kabuto was working for Konoha ANBU at the moment.

But that raised even more questions. For example, why did Konoha's ANBU use a bunch of kids? And why the hell did no one see through Kabuto's disguise as a fake genin in the Chuunin Exam arc if they knew he had ANBU training!? Yeah, ANBU identities were kept secret, but surely someone would know about it.

Maybe Canon had an explanation for it, but right now Sute could only think of "bad writing and retconning," which naturally she did not like. This world was her reality now, which meant it had to follow some kind of rules. While she had some holes in her memories and knowledge of Canon, she knew even with a complete knowledge Naruto would have left plenty of holes which had to be filled in by the actual world. For example, she doubted Kiri's hospital woes would ever have reason to appear in a story about a Leaf ninja.

For now though, she pushed the thought away and focused on the task at hand. She hummed as she turned into an exam room, rolling his answer about his training over in her head as she headed straight to a set of cabinets. "Fair enough. But that said, I also noticed you haven't been tested on it."

"Ah, when I arrived, Maki-san said I shouldn't bother since I'm still just a trainee." The reference to her former supervisor made Sute want to groan, remembering his dismissive attitude towards even her when she'd first started.

"So stealing records, and sabotaging trainees," she muttered under her breath, a distinct note of irritation creeping into her tone. When Kabuto looked at her curiously she waved at him and said, "Forget it, Maki was just an idiot. Being able to use the Mystic Healing Palm at your age is a pretty big feat." Even as she spoke she pulled a scalpel out from the cabinet, and with a flick of the wrist proceeded to slit her arm from the elbow to the wrist.

Kabuto jolted as blood sprayed from the wound, his eyes widening. "R-Ringo-senpai?" he stammered, and flinched when the older teenager shoved her bleeding arm at him.

"Heal it," she ordered, her apple green eyes boring into him. "R-Ringo-senpai?" he stammered, and flinched when the older teenager shoved her bleeding arm at him.

"Heal it," she ordered, her apple green eyes boring into him. "I want to see your skills for myself." He stared at her wide-eyed, still a bit stunned, but then his face set in determination as he stepped forward to get to work. His hands lit up green with healing chakra as he grabbed her wrist, his chakra expertly flowing into it. Despite the blood spray the cut was fairly shallow, and it took barely three minutes to mend the skin.

Sute watched closely the entire time, analyzing his ability. She could tell that the skill was not new
to him. Vaguely she recalled Kakashi confronting Kabuto and mentioning something about him being the son of the hospital director, or... something, so she supposed his experience made sense. That, and he showed an obvious natural knack for it given his speed. When he finally finished she lifted her arm, flexing the muscles to confirm he'd done a sufficient job.

"How long have you been able to use it?"

"About two years, ma'am."

"I assume you practiced on patients at Kaede-san's place," she continued, not phrasing it as a question. "Did you have any chances to practice since she died?"

Here, Kabuto hesitated, staged more for effect than genuine truth. This was the gap in the story that had stood out most to her, since his skill with the Mystic Healing Palm matched up with consistent practice. Practice he wouldn't be able to get after "Kaede" died. "I... not particularly," he murmured, avoiding her gaze. "I treated a few of her patients before the village was... well, you know. And after that, I decided to... practice on myself." He bit his lip, turning away and ducking his head as if ashamed.

Immediately Sute grabbed his hands and jerked them upwards, prompting him to jump and snap a startled look at her. She eyed his exposed wrists with a critical gaze, her eyes narrowing as she glanced at him. "Where did you injure yourself?" she demanded, and saw the distinct spark of panic in his eyes ever so briefly. Aha. Clearly, he hadn't thought that far when coming up with the story.

The panic faded somewhat, but the nervous tension still remained. "I... on my stomach," he replied, his hesitation likely genuine since he was coming up with it on the spot. "I did not want to use an area that could potentially hinder my mobility if I messed up—"

Kabuto cut himself off with a yelp when Sute took that as her cue to release his hands and sharply tug his shirt upwards, the boy nearly staggering back in shock. She ignored his alarmed sputtering, focusing on his clean, unscarred skin on his stomach. "There aren't any scars," she said pointedly, arching an eyebrow at him.

"I-I tried to be very careful," Kabuto stammered, looking shaken. "I only made shallow wounds, just enough to keep my skills in shape. I didn't want to do anything too serious, especially since I was alone most of the time. Now, can you p-please stop staring at my stomach? I-it's kind of... embarrassing..." The red tinge to his cheeks was totally genuine, and Sute rolled her eyes as she let go of his shirt. His story felt flimsy, but not enough to call BS on it, so she decided not to call it out.

"Kid, you're a medic now. Modesty is deadly in this field. You can't be afraid to show some skin now and then."

"But... don't you avoid the onsen?" Kabuto hazarded hesitantly, and she blinked and shot him a somewhat incredulous look.

"How—?"

"Mio-san complained about it," Kabuto explained. "She, ah, got drunk one night after her shift and started ranting about you being a prude in the break room."

Sute stared at him for about three seconds before her face schooled into an annoyed scowl. Every medic had their vice, and for Mio, it was drinking and gossip. Sute knew a lot more about her coworkers than she really cared to know after listening to her drunkenly babbling with another
nurse. Of course they wouldn't stop around a couple trainees. "Seriously? One of these days that woman's gonna blurt something that's completely confidential, and we'll have to kill the poor saps that hear it."

"You're joking, right?" Kabuto asked, and Sute paused, before smiling coyly at him.

"...Sure," she said sweetly in a tone that told him she was not joking about it. She admittedly enjoyed the way he paled a little too much, no doubt thinking about his own danger if he ever got exposed. She then wiped away her smile and sighed, running a hand through her hair. "Anyways, the onsen thing is different. I'm just not into public bathing, it doesn't seem sanitary to me."

Sute silently thanked her known fastidious obsession with hygiene, since it provided a reasonable excuse. Everyone here found bathing together to be perfectly normal, so she knew her avoidance would be seen as strange. "I see," Kabuto said, and fell silent. "Erm, about my healing. Is it satisfactory?"

"Oh, it's fine," she replied with a shrug. "You still need some work—that cut could have been healed in thirty seconds—but you've got the foundations down for that part at least. One of the neatest jobs I've ever seen, Kaede did a good job teaching you."

"She did." The smile Kabuto wore felt more genuine than the other expressions, his gaze taking on a distant glint. Probably thinking of his real teacher, then, she mused. As her ANBU instructors had drilled into her head, the best deceit had grains of truth mixed into it, and she suspected "Kaede" had been a substitute for another person.

"Why don't you tell me what else Kaede taught you?" she suggested, and Kabuto blinked as he snapped out of his reverie before nodding.

"Of course," he agreed, and hesitated before adding, "And maybe... you could give me some tips too?"

The request surprised Sute. Her? Teach Kabuto? The thought made her want to laugh. Kabuto was a threat, pure and simple. Either he reported to Konoha, or he reported to Orochimaru—either way, he was bad news. The only reason she hadn't reported him yet and let T&I whisk him away was because his removal would change too many variables surrounding Orochimaru, and while she didn't really care to preserve canon, Sute needed to keep any advantage possible. Teaching Kabuto would give him direct exposure to her skills, ultimately preparing him to face her someday if they ever butted heads.

But on the other hand... Wouldn't teaching him also give her a better idea of his skills? Teaching him would give her a reason to observe him, and more direct access to him. Slowly Sute felt her initial derision of the idea give way to a smirk—a sharp, jagged looking expression, full of pointy edges and mischief.

"Sure, why not? Us self-taught child geniuses have to stick together." After all, as the old saying went: keep your friends close, but your enemies closer.

"Right." Kabuto nodded, looking a bit apprehensive, but his eyes held powerful resolve. It seemed Sute had found a fun project for the remainder of her time in Kiri.

Three figures stood on a tall mountain towering over Kiri, staring at the fog-shrouded village sprawled below them. From their vantage point they could spy several tall cylindrical buildings which blended with the blocky mountain range dominating the skyline, the rooftops covered with
thick clusters of trees to further mask it from sight.

"Hoh, looks like the 'Hidden Mist' part isn't a misnomer," one commented almost lazily, arms folded behind his head. "Took us long enough to find it." His companion scoffed, rolling his eyes.

"Oi, take this seriously. We're here for a job, not to go sightseeing."

The first man snorted. "Please, as if you could go sightseeing in this fog. You'd be lucky to see where you're going."

"You would have trouble, seeing as you ran into a wall back home, too." The man started, spinning to glare at his companion with a heated snarl.

"Hey, I was six and half-blinded by a flashbang, you stupid pretentious—"

"Is now really the time for this?" the third member of the group cut in dully, silencing the argument before it could escalate. "We have a job to do." The man stiffened and grumbled as he turned away, falling silent and glaring at the village.

"Yeah, yeah, I get it," he muttered. "This isn't my first infiltration, kid."

"Give us three days, we'll be done in no time," the second man added. "You just sit tight and avoid being seen, we'll see you when we're done."

"Will do," the third agreed, and with that the other two jumped down the cliff, vanishing into the thick fog below. He sighed as he turned to walk to the cave where they'd established their base. Something told him the next three days would be very dull.

Chapter End Notes

Alright, point taken: Sute is not a Mary Sue. Thanks guys, guess I just let some worries get the best of me. I'm always wary of keeping characters balanced and realistic. I also got some interesting history about the term, did not realize it started as a misogynistic term. The more you know.

On that note, I highly recommend aspiring writers to use The Universal Mary Sue Litmus Test found on Springhole. That was my introduction to the term, and it's actually a pretty good way to keep characters in-check and balanced. Granted, it's not perfect (trying to do it with Sute is tricky since she's in a minor area with canon characters who probably aren't as important as the test intends to mention, and also it doesn't really cover "screwed ethic code due to deadly serial killer father"), but it does help keep you think more about your characters. The questions include links to guides which have actually seriously helped me with my writing over the years—including me totally revising at least one character's backstory—so I highly recommend checking it out.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Sute gets a visit from Harusame, and then she learns some shocking information.

On the second day of Sute's week of leave, Harusame visited her house and went straight to her bookshelf.

"Have you read this book?" he asked, pulling a random novel off the shelf. Sute blinked in mild surprise and squinted at the cover, recognizing it to be a mystery novel.

"Yeah, but it's been years," she confirmed with a shrug. "I got it back during my first leave in the war."

"Do you remember the culprit?"

"Not off the top of my head? If I read it and saw the name, I would."

Rather than respond, Harusame merely smirked and gestured for her to follow him.

Sute had only been to her teacher's house a few times over the years, and as far as housing in Kiri went it was pretty unremarkable. A bit smaller than the Ringo household since he didn't belong to a clan, with enough space for all the basic rooms and amenities and a guest room... Of course, as one of Kiri's few fuinjutsu experts, he also converted two different rooms into workshops. This time he took her to the one in the basement, which he used for private and more dangerous projects.

She paused as they descended the stairs, recognizing the pattern of lines etched along the floor and wall... and also the lumpy bag shoved in the far corner. "Shishou?" she asked, glancing at Harusame.

"I've been working off your notes of the memory-enhancing seal for the past few weeks since you were busy," he informed her crisply. "Your rough draft seemed stable enough for the most part, so after some minor tweaks I decided to draw up a full version for testing."

"And the body in the corner is...?"

He glanced at her, his smirk taking on a bloodthirsty edge. "As I said, I thought it was ready for testing. So I did."

Sute just stared at him, admittedly a bit off-guard. For all his unusual kindly demeanor, that did not change the fact that Harusame was a product of the Bloody Mist. He had been part of the generation which had slaughtered a classmate in order to graduate, and he had no qualms killing people. Or using captured enemies as test subjects for his seals, apparently.

"...Huh," she said finally, not sure what else to say. Turning back to the array, she cocked her head. "So how does it work?"

"Just pulse chakra into it, and focus on what you want to remember. I've placed a hard time limit of five minutes on each usage so you don't get trapped in your memories. I've already tested it twice in
the past, so it should be physically safe. The subjects didn't appear to suffer any noticeable brain damage before I killed them."

"How reassuring," Sute drawled sarcastically, already strolling towards the center of the complex array. A majority of the seals in the room actually had no relation to the memory-enhancing seal she'd designed, but instead existed as safety precautions for testing particularly risky seals. Safety measures could only do so much for fuinjutsu though, testing new seals always carried a bit of risk.

Her seal itself barely took up one square foot on the floor, located in a large circle in the center of the array. Sute sat cross-legged in the circle and placed a hand on the ground where it had been drawn, closing her eyes. Focusing on the thought of the book's cover and title, she pulsed her chakra into the seal—

Two minutes later Sute opened her eyes with a small breath, the world briefly spinning around her as the colors and shapes seemed to swirl violently. Blinking blearily, she quickly grabbed at her head with a pained hiss as she felt herself sway. A large hand quickly grabbed her shoulder, holding her steady as she waited for the sudden sense of vertigo to fade.

Gradually the world came back into focus, the dim features of the basement workshop emerging. Exhaling softly, she lowered her hands and closed her eyes for a few moments, letting the tension seep out of her shoulders. "I'm okay," she breathed out. "I'm back." After a moment the hand removed itself, and she twisted her head slightly to see Harusame hovering behind her, a vaguely worried look on his face.

"Nothing feels wrong?" he pressed. "No disorientation? No sense of disconnect?"

"My mental faculties seem to be in order," Sute responded calmly, shaking her head. "Just... It's powerful. Stronger than I expected." Rather than just conjure the memories, it felt as if she directly experienced it again. She'd held the book in her hands, able to feel the overly scratchy fabric of the ratty old couch in the living room she'd thrown out a year ago. Already the experience started to fade from her memory, just like all memories, but it still lingered fresh in her mind as if it had just happened.

"That book's writing was so dry," she muttered to herself, pinching the bridge of her nose. "How the hell did I even read it the first time?"

"Do you know the culprit?" Harusame asked, arching an eyebrow, and she bobbed her head.

"It was Kizaru, the carpenter. The detective's end-case spiel should be on page one seventy-six, I think." She'd been reading the climax of the book in the memory, where the detective had confronted the culprit and explained all their findings. In retrospect, the scene had been unbelievably cheesy and overly dramatic.

She heard the flipping of pages behind her and a thoughtful hum. "Yes, that's right. In that case, I suppose we should mark it as a success."

"For now," she agreed with a light shrug as she rose to her feet, her mind still racing and analyzing the experience. The clarity really had been startling; she'd hoped to just pull it up for easier access, not experience it so... directly. More than that, she'd experienced it in real time, which made it a bit less time-efficient than she'd like—and also a bit too vulnerable.

Her entire reason for wanting the seal was to access memories of the Naruto canon from her past life. Chances are she wouldn't always be in a situation where she could safely retreat and spend five minutes watching some scene from an old episode; she planned to go missing-nin, and she
probably wouldn't have someone to watch her back. Worse, the five-minute scene might not even contain all the information she wanted or needed.

No, while it was serviceable for now, she'd need to make some serious adjustments before she left Kiri if she wanted it to be practical. For now though she pushed the thought away as she turned to her teacher. "Thanks. Do you mind keeping this from the higher-ups though?"

"You mean to hide something from the Mizukage?" Harusame questioned, loftily arching his eyebrows as he peered at her down the bridge of his nose. "That's akin to treason."

"Does he know the contents of your secret project?" Sute countered loftily, and the small smirk he offered her told her he didn't.

"Very well. I wish you luck with your experimentations, Sute-chan."

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Day four of her leave proved a bit less relaxing.

"Whyyyy..."

Sute bowed her head mournfully as she knelt on the stone path in her greenhouse, moaning in heavy dismay. Before her, the water hemlock had been reduced to a bunch of shriveled brown petals. Despite her best efforts, the damn flower shriveled up and died. At this rate she felt ready to just give up. She would need to use mokuton to keep the damn thing alive.

As she mourned the difficult plant's demise Utakata hovered behind her, perfectly unsympathetic to her despair. "It's actually kind of impressive it died," he remarked lightly. "You have plants from the deserts around Suna in here, but you somehow can't keep one of Kiri's own local plants alive."

"It's got to be the soil," she muttered, wiping her face with her hand as she got up. "This thing grows right around the border of the marshes and the lake. It's such a vague area because it's right at the edge of both ecosystems, I can't recreate the exact conditions properly." Recreating the fluctuating humidity levels would be a pain, same for the general soil conditions stemming from the blending ecosystems; fuinjutsu couldn't do everything. Water hemlock hadn't been nearly so finicky in her last life, she thought irritably.

Utakata did not respond to her mutterings, his attention focused elsewhere. "...Sute, do you have your mamushi running loose?" he asked slowly. She turned her head towards him, following his gaze to a scaly brown form slithering beneath the shadows of a large, leafy fern.

"Oh, hey, Mushishi," she greeted with a small nod in the serpent's direction, and Utakata turned a wary amber eye towards her.

"You renamed it?"

"Oh, no, I got another one." He flinched at that, but to his credit he didn't react with any more shock than that, instead just looking more resigned to her actions.

"I know you need their venom for poisons, but do you really need two?" he questioned lowly, and she shrugged.

"Milking snakes isn't really feasible with only one snake, doing it too much would cause them more harm than good. It's best to have multiple snakes so I can alternate between them and let them rest."
"...I'm sorry, but did you just say 'milking snakes'?

"That's the proper term for collecting snake venom," she responded with a wry smile, perfectly aware of how silly the term sounded. Milking snakes had to be one of the single weirdest skills carried over from her first life, though it had been incredibly useful in this one. "It works better with an assistant though, maybe you could give me a hand sometime?"

"What would that even include?"

"Mostly holding it while I get it to bite down on a jar."

"...I want to say no, but I'm actually kind of curious," Utakata admitted grudgingly, and she smiled.

"Sweet! We can try it later this week!"

"If I get bitten, I'm counting on you to give me the antivenom ASAP," he informed her flatly. "Don't just wait for the Rokubi's chakra to push it out of my system."

"Didn't I already say I liked you too much to do that?" Sute retorted, and Utakata paused briefly before shuddering.

"I'm almost starting to miss you being busy with training all the time."

"Jerk." She rolled her eyes and turned away from the plant, mentally deeming it a lost cause.

"Anyways, thanks for providing moral support. So obviously we won't need to cover how to care for that."

"You still haven't explained why you need to prepare me for long-term greenhouse sitting," Utakata commented, and she smiled at him.

"Sorry, it's classified." As he glared at her sourly Sute could already tell she'd love avoiding questions about her ANBU work. Today marked the penultimate day of her rest period, and in two short days she'd be receiving her first mission as a Mist ANBU. Of course she had no idea what that mission would entail, so she needed to make sure Utakata would be prepared to care for the greenhouse anywhere from one day to more than month. Hopefully it wouldn't be the latter, that would be a bit long for her tastes.

At this point a bell began tinkling, and she nonchalantly turned and started towards the front of the greenhouse, Utakata following behind with a deceptively relaxed gait. He'd been one of the few she'd informed of the warning system, and she could see the minor tension in his posture, ready to lunge and fight at a moment's notice. "Anyways, should we have a funeral for it?" she asked.

"What would a funeral for a plant even include?" he mused lightly, playing along with the odd inquiry in case someone could somehow overhear them despite the security and privacy seals. "Funerals usually involve flowers, but at a funeral for a plant..."

"The flowers are blood sacrifices," Sute replied solemnly, "so that the hemlock will not be alone in the plant afterlife."

"If that's how you handle a plant's funeral, I'm afraid to see how you handle one for a person," Utakata quipped dryly.

"Eh, I leave the planning for those to others."

"Good. Because I'm specifically updating my will to order you to have no involvement in my
"I'd be offended, but you are probably correct to be wary."

By that point they'd reached the front of the greenhouse, another bell joining the chorus. Utakata casually glanced upwards, his visible eye narrowing. "One and seven," he told her quietly, and Sute huffed out a small breath. Bell one meant a gate intrusion, and bell seven meant the visitor would be directly outside the greenhouse. They exchanged knowing looks, and Sute stalked to the door and threw it open.

Zabuza stood a few feet away, looking rather unimpressed. "Oi, Ringo, what's with all the traps?" he questioned gruffly. "Your yard's practically a minefield."

"I take security very seriously," Sute responded with a shrug, while Utakata quietly stood to attention behind her.

"What do you want, Momochi?" he demanded lowly, and Zabuza's eyes narrowed in return.

"Business," he replied shortly.

"So specific," Utakata drawled, folding his arms, and the other male glared at him while Sute watched with faint amusement. For some reason the two really did not get along. She had no idea why or when their animosity started, as she'd only seen them interact a handful of times, but they tended to glance and make low, snarky comments full of obvious disdain. She found it strange but amusing, though right now might not be the time for it.

"What kind of business?" she questioned, leaning against the door frame and arching her eyebrows. Zabuza quickly turned back to her, his face twisting into a scowl beneath the bandages.

"Business," he repeated, and this time she noticed his hand flex at his side, the middle and ring fingers folding inwards. Immediately her light mood faded to a professional veneer, recognizing the silent gesture for a private conversation from her ANBU training. It surprised her to see it already since she still had two days leave, but she supposed it shouldn't surprise her. ANBU business, then.

"Sorry, Uta," she said, glancing at her friend. "I think he wants to talk to me alone." Utakata squinted at her warily, clearly displeased at the dismissal, but soon huffed and crossed his arms.

"Fine," he said briskly. "I'll just head out, then." He stalked past her and likely would have shoved against Zabuza had the older teen not stepped aside, leaving Sute to sigh. Not for the first time, she wondered what caused their weird animosity.

"Come on, there's silencing seals around the greenhouse," she said to Zabuza, gesturing her head to the space Utakata had formerly occupied, and he took up her invitation and walked inside.

"I can't believe you actually got into ANBU," he said once the door closed. "Since when the hell have you been aiming for that?"

"A while," she replied cryptically, crossing her arms. "But that's not why you're here. Skip the small talk, Momochi. What's going on?"

"Emergency patrol. Someone tried to break into the old records building." Sute stiffened at that, instantly snapping to sharp attention. The old records building referred to an older structure which housed more historical and archived documents. Nothing relating to active duty forces, but the documents there still held some important information about old patrol routes and treaties...
including some which violated other old treaties.

Some of it could definitely reignite faded anger if it fell into the wrong hands.

"When was it?" she asked, all business.

"Within the last three hours. Someone found the guard unconscious near the door at shift change, still haven't been able to wake him up or figure out if anything went missing. Higher-ups want as many people on the ground patrolling the borders as possible. On that note, catch." He pulled a book out of his vest and tossed it to her, Sute catching it on reflex and glancing at the cover.

"A bingo book?" she asked, her interest now thoroughly piqued. It'd been a while since she'd seen one, and this one looked new.

"There's rumors that Kumo's got some people nosing around," Zabuza informed her gruffly. "Not sure how accurate they are, but apparently the guard has those lightning scars on the back of his neck—"

"Like this?" Sute asked, holding up her hand to indicate the tree-like scar on her palm. Zabuza paused in his briefing, squinting at it suspiciously.

"You're not learning raiton now, are you?"

"Not really, made a spark and shocked myself, stopped there. Just didn't bother healing it." She lowered her hand and asked, "So does it match that or not?"

"Yeah, it does," Zabuza confirmed gruffly. "Obviously raiton's not a common affinity around here. The higher-ups want us to do a refresh on the Cloud nin section just to be safe."

"Kumo, huh?" Sute mused, flipping through the book curiously. Kumo had to be one of the larger blanks in her knowledge. It was the only village that didn't sprout an Akatsuki member, and by the time she'd stopped reading it still hadn't made any major appearances. Seriously, even Iwa had Deidara and the guys who killed Obito. The only appearance of a Cloud ninja she could recall would probably be the Hyuuga kidnapping, which should be...

She paused. "Hey, have you heard anything from Konoha about a kidnapping attempt?"

Zabuza's blank looks answered her question perfectly. "Why the hell would I hear about a kidnapping there?"

"Reasons," Sute dismissed with a shrug, knowing he wouldn't press her for details, and then paused as she finally reached the first page of the Kumo section. Her gaze sharpened instantly, her lazy slouch straightening as she narrowed her eyes. "What the hell?"

"Never seen Cloud nin before?" Zabuza guessed, ignoring her gratuitous switch to English. She'd done it enough that most people just wrote it off as a quirk at this point.

"No, I haven't," she confirmed lowly, frowning at the photo on the page. Fittingly enough the section opened with the current Raikage, a dark-skinned man with a goatee and white-blond hair combed back... actually, no, it wasn't combed back, those were cornrows. Cool, stylish white-blond cornrows sported by an obviously black guy.

Her brain temporarily shut down as she stared at the photo. After fourteen years in the Naruto universe, Sute had kind of assumed it was one of those anime universes with a singular generic anime-ethnicity. She'd been used to everyone having some weird anime-blend of Asian and
Caucasian features in this life, with a heavier emphasis on the Asian side and a spattering of unnatural hair colors—and, in some cases, skin colors too, as evidenced by Kisame and Orochimaru.

Which... actually, if Kisame had blue skin, then why not assume that black people might exist too?

"...Ringo, are you okay?" Zabuza seemed mildly perturbed by her extended silence, eying her warily. She blinked and then shook her head, shrugging as she shoved away the sudden pang of uncomfortable nostalgia.

"Sorry, got lost in thought," she replied airily, turning the page. And then froze as her brain shut down again, this time at the sight of a similarly dark-skinned white-haired man sporting sunglasses and a facial tattoo resembling horns. "...Kira... Bii...?"

"The Eight-Tails jinchuuriki," Zabuza informed her bluntly. "Don't bother with his entry right now, he works with the Raikage so he's not likely to show up."

"But..." Sute trailed off, flipping ahead and squinting at the entries with renewed interest. She lingered on one in particular, the previous Raikage who'd been featured for posterity. Apparently he'd taken on a student—identity still unknown—and had passed on a technique to create black lightning called "Kuropansea".


"Okay, this is getting weird even for you," Zabuza declared. "Are you going to freak out, or can I continue the briefing?" Sute sighed, shaking her head to clear her thoughts.

"No, I'm fine. Sorry about that, just a bit shocked. It just reminds me of... well, before." She offered a vague shrug, referencing her first life, but she knew he'd interpret it as a reference to before coming to Kiri. His expression remained sharp but she saw a glint of understanding in his eyes as he nodded, no doubt reaching his own conclusions.

"Right. Just don't let it get to you, then."

"Please, I'm a professional," she replied, turning the page to another pair of entries. This time a man with lighter skin and pale blond hair on one page, and another guy with dark skin and bright yellow and orange hair on the other. "So how likely do you think it is Kumo's actually skulking around? Most of these guys don't exactly blend in with the Kiri crowd."

"Not sure, but doesn't matter," Zabuza grunted. "Go to the gates in fifteen minutes, you'll be patrolling the area outside the village solo. Remember Tsurugi?"

"From our platoon back in the war?" she asked, closing the book, and he nodded once.

"Good, that saves us time. He'll be waiting around the gates and will tell you the specific area you're assigned. Higher-ups want this to be investigated discreetly in case the culprit's still in the village, so don't worry about needing a uniform this time. Just play it off as a normal patrol."

"Got it. I'll grab my gear and head out." Zabuza nodded at her and left without so much as a farewell, Sute close behind to go to her house to gather her supplies. Once she'd stepped through the door she pulled out the bingo book again, flipping back to the entry on the jinchuuriki and focusing on the katakana characters for his name. Katakana, in her old life, had been mostly reserved for writing out foreign words or other words borrowed from foreign languages.
For example, *English* words.

"Kira Bii," she read aloud. "*Killer Bee.*" A small giggle escaped her at that, amused as she flipped through the other pages. From what she could tell, Kumo had a fair mixture of fantasy-black people and the generic anime ethnicity, though *interestingly* a lot of people tended to have blond hair. Combined with her basic knowledge of Japanese culture and how other cultures tended to be portrayed in manga and anime, she reached a simple conclusion:

*Kumo was a freaking America expy.*

The thought made her laugh, eyes glinting exciting. "*Interesting,*" she breathed, grin growing wider, and slammed the book shut to begin preparing.
Hey guys, before I post, I have an announcement:

**The Bloody Oracle of Kiri will be going on hiatus until August.**

My family is going on vacation next week, and I won't have time to edit/post while we're gone. Beyond that, I'm also starting classes again in mid-August, so I should probably focus on building a buffer. At earliest, you can probably expect the next chapter around... August 11th, maybe? At the very least, I plan to update Echoes of Light first.

On that note, if you haven't read EoL, please do. Everyone's freaking out over the latest twist, and I am absolutely ecstatic because I've been waiting for this twist for over fifty chapters. I am dead serious about that. I won't lie: while Bloody Oracle is the more popular story, I'm honestly prouder of EoL. That one takes a lot more effort and planning to write, and while it's admittedly slow at times I think I've managed to twist most of the common Naruto tropes on their head. To give you an idea of what I mean: the Land of Waves arc features Team Seven forced to try to protect Tazuna without Kakashi there to guide them.

So yeah, please read it! I am so proud of it and where it's going! You can read it here. Anyways, enjoy the chapter. Sorry if it's a bit rougher than usual, I'm still trying to get fight scenes down.

So far, Sute's first official ANBU mission felt exactly like every other patrol, save for one key detail: most of her patrols took place during the day.

"Why the hell did I like horror stuff so much," Sute muttered under her breath as she trudged along. She'd been given a solo route through the swamps, having only a dim, flickering lamp to light her path. Night had started to fall and shroud the world in blackness, the sky cloudier than usual to create an even darker night than typically experienced in Kiri. The water looked particularly black and murky as she lightly walked across the surface, slimy seaweed and moss shifting under her feet.

For all her skill and fighting ability in this life, Sute was not immune to the imagery her imagination could produce. Junji Ito's art had been the tip of the iceberg of her fascination with horror; she'd had a love-hate affair with horror books, comics and manga. She'd read everything from Stephen King to online copies of those old horror comic anthologies like *Tales from the Crypt*, always looking for something new to chill her. Walking through the dark, foggy swamp at night—alone—brought back plenty of snippets of creepy imagery.

"At least the fog's thin tonight," she murmured to herself as she paused next to a mangrove tree, pulling out a paper tag from the pouch on her hip and pressing it against the trunk before moving on. Sute had prepared a small stack of perimeter-alarm seals, each connected to a temporary seal inked around her wrist like a bracelet. If anyone passed them, it would detect their chakra and one
of the diamond-shaped symbols on her wrist would light up to let her know which ones had been triggered. So far she'd placed four, all at various strategic points.

As far as ANBU missions went, she suspected this to be tamer than the usual fare she would face. She hadn't expected anything too flashy for her introduction to ANBU life, but she hadn't expected a glorified midnight patrol in a horror movie-esque stretch swamp.

Granted, she didn't expect to find anyone. Up to three hours had passed since the guard had been knocked out. Either the assailants would flee Kiri immediately to get ahead of the patrols, or they would lay low at least a full day before leaving. Leaving in the middle of the night just screamed of suspicious behavior and intent.

So one could imagine her surprise when she heard a distant bang from the direction of another patrol and looked up to see a red flare shooting high into the sky, the streak of white and golden sparks bright against the cloudy night.

Red. That color indicated the other patrol had encountered an unknown hostile and engaged in combat. Sute immediately stood on edge, knowing it likely wouldn't end up being some sort of false alarm or misunderstanding with another Mist ninja. More importantly, the angle and direction of the flare's path told her it came from the patrol group nearest to her route, which meant other intruders could be around as well.

She stepped into the shadows of a nearby mangrove tree at this point, her chakra folding in on itself to mask her presence as she glanced at the seal on her wrist. Sure enough, she soon felt a tug on her chakra and one of the diamonds took on a dull glow, the upper corner containing a particularly bright red dot.

Movement detected near the seal, heading north of seal's location, she thought. Her mental map placed the seal not too far from her current location, and after briefly pulling out a compass to quickly confirm her location she realized the person would be heading her way from the same direction the red flare had been launched. Most likely whoever came by wouldn't be an ally.

Years of training kicked in instantly, the kunoichi flashing through hand seals to form a small air bubble to breathe as she allowed herself to sink into the inky depths of the water. Pressing her hands against the slimy algae coating the swamp floor, she pulsed her chakra through it and let it ripple across the vegetation spanning the swamp, providing her an active mental map. Soon she recognized the faint vibrations of footsteps walking across the water's surface, light and careful from years of practice.

A devious smirk played across her lips, her eyes sparkling with delight as she began swimming towards it, the algae swaying out of her way to provide her a clear path and help mask her movement. Gliding stealthily towards her ever-approaching quarry, she began molding her chakra in preparation for an ambush, letting her instincts take over.

The thing about Sute was, she knew the terrain around Kiri. She knew which routes would be most likely to be used by an ill-informed outsider, the ones where one wrong step would have someone sink into the bog and where the water hid dangerous predators waiting for an unsuspecting bystander. No, the patrol organizer had been absolutely correct to assign her a solo patrol to this area.

Sute was a swamp monster, and this was her domain.

Coming to a halt, she slowly rose towards the surface, moving carefully to minimize ripples. Her hair floated about her freely, the murky brown-green hue blending in with the algae and helping to
hide her even more. Keeping close attention on the movement of the approaching figure, she began
cycling through hand seals with practiced ease. Two inky tendrils of water exploded from the
surface, snagging her prey's ankles and snaking up his legs.

The intruder started, mouth opening to shout in alarm, but before he could make a sound Sute
emerged behind him and slapped a hand over his mouth, prematurely muting his screams. She felt
him shudder briefly as she leaned her head forward, her hair falling into his line of vision like a
curtain while her free hand reached into her pouch. Slowly his head turned towards her, just
enough for her to glimpse a large black eye full of apprehension and alarm.

"Sweet dreams," she crooned with a twisted smirk, and slapped a paper seal onto the back of his
neck. Instantly his eye rolled up and he went limp, making her grunt as she quickly hooked her
arms under his armpits to catch him. Huffing, she dragged him to the land and laid him out on the
marsh, taking a moment to look over his face.

Though she couldn't get a clear look at him in the darkness, she had a good hunch he didn't belong
to Kiri. He had the typical dark brown hair common among civilians, and his skin tone held a
slightly deeper tan than normally be found in the ever-foggy Land of Water. Beyond that, his
clothing seemed a bit more shinobi-grade than most civilians wore—specifically, the armor plates
she'd felt underneath the shirt when holding him.

Shrugging it off, she pulled out one of the modified explosive tags used for the colored flares and
tied a blue one one around the handle of a kunai. Enemy captured, awaiting backup. As she reeled
back her hand to throw it she felt a tug on her chakra though, and her eyes quickly flitted to her
wrist to see the same diamond glowing again. She stiffened, suddenly wary.

There were two explanations. One, one of her colleagues had moved to pursue the enemy who had
come her way. Two—another enemy was coming.

Her grip tightened around the kunai's handle, her mind racing. Either option could be true, but the
second one had far more potential and risky paths associated with it. Worst case scenario, the
enemy had eliminated the other patrol team and had moved on to fight her alone.

Quickly weighing her options, after a moment Sute slowly slid the kunai back into the pouch on
her hip along with the others. Sending the flare into the sky would give away her position; if the
newcomer was an enemy she'd work best with the element of surprise. She grabbed her
uncosscious captive and dragged him further from the water's edge towards some bushes,
hesitating briefly before quickly slamming her hands together into a seal to cause the plant to grow
a bit bigger and help conceal his body.

With that done she slunk towards the water's edge, once more submerging herself and silently
gliding towards the newcomer. Once more she could feel the faint ripples of light footfalls atop the
water, this time faster and slightly heavier than before. Rising higher, she let the figure pass
overhead before carefully emerging just enough to peek above the water's surface. She spied a
familiar figure running away from her, prompting her to call out in surprise.

"Mangetsu?" The teenager skidded to a halt, spinning to face her in surprise.

"Huh? Wha—what're you doing underwater!?"

"What are you doing here?" Sute retorted, climbing onto the surface and crossing her arms. As far
as she knew the mission had been just for ANBU, and Mangetsu hadn't struck her as the type to
join the organization. Not out of a lack of skill—no, he had plenty of that—but his personality
didn't fit the discreet organization. Or so she thought, anyway.
"I'm patrolling, what else?" he asked with a huff. "Same as you, I'm guessing. Anyways, a guy got away from the team over there so I thought I'd see if I could catch him for them. See anything?"

Sute frowned faintly, walking past him towards where she'd stashed her captive. "Yeah, one guy..." She trailed off, a curl of unease in her stomach even as she listened to Mangetsu walk behind her. Something didn't feel right.

In her old life, her father had taught her to always listen to her gut feeling. He had taught her both through example—watching him lure victims to their home with an easy charisma that lowered their guards—and also through direct lessons and lectures. People had cultivated that so-called "sixth sense" as a survival mechanism, their subconscious picking up on small details they otherwise didn't recognize. When their instincts said something was wrong, something was.

"Yeah? Where is he?" Mangetsu asked, and Sute paused with a light hum.

"Well... First, reflex check!" she sang, twirling around with a roundhouse kick. Mangetsu jumped back with a yelp, narrowly dodging her foot.

"What the hell!?" he sputtered, staring at her with startled violet eyes.

"Oh, come on," Sute laughed, flashing a teasing smirk. "You never complain when I do it back home. Aside from the head-turning-into-a-puddle thing."

"Yeah, well, right now we're working," Mangetsu snapped back, relaxing minutely. "There's a big difference between doing that there and here." Sute's smirk turned more malicious, her eyes twinkling.

"You're right," she agreed lightly. "Except for one thing: I never do reflex checks." The other teen tensed at her words, and then both of them moved, Sute lashing out with a kunai from her hip pouch while "Mangetsu" reeled back. As he did his features shifted, the transformation technique fading.

One look, and she knew he definitely came from Kumo. He looked to be around her age, his skin almost dark enough to blend in with the soil and offset by his shaggy white hair which covered one eye. His clothing looked rather ordinary, the kind civilians wore, but with the transformation gone he clearly had a sword strapped to his back. He regarded Sute warily, already palming a kunai and keeping a wide gap between them.

"You saw through it, huh?" he muttered.

"Always trust your gut," Sute said, her earlier smile gone and replaced by professional cool. Something about the boy in front of her felt oddly... familiar. She shook it off for the moment though, shelving the curiosity for later consideration. "You're not exactly in an ideal position to fight, you know. You should just surrender peacefully."

"Do you really expect me to do that?" he asked dully, and she snorted.

"Of course not. Only an idiot would surrender willingly to Mist custody. But it doesn't hurt to ask."

The other teen just sighed, looking quietly resigned to a difficult fight. For a moment they stood still, just staring each other down. Then, they moved as one, launching into action.

Sute surged forward as the boy reached for the handle protruding behind his back, throwing her kunai at his chest. He ducked to the side and barely dodged its tip, managing to wrench his sword free from its sheath and swing it at her. She dodged easily, feeling a light tingle from electricity that barely missed her as she did, and skipped back to get some distance. His sword was surprisingly
short and square-shaped, sort of like a cut-off version of Kubikiribochō, with electricity crackling along its edge.

Raiton-charged weapons had to be some of the deadliest out there; Sute remembered all too well the corpses Ameyuri and Raiga left with the Kiba during the time they spent together on the battlefield. Getting close to it would be dangerous, she needed to keep her distance. She offered a silent notion of gratitude towards Ao for the accuracy training; though the first kunai had missed, her aim had greatly improved. She only needed to make a little nick and one of her poisons would circulate through him.

Still, long-range battles definitely weren't her strong suit. This battle placed her at numerous disadvantages, the only advantage she had right now was the terrain. To that end she rushed through hand seals for the Water Fang Bullet and the swamp water began to rise, two twisting spires shooting towards him like drills. The Cloud ninja jumped out of their path and only narrowly avoided them, the hem of his pants shredded as it brushed against one spire. He yelled as he swung his sword at the other one, cleaving through it with a rippling current of lightning and sending it crashing back to the water.

At the same time Sute hurled two kunai at the location he'd been forced to dodge towards, and while he tried to twist away from them this time one managed to graze his arm, making him hiss lightly. She wasted no time, rushing through more hand seals to cause four more water spirals to shoot towards him. This time he had a harder time dodging, his body contorting as he tried to avoid them only to yell as one grazed his leg. Blood swirled and mixed with the spinning water as it crashed back into the swamp, the Cloud ninja skidding back and gritting his teeth. His leg itself looked rather gory, the pants torn along the shin and completely coated in red.

With this, Sute had gained the edge once more. With a few quick hand seals she formed three water clones and began running in a large circle around him, all four of them flinging senbon at him with deft precision courtesy of her training with Ao. The Cloud ninja growled in frustration as he tossed his sword at one clone to collapse it and dropped down, rushing through hand seals before slamming his palms on the water's surface.

Sute's eyes widened with realization and she quickly jumped away as lightning surged from his hands, electrifying the water. The two remaining clones jolted as the electricity rippled across their forms and collapsed into the water with a large splash. Retreating to the safety of a nearby tree, she stuck to it with chakra on her feet and then launched off. While fighting a raiton user at close range would be risky, she couldn't waste the opportunity now that he'd thrown his sword aside.

Clearly he hadn't expected her to immediately jump right back into the battle, because he started in surprise and began to turn to dodge. His reflexes were just a bit too slow and she managed to snag his arm, digging her nails into his skin as she barreled into the water, dragging him down with her. Everything grew muffled as they sank into the murky depths, her hair fanning out around her. She could feel the Cloud ninja try to wrench his arm free from her grip, the water's current gently swaying as he brought his other hand towards it to form another hand seal. Sute reacted swiftly, jerking his arm away and yanking him towards her. Her other hand reeled back and surged towards his face, her fingers jabbing into his nostrils and tearing away.

Air bubbles exploded from his mouth as he released a muffled scream, his free hand quickly moving to claw at his nose as a cloud of dark red mixed with the water. Sute released his arm long enough to dig her knee into his abdomen near the solar plexus, causing him to gasp on reflex. Between that and his earlier scream he was rapidly losing air, and Sute quickly grabbed his wrists and dragged him deeper down to the swamp floor.
It took about four seconds for him to begin struggling, but it was sluggish and weak, the poison from her kunai finally taking effect. She kept a firm grip on his hands and held them far apart to prevent him from forming seals, staring him straight in the eye. She could barely see him in the inky depths, the water too murky from both his blood and the blackness of night, but she could glimpse the panic in his eyes. As his struggles lessened more and more his lips parted, forming a single syllable, and then his eyes closed and he soon went limp.

After a moment she pushed off the swamp bottom and swam to the surface, pulling him with her. Breaking to the surface she dragged him to the shore, dumping him unceremoniously on the boggy ground. Her hands lit up with chakra as she pressed them to his chest, guiding the water in his chest away from his lungs and to his mouth so he wouldn't drown. As she did she took the opportunity to glance at her captive once more, idly noting the torn cartilage around his nose from where she'd used her fingers to tear it underwater, only to stiffen as she one more interesting detail—or rather, two:

Two tattoos, one on each arm with stylized kanji—the left for lightning, the right water.

Her stomach sank as she stared at them, a sudden pang of pity washing over her—pity, and also a bittersweet sense of homesickness she hadn't felt in fourteen years.

"Fuck," she breathed, looking at his face once again. Looks like she knew at least one Cloud ninja after all.

Darui's day could be described as 'kami-freaking-awful.'

As a proud shinobi of the Hidden Cloud, Darui tended to be more mellow than most of his peers, but no less loyal and determined to serve his village. In fact, his work ethic and incredible potential had secured him a place as a personal student of the Third Raikage at a young age. Now at thirteen, he had become the sole inheritor of his Black Lightning techniques—a fact denoted by the recently administered tattoo on his left shoulder with a stylized character for "Lightning"—and was on track to a jounin promotion.

In short, Darui was an all-around badass and not someone to be taken lightly.

That said, he still had a lot to learn. And this mission just exemplified it.

He grunted as he stirred to consciousness, feeling groggy and sore as he struggled to take stock of his situation. He was leaning against a tree, his wrists bound in front of him with wire. As he exhaled shakily he suddenly coughed, doubling over and hacking up small bits of water. Gasping, he raised his head and looked around, struggling to get his bearings. The Mist ninja he'd fought sat cross-legged nearby, drumming her fingers against her leg.

"Two minutes," she remarked idly. "Lucky you, Cloud ninja-san, you probably won't have any brain damage." Darui glared at her weakly, his hackles rising as her neon green eyes glinted in the minimal light available on this dark night. Those eyes felt familiar, niggling at a memory of the bingo books he'd combed through before leaving on the mission. He couldn't place a name or face to it though; most of their intel on Mist ninja was old and outdated due to its insular nature.

Swallowing harshly, he forced himself to meet her gaze. "My arm's numb," he noted flatly. The arm that had been grazed by her kunai earlier had gone completely numb in the time he'd been unconscious, and he could feel the pins and needles feeling extending to his chest from his shoulder. "You poisoned me, didn't you."
"Of course," she replied with a shrug. "Poison is so useful, a shame people don't use it more. The toxin I used causes temporary paralysis. You won't die but by tomorrow morning you should be totally immobile. Fortunately for you, it'll flush out naturally by sunset thanks to the usual biological processes."

"Lucky for me?" he repeated warily, and she shrugged as she got to her feet.

"You have until dawn to get as far from here as possible and find a place to hide yourself. If you're still alive after that, get the hell out of Water and never look back. I suggest you hurry up, your leg's pretty messed up so you'll have a pretty bad limp, though I fixed your nose for you. Your mission's a total failure, so consider it a learning experience." Darui froze at that, his eyes briefly widening with surprise before he squinted at her suspiciously, his instincts on edge.

"Why not just kill me?" he demanded lowly, and she glanced at him briefly before turning away.

"Because I'm a sentimental idiot," she said flatly, and Darui stiffened, eyes widening with shock as he watched her vanish into the darkness. After a long moment of silence he finally forced himself to get to his feet, hissing as he felt stabbing pain in his leg where the muscles had been torn up by the suiton jutsu. Shifting his weight onto his good leg he began limping away silently, his hands dangling in front of him uselessly for the time being and his mind racing.

To anyone else, her words would have sounded like gibberish, but any decent Cloud chuunin could recognize the near-extinct native tongue from the Land of Lightning. The question was how she would know it.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Loose ends are wrapped up, Sute deals with painful nostalgia, and Ao attends a meeting dealing with the aftermath of the latest infiltration...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ping.

The buzz of her phone interrupted her late-night reading, her gaze lifting from the textbook to the device on her bedside table. The screen lit up to show a text from a familiar name, one she hadn't seen in a while. She shrugged as she set aside the book to pick it up instead, not in any particular rush to review internal anatomy when she knew it so well.

'Do you mind a minor spoiler from Naruto?' it read, and she smiled, knowing exactly where this was going. She tapped the reply box to bring up the touchscreen keyboard and began typing.

'Dude, just show me your awesome cosplay.'

There was a brief pause, and about a minute later a photo came through. A dark skinned black man gazed at the camera with an almost bored look, a white wig styled to cover his left eye and wearing a sleeveless black top a white one-shoulder vest. Two more photos followed, highlighting two tattoos on each shoulder. That made her perk up in interest, tapping a reply.

'What are those tattoos?' she typed, but even as she pressed send the designs' meaning suddenly clicked in her head. 'Oh wait, are those lightning and water?'

'Got it in one! Forgot you read Japanese.'

'You said he's from Naruto? Don't see a headband anywhere tho'

'He doesn't wear one, but his uniform is pretty obvious. I'll let you wait to see which one it is when you get back into it.'

'She smirked and tapped out a quick 'ok' and then went back to reading her textbook.'

Sute opened her eyes with a quiet gasp, her hand scrabbling to clutch at her head as the world spun violently around her. She heard quick footsteps and then felt a hand press against her back, the motion somewhat awkward as if wavering between whether to comfort her or hold her steady. "Sute?" she heard Utakata say, and she groaned, waiting for the vertigo to fade. Slowly the world stopped revolving, the dim features of her private study emerging as her vision steadied.

She exhaled shakily, lowering her hands and bowing her head. "I'm okay," she mumbled. "Sort of."

"That is not very reassuring," Utakata muttered behind her, and she chuckled weakly as she sat up straight, brushing her hair from her face. A full day had passed since she'd fought the Cloud ninja
and let him escape. The other Cloud ninja she'd ambushed earlier had been the only infiltrator to survive, currently locked away in the depths of T&I, but she found her attention drawn more to the teen she allowed to get away.

That tattoo had niggled at her mind, bringing back hazy memories of a photo. She knew it came from her last life, even had an inkling of where she'd seen it as her mind conjured images of an old friend, but she couldn't remember the details. Harusame had given her permission to use the seal as long as she had someone to supervise her in case it went wrong, so she'd naturally grabbed Utakata to finally sate her curiosity so she could move on.

It should have been fine. Should have.

"It's strong," she said quietly. "I knew that. I just forgot how strong though." Already the experience started to fade from her memory, just like all memories, but it still lingered fresh in her mind as if it had just happened. She'd held a cell phone for the first time in fourteen years, able to even feel the small chip in the phone case's corner as she slid it into her palm to type. The familiar ping of her ring tone, the smooth glass beneath her thumbs, the way each letter appeared smoothly and fluidly in the textbox and her phone vibrated ever so slightly with each press—it had been natural, totally normal in those brief moments in her college dorm.

A normal she would never again attain.

"Dammit, this is depressing," she muttered to herself, pinching the bridge of her nose.

"Sute?" Utakata asked sharply, alarm flitting across his face. She waved a hand at him, shaking her head as she exhaled a shaky breath.

"Sorry, Uta, I'm fine. It's just... really clear. Kinda like jabbing at a fresh wound..." She shook her head again, her hand falling to her side limply as she sighed. "I should probably tweak it to make it less... intense." At this point Sute had resolved to do just that, and if she failed she would simply never use it again. Otherwise, using the seal would do nothing but send her spiraling into depression.

Despite her ability to easily detach herself emotionally from reality, Sute was not immune to falling into despair. She still had access to all the same core human emotions as every other naturally neurotypical person, she just had a very skewed upbringing that let her ignore her feelings more easily than others. But the seal's current strength made that very difficult to do. Yearning for a reality that she could never return to would eventually become soul-crushing if she didn't nip it in the bud now.

Sute had known that she would experience the memories directly, but she hadn't anticipated how it would actually feel upon seeing her old world.

For now she pushed the thought away, getting to her feet. "It worked, at least. I saw a photo of a guy that looked like that Cloud ninja when I was younger, but it wasn't him. Didn't get any useful information about him from it." Technically it wasn't a lie, since her friend had never told her about the guy he cosplayed as. But the fact he dressed as the character at all told her he would be important.

The guy in question had been a friend from high school, an avid fan of cosplay who found his passion hampered by his mixed African and Polynesian heritage. Anime rarely had characters on the darker end of the natural skin color spectrum, and he never cosplayed white people or even "token" black characters. The fact he'd chosen to dress as that specific Cloud ninja meant the character had played a fairly significant role, at least above a nameless extra, and had been one he
It just... never really resurfaced in this life, so she kinda forgot until now.

Right now, no one knew she'd allowed him to escape. Sute had told the others she'd engaged him in combat briefly and he'd escaped using a substitution jutsu, though not before she'd retrieved the scroll he'd stolen. A white lie, an act of mercy spurred by the memory of a friend she would never seen again.

Sute hadn't been lying to him: she was a sentimental idiot.

Sighing, she turned to Utakata with a nod. "Thanks for watching me."

"No problem," he said with a wary nod of his own, and muttered under his breath, "At least it didn't explode this time." His remark spurred a laugh from Sute, sharp and full of amusement. The jinchuuriki instantly blanched and shrunk back as her eyes glimmered with malicious glee.

"Oh, really?" she sang, her mouth stretching into a mischievous smirk. "I have the rest of the day off, I have a few other seals to test..."

As expected, Utakata turned and fled without a word, leaving a cackling Sute to dash after him. She could probably stand to be a bit nicer to him, but what the hell, this was fun.

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Screams echoed off the stone walls as he moved down the hall, the noise muffled by a door but the dull ring that accompanied the high-pitch note still all too clear. Years ago the accompanying grinding noises might have grated at Ao's hearing, making him grimace in mild sympathy for the victim, but now it barely phased him. He walked slowly, still dependent on crutches to move around, and each step brought him closer to the source of the scream. Not that it was his destination.

He turned a corner and spied a familiar figure waiting by a door, pushing off the wall to face him. "Ao-san," Yagura greeted monotonously, the boy dipping his head in acknowledgment. "You took longer than expected."

"I'm not exactly able to run right now," he retorted coolly, gesturing at the crutches. Yagura made no comment, simply nodded once and turned away.

"Come, the others are waiting to go over the report." He briskly strode down the hall past the door where the screams emanated from, Ao trailing after him in wary silence. The Mizukage's apprentice and favored successor admittedly unsettled him at times. The teen looked more like a child than a jounin-ranked shinobi, his small figure almost out of place in the depths of T&I. But in sharp contrast to his youthful features, his violet eyes held no light, his expression giving no hint of emotion.

Briefly his thoughts wandered to the other teenage prodigy he knew. Sute provided a sharp contrast to the quiet boy, always animated and lively with a dangerous glint in her eyes whenever she smiled. In comparison, Yagura felt more like a doll than a human being.

Coincidentally, Sute happened to be one of several subjects in the upcoming meeting. Yagura led the way to a door which he opened to reveal a small conference room, several high-ranked members of Kiri's administration and ANBU already seated around the table. At the head sat the Mizukage himself, looking regal and perfectly composed as always. Yagura held the door so Ao could limp inside before letting it close, the distant screams now little more than a low buzz, and then went to stand behind his mentor.
"Now that everyone is here, we shall begin the meeting," the Mizukage announced, skipping pleasantries. Ao slipped into the empty seat next to Heki, laying his crutches against the table and glancing at the papers his long-time partner had sitting in front of him. A mission report from the looks of it, the words "Kumo" and "scroll" quickly popping out at him during his brief glance.

Hanami Moriie, head of T&I, decided to start the meeting. "The interrogation is still ongoing, but we have a rough idea of their goal," he began, gesturing to a scroll sitting on the center of the table. Ao sat up a bit straighter, his exposed eye narrowing as he examined it. Across from him Fuguki huffed lowly, almost looking like he was sneering.

"Is that the scroll Ringo retrieved from the escapee?" the Swordsman questioned, and Moriie nodded once.

"This scroll was undoubtedly their goal. It's an old treaty from shortly after the Second Shinobi War with Umisaki, a port town in Hot Water—now deserted. It contains a list of commonly used trade routes at the time."

"What use would that be?" one of the other men—Yashiro, some tokujou-level admin if Ao remembered right—muttered under his breath. "If the town is deserted, it's not like there'd be any trade on those roads anymore." Ao frowned, mulling over it as he dredged his memories for the city's name.

"That might be the point," he mused lowly. "Umisaki was one of our major points for trade before a tsunami wrecked it. The trade routes should still connect to other major cities on the continent in a few different countries. It would make for easy reference for a relatively empty route to travel."

"Tch, so they're just looking for a pre-drawn travel map," Fuguki huffed. "What a petty reason to break into Kiri."

"It's only one possibility," Moriie observed blandly. "As I stated, the interrogation is still ongoing. He should crack soon, so we'll have more information then. It would have helped if Ringo had also captured the other one though, it would go much smoother with two prisoners than just one." His voice took on a slightly disapproving edge, making Ao's eyes narrow.

"You should be glad you have any living subjects to interrogate," Heki noted calmly next to him, having his back as always. "Usually we just kill people. You're lucky Ringo has a skillset that can be used for live capturing."

"Still, allowing someone to escape is a large mistake," Moriie grumbled, his lips curling back as he scowled. "Have ANBU's standards really fallen that low?" Several annoyed looks shot his way, the other present ANBU silently airing annoyance at being written off so easily.

"Technically, she won't be officially instated as ANBU until tomorrow," Ao countered, carefully keeping his own voice bland. "She only finished her training last week, she was only pulled for the patrol because it was an emergency. Besides that, she's spent most of her career working in the hospital since the war. Given her lack of field experience compared to others, I believe her performance is more than impressive."

"Doesn't that make her placement in ANBU more questionable, though?" Yashiro wondered aloud. "I am aware our ANBU need more combat-approved medics, but that also means we can't afford to waste one. If she's not ready, we should spend more time training her before sending her out. I don't think anyone here can argue she's one of our best medics, even with her age."

His words elicited a thoughtful hum from one of the others in the room, the sound making Ao
narrow his eyes at the source. Raiga. Usually the Swordsman remained silent at these meetings, so
to hear him make any sort of noise drew everyone's attention. "I agree," the green-haired man said.
"I'm not close to Sute-san, but she is the adopted child of my departed mentor... It would be
disrespectful to her memory if I remained silent while her daughter was sent to die in the field."

Had it not been such a formal setting Ao probably would have scoffed at the almost melodramatic
wording. He had no particular opinion on Ameyuri's successor; something about Raiga's demeanor
admittedly felt a bit too distant and off, a bit too detached even for a Mist ninja, but they worked
together fine on the missions they ran. The man did his job and showed no signs of becoming a
traitor, so Ao didn't really care too much about him, so much as his words, and opened his mouth
to respond.

"Ao," the Mizukage intoned flatly, and Ao immediately clamped his mouth shut as he turned to his
leader. The Third Mizukage may not have inherited the Hyoton, but he held himself with the same
cold grace of his distant Yuki relatives. He wore an impassive expression devoid of any menace
or particular disapproval, but the aura he exuded still called for silence. "There is no need to
defend Ringo Sute's placement in ANBU. Your report on her battle with Biwa Juzo alone has more
than justified it."

A thrill of discomfort tingled down Ao's spine at the mention of the traitor, the still-healing scars in
his leg and side tingling at the memory of the ill-fated mission. It had been by far the closest he'd
come to dying, death only seconds away before Sute had appeared to distract the former
Swordsman. He kept his face carefully stoic as he nodded in mute acceptance, and the Mizukage
turned to face the room at large.

"We seem to have gotten off-topic," he noted. "Right now, this meeting is to discuss a serious
issue: at least three Cloud ninja managed to enter the Land of Water—two trespassing into Kiri
itself—and one escaped. We have already tightened our borders heavily over the years, they should
not have been able to succeed. I want to know how they got this far, and I want to find out any
information we can on the one who escaped. I do not think I need to impress upon you the severity
of the situation."

Grim silence followed his cold declaration, a chill running down everyone's spines. Displeasing the
Mizukage always had horrific results, and none wanted to test his ire or patience. "We have teams
combing the country for the escapee as we speak," Yashiro said after a moment, his tone
somewhat mild and almost cowed. "As for how they entered the Land of Water, we have yet to
determine that."

"No outside ships have made port on any of the major islands this week," Fuguki interjected
gruffly. "Most likely, they either took a boat towards one of the more secluded areas and water-
walked the remainder of the distance, or hijacked a fishing boat and snuck back to shore disguised
as the crew. I sent out Kisame and a few others to make rounds in the fishing villages and ask this
morning."

"I'll be sure to bring it up when I go back to chat with our guest," Moriiie added, flashing an almost
savage-looking smirk. "He's pretty tight-lipped about his mission's goals, but he should be singing
pretty soon."

"That reminds me, the guard from the document building only reported seeing two men after he
woke up," Heki mused aloud, leaning back in his seat with his arms crossed. "And we only really
saw two in the pursuit. There's a chance the third never actually entered Kiri and hid out
somewhere nearby. The rumors about Cloud ninja skulking around had to come from somewhere."

From there the meeting shifted into a discussion about the quickest plan of action to find the
getaway Cloud ninja, and ways to fortify Kiri's defenses to prevent a repeat. Ao remained silent for
the most part, having no particular input to offer beyond basic advice for how to position Kiri's few
sensors for maximum effect. Instead he found his thoughts wandering to the next few weeks and
what the future would hold, specifically in regards to a certain troublesome new recruit to ANBU.

That kid better know what she's doing, he thought grimly, not for the first time since agreeing to
train her. He genuinely wondered if she realized just how dangerous her decision to join ANBU
really was, how much attention it would draw to her. The most he could do was hope his training
would help her get over her block.

And from there, his thoughts flashed back to his meeting with Mei, just after he received
confirmation Sute had been approved for ANBU training.

"You wanted to meet me?"

Terumii Mei looked rather regal as she reclined in her seat, hands cupped around a cup of tea.
More than a few people glanced at them from other tables in the small tea shop, whether out of
appreciation for her beauty or wariness for her deadly bloodlines, Ao did not know. It did not
matter anyway, as long as no one could hear them.

It had been why he chose this particular shop, more popular with civilians than shinobi. It lacked
privacy seals or other measures to avoid eavesdropping, but the small table they sat at in the back
of the shop was distant enough from the rest to ensure some privacy. The clientele would not be
able to hear them if they spoke lowly, and both knew to keep their heads turned slightly to avoid
their lips being read.

"What do you know of Ringo Sute?" he questioned, skipping straight to the point. Mei arched an
eyebrow at the query, delicately sipping at her tea.

"We talk now and then. She's a sweet girl. I just came from a meeting with her, in fact." She
lowered her cup with a small exhale. "She said she was angling to enter ANBU."

The comment was casual on the surface, but the sharp glint in her eye as she glanced at Ao was
anything but. Ao made a rumble of quiet affirmation, sipping his own tea for a moment as he
dipped his head. "She is talented," he said once he lowered the cup. "I already know for a fact she
will be scouted today for training. The Mizukage is very interested in her potential."

Mei hummed, setting down her cup. "I would assume that information is meant to be confidential,"
she commented, suspicion visible in her gaze. Why are you telling me? Shinobi did not convey such
information without good reason, they dealt in secrets and hiding information for a living. They
did not share something so critical in such a casual fashion without some sort of intent.

Ao ignored the silent question for the moment though, instead saying, "You said you just came
from meeting her. Did she ask for your help in training at all?"

Another arched eyebrow at the question, clearly curious as she sensed a hidden intent in the abrupt
topic change. "She did, but we had to cut it short when one of her friends showed up," she
responded nonchalantly, and her lips curved into a small smile as she added, "Did you know she
calls Hozuki Mangetsu 'not-Suigetsu'? He looked so exasperated."

"He called Hoshigaki 'Shark-nii-san' to his face and regularly greeted Juzo with 'oh, you're still
alive,'" Ao responded flatly. "She knows almost no fear."

"Almost?" Mei repeated quietly, inclining her head slightly. "That is very specific."
Ao offered a lazy sort of shrug, his gaze roaming the cafe briefly as he leaned back. The other patrons had turned their attentions away by this point, more interested in their own conversations than the two shinobi in the back corner. Still, he kept his voice low, not a whisper but still quiet enough to avoid carrying. "What do you know of her battle with Biwa Juzo?"

Mei at the question, her eyes narrowing. "Not much," she responded carefully. "I read the official report of course, but she never discussed it with me if that's what you're asking. I would assume you know more than I do. After all—"

"The Byakugan can penetrate the Hidden Mist jutsu, can it not?"

When Darui finally staggered to the shoreline in the late night, he had never looked or felt more haggard. Ugly red marks cut into his wrists from where they’d been bound by wire, his hair and clothing totally disheveled and his lower face caked in drying, crusted blood. Grunting tiredly, his eyes skimmed the waters before he spied a thin mist starting to set in, making him stiffen and narrow his eyes apprehensively.

Then, he spied the glitter of ice slowly stretching across the water from within the mist, and the tension seeped out of his body all at once, a quiet sigh slipping free.

He trudged towards the shore and stepped onto the icy path that had formed, the path melting behind him as he walked deeper into the mist. The silhouette of a person in a small boat took shape in the distance, barely visible in the dark of night, and as he drew closer he saw the figure gracefully rise. "Just you?" a soft voice called.

"The others got captured," he grunted in response. "The mission's a failure."

"A-san won't be pleased by this."

"I know. I'll make it clear the failure had nothing to do with you." He stepped off the path and nearly collapsed into the boat, causing it to rock gently. Ice pressed against his sore muscles as he slumped along the floor, closing his eyes to just soak in the refreshing chill. His companion remained silent, and he felt the boat sway slightly as she sat back down.

They drifted away in silence, the mist covering their departure from the Land of Water. Releasing a deep, body-shuddering sigh, Darui cracked open an eye to peer up at the starry sky, barely visible through the thin haze surrounding them. "Hey, you're from Kiri. Did you ever meet a girl about my age with greenish-brown hair and bright green eyes?"

His companion hummed. "I did. We were on the same platoon in the war." His eyes flicked towards her in faint surprise, not expecting a positive answer. He grunted as he shifted to sit up a little straighter, rubbing at his wrists as he faced her.

"Was she Mist-born?" he asked, and she paused, dark eyes narrowing.

"Is there a reason for the interest?" she questioned coolly. Darui bit back the urge to sigh in frustration, sensing it would be difficult to pry information from her about this topic. He didn't want to tell her the truth, about the snippet of a near-dead language he'd recognized but couldn't fully translate.

"She beat me," he said instead. "She managed to knock me out, and had every opportunity to either kill me or take me back to Kiri. But instead she took back the scroll and let me go." She'd left him with his hands bound and a poison in his system that would leave him at a severe disadvantage, but the fact she gave him an opportunity to run at all spoke volumes. Just what those volumes said, he
didn't know. Not yet, anyway.

The woman remained silent for a moment, and then finally dipped her head. "You think she may want to defect?" she guessed.

"It's possible. Doesn't seem too loyal to Kiri at least." His remark elicited another thoughtful hum, her head turning to gaze out at the waters.

"She's not from Kiri," she finally said. "She was a child found on the battlefields by one of the Swordsmen. But I don't believe she's from Lightning, if that's what you suspect."

"Why not?" Darui pressed, frowning slightly, and her lips quirked into a faint smile.

"I can't say why. I owe her a debt. She's the one who warned me to leave Kiri, and this trip has only confirmed that my family has been nearly eradicated since the war's end. All that remains is my father's cousin, and she has to hide among civilians. No doubt I would have been targeted at some point had I stayed. The least I can do is keep her secret."

Darui frowned at the avoidance but let the subject drop, knowing he wouldn't get anything more out of her. That was fine though, it had to be. Yuki Shiromi may not be in full service to Kumo, but her willingness to share her bloodline with them made her valuable enough.

With that they fell quiet once more, only the waves lapping against the ice boat filling the silence.

Chapter End Notes

I'm really sorry for the delay everyone! I wanted to get Chapter 61 of Echoes of Light ready before I published this, but between a hellish case of writer's block and the busiest semester of my school career, I just... kind of fell behind. I did not intend for either of my stories to go six MONTHS without an update, I am so sorry.

Today's chapter is longer than usual though, so hopefully that makes up for it? We got full confirmation of some important details at least. If it's not perfectly clear: yep, Ao absolutely knows about Sute having mokuton. It's canon that the Byakugan can penetrate the Hidden Mist jutsu, and there's no sane reason Ao wouldn't want to keep an eye on the guy who JUST tried to murder him. Also, anyone remember the Yuki woman from the war? She's still alive, and you can expect more appearance from her in the future. (For the record: yes, she's referring to Haku's mother, but is purposely omitting Haku's existence for obvious reasons.)

On a more important note though: at this point I cannot tell you when the next chapter will be released. I am now in my last semester of college, so I will be focusing all my efforts on that. Last semester I actually failed a class because I got burnt out by a different class and missed a big deadline, and this semester I only have two classes so I really can't afford that again. Especially since one is an independent study that involves me creating an entire story-driven game by myself (by my own choice, mind you), which will be the culmination of my entire college career.

Just. Yeah. Fan fiction will be a low priority this semester. I apologize now. ...That said, I'm REALLY getting into the My Hero Academia fandom, so if you have any fanfic recs from that fandom (or this one!), please share them. I need something to avoid
burnout, and I am consuming fan fiction from MHA at probably unhealthy levels. Gen preferred over romance or extreme AUs (as in, fantasy or modern). I do love canon divergence though.

That's all for now. I am still alive, just very busy. I hope today's chapter was worth the wait!
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Time passes. ANBU life has begun.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Akebino Kenjiro. Age 23, chūnin-level kenjutsu specialist with secondary focus on taijutsu. Cousin of late Shinobi Swordsman Akebino Jinin, formerly aspired to take his place in the group, but failed due to generally low ambition and drive.

Current Status: Defected from Kiri, missing-nin for four days and counting.

Sute's breaths softly bounced off the inside of her mask as she hid in the trees, her eyes narrow. Below her the bulky twenty-three-year-old walked along the path at a brisk pace, eyes darting around warily. In the tree across from her she could see another ANBU subtly incline his head towards her, the small gesture all the message she needed. Go.

A flick of the wrist and her senbon descended upon him in a shimmering rain of silver. Kenjiro jolted as they fell, moving to dodge but unable to evade them all. Several of them hit him along various points, both vital and non-vital, and he staggered to the side with a loud gasp. The muscle around each senbon began to rapidly change color, tinting purple with a black vein-like pattern quickly spreading from the impact sites.

In a flicker of movement the other ANBU was behind him, slicing his short tanto across the man's neck and jumping back to avoid the spray of blood. Kenjiro collapsed to the ground with a strangled gasp, his body violently spasming for a moment before finally going still.

Brief silence.

Then, "Well that was easy."

"Not all rogues are tough. Some just manage to get lucky when they sneak out."

"Hmm. Yeah, sounds about right." Sute hummed as she lightly touched down on the ground, striding over and slapping a seal on Kenjiro's body. Fire instantly consumed the corpse, reducing it to ashes within seconds. A quick hand seal from her fellow ANBU Amano had a gust of wind blowing past them, scattering it to the winds and erasing any traces of their presence. All in all, a smooth job.

Nearly three months had passed since that semi-disastrous first outing as official Kiri ANBU on that emergency patrol with the Cloud ninja. As the seasons turned from summer to autumn Sute had decided to push her defection until late winter, when spring would be near and she wouldn't have to worry for quite as long about finding shelter or food. In the meantime she had thrown herself into ANBU work, determined to learn as much as she could in the short time she'd be there.

Getting information on Hunter-nin tactics was slow-going. Since ANBU needed combat medics in general, she didn't get accepted directly into the Hunter-nin unit like she'd hoped, but she still got to
go on missions with them sometimes. Some of her colleagues seemed to think she wanted the position in order to finish the job and eliminate Juzo, which, cute, and also a much safer story than the truth.

So far she spent more time on general ANBU missions than Hunter-nin stuff, in part because surprisingly, most of the Hunter-nin jobs tended to be simple. Not every rogue was some powerful and dangerous genius shinobi after all. Quite a few had been actually quite weak, and escaped more on luck and good timing than skill. From what they gathered, Akebino Kenjiro had just ditched his team during a mission onto the mainland. They'd had to track him down into Fire Country, which... huh.

Knowing she currently stood in the main country of the fictional series this world derived from gave Sute mixed feelings. On the one hand, she'd never actually set foot here before, at least as far as she knew. Maybe as a toddler wandering battlefields, but most of her platoon's travels in the war took place in smaller countries for some reason. This was the closest she'd knowingly gotten to the fabled Leaf Village in this life.

On the other hand, she was currently a Mist ninja. A distinctly unfriendly village as far as Konoha (and literally any other village) was concerned.

They hadn't ventured too far into it, just a few kilometers past the borders with the Land of Hot Water. Konoha would be days away from here, even running at top speeds. Still, that didn't ease the tension that consumed both Sute and her comrade. If a Leaf ninja patrol came across them—or even a farmer or wandering merchant who could report their presence—they'd definitely be in trouble.

With that in mind they both turned and began rushing back towards the borders in silence, neither of them needing to communicate the need to get the hell out of dodge. Only when they safely crossed the border into Hot Water did they finally slow, Amano stopping to remove his mask while pulling out a flask of water. "Damn, even autumn is hot out here," he grumbled as he took a long gulp.

"I'm more irritated by the humidity than the heat," Sute grumbled, stripping off her own mask and greedily exposing her face to fresh air. The mask's wood felt sticky and claustrophobic against her face in the high humidity, making her every individual breath far too noticeable for her liking. "The heat's probably from all the hot water deposits around here. Doesn't help the humidity, either."

"Yeah, yeah," Amano huffed, capping his flask and stowing it back in his pouch. "Anyways, we managed to catch that guy two days ahead of schedule. What do you want to do now?" His question earned arched eyebrows from Sute, her eyes glittering curiously.

"Are you suggesting we don't go straight back to the nearest outpost?"

"We've been on-call for the past three weeks with no breaks, and the second we go back they'll just assign us more work. I think we can afford at least one night of rest and relaxation. Or should I say, information gathering."

Her lips quirked into a wry smile at that. "Yes, it is quite hard to find these people sometimes, isn't it?" she mused lightly. "Especially when they like to bang prostitutes all night long."

"It's generally not a good idea to kill in front of witnesses anyway," he chuckled in agreement. "Too messy to cleanup. On that note, think anyone would buy you seducing him into leaving the bar to an ambush?"
"Yes, because I'm obviously a supermodel," Sute deadpanned, and he laughed heartily as she cracked an amused smirk. Amano was one of her more regular partners for ANBU missions, around six years older than her, and they had a good chemistry going. They had bonded over an in-depth knowledge of human anatomy, and spent hours discussing how to most efficiently take someone down with minimal injury. While generally he took his work seriously, he tended to be among the more laidback members of their unit once they finished their assigned tasks.

...Also, he tended to ask her to help with his hangovers. A lot. "You just want to go to a bar, right?" she guessed, and he smirked.

"You got me. I hear the sake made in this region has a special tang to the flavor thanks to all the hot springs around here." She hummed, faintly amused by how openly he admitted it.

"Right. So what, split up and rendezvous in the woods tomorrow morning?"

"Sounds like a plan," Amano agreed. "Should we establish a specific point?"

"Would you be able to find it again?" she countered wryly, earning another chuckle.

"Fair. I'll just keep the tracker and leave it to you to track me then."

"Alright. Later." With a nod the two split off, Sute vanishing deeper into the woods. Once she reached a safe distance she ducked into a closely-bunched outcropping of pine trees and quickly stripped out of her ANBU gear until only her underwear remained, shivering in the autumn chill. A quick application of chakra on her arm activated the storage seal she'd tattooed there, clothing her almost instantly in a dark green yukata and civilian-grade sandals.

She quickly retrieved her balled-up knapsack from the pocket of her ANBU vest before stowing her gear into another storage seal on her left wrist, shifting it onto her back. She tied up her hair with a wide band of fabric as she strolled out of the trees, struggling to gather it into a bunched-up ponytail. Like this Sute looked a bit more mature than her now-fifteen years of age, more like a young woman than a pimple-faced teenager. Far less suspicious that she'd be traveling around a country alone.

She wandered to a small civilian town they had passed earlier, quietly noting it should be late afternoon by now. Like many towns in this country it housed a small inn with a sign advertising hot springs, though it had a much more subdued and quaint quality to it than some of the resorts Hot Water was known for. This town served more as a point of transit than a full destination, just a place for travelers to stay the night while heading to larger cities.

Sute played with the idea of renting a room but decided against it, not wanting to deal with explaining what she had used her ryo on should one of her commanders decide to check everyone's current holdings. It was a routine precaution to prevent people from defecting; a noticeable dip or rise in personal funds tended to be a decent giveaway of intent to meet someone or defect.

She could, however, treat herself to a nice meal, and maybe a new book.

With that in mind, she headed towards a small café near the town's entrance with a sign advertising a nice variety of takoyaki flavors among other things. A few people were scattered around when she entered, and Sute claimed an empty table near the back window. Most of the customers seemed to be locals, some chatting quietly as they ate while others read the region's local newspaper. Soon enough a waitress came to take her order, and before long she had a cup of steaming tea to warm her hands as she waited for her food.
Knowing it would be at least a few minutes Sute opened her knapsack to pull out a mystery novel she had purchased a while back. She had found a series with a recurring youkai motif, which had been enough to pique her interest. Even as she began reading she kept her senses loosely attuned to the café though, not willing to let her guard down. She doubted many shinobi would cause a scene in a public setting like this, but it would be better to notice trouble early before leaving for somewhere more isolated.

So when the door opened a few minutes later her gaze flitted towards it briefly, her expression bored as she noted a young teen with brown hair and large black eyes before turning back to her book. In that brief span of time she had recognized his black pants and sandals to be a bit too neat for a civilian, the brown sweater worn over his black turtleneck top almost comically out of place to the trained eye.

Then she felt him approach the table, and her gaze rose once more. The boy stood next to her, his face smooth as stone but his dark eyes betraying a hint of nervousness. Yep, definitely shinobi. "May I sit here, ma'am?" he asked politely.

Sute arched her eyebrows at the query, letting her gaze slowly rove the room at all the other, empty tables around them. Her eyes returned to the boy, who looked even more tense than before. "You do realize there's a lot of civilians here, right?" she asked dryly, pitching her voice low to avoid being overheard. He stiffened further, his face pinching in slight apprehension as he recognized the subtle threat. Before he could respond though she lazily waved a hand at the opposite seat. "Go ahead. Just making sure we're on the same page."

Swallowing, he slowly slid into the chair across from her, keeping wary eyes on her the whole time. The waitress scurried over to take his order and he asked for just water, denying any particular hunger pangs. Once she left he turned back to Sute, who had returned to reading her book. "What are you doing here?"

"Reading," she deadpanned, not bothering to look up at him. "That's... not what I meant." His voice took on a slightly helpless note, almost like a whine if it wasn't so flat. Sute just hummed, idly flipping a page.

"I'm also waiting for my lunch," she offered up lazily. When he didn't respond to that she sighed and resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "What about you, kid? What are you doing here?"

"That's classified information," he responded almost automatically. "Shouldn't you report back immediately?" he pressed, frowning at her intently.

"Should. But Kiri's a bit of a totalitarian society, and I don't get to enjoy the scenery too much. Besides, nice to have something other than seafood for a change." As if on cue the waitress appeared with a plate of steaming mushroom tempura, placing it in front of her. She licked her lips as she pulled it closer, snapping apart the chopsticks to begin eating.

Her companion just watched with a slightly befuddled look on his face, looking more lost than
ever. Sute found his obvious distress at her behavior highly amusing.

Eventually though his face settled into a frown, looking more flustered. "Look, you're incredibly close to the border with Fire. If your mission has anything to do with it or Konoha—"

"It didn't," she cut in, swallowing a bite of tempura. Setting down her chopsticks, she raised her head to meet his gaze squarely, her face cold and stony. He stiffened immediately, clearly on edge as her vivid green eyes bore into him. "I have no knowledge of any ongoing missions that may involve Konoha in any shape or form, nor any recent or past ones. My present mission is complete, I am currently in neutral territory, and I wish to enjoy a meal before reporting back. Is that a problem?"

He visibly shivered under her cool gaze, his Adam's apple bobbing gently as he swallowed. "I... N-no, it shouldn't be, I think?" he finally said, still sounding uncertain.

"Good." With that Sute smiled, sweet and innocent and dropping all of the silent threat her earlier expression had held as she picked up her chopsticks to finish off the food. "In that case, why don't you order something too? Unless you need to get back to your jounin sensei."

"Jounin sensei?" He actually looked offended at that, frowning at her deeply. "I'm not—I don't need—!"

"Let me guess, another child prodigy?" she drawled, and he immediately went silent. "Join the club, kid. It totally sucks, doesn't it?"

"Kid?" he whispered, looking even more flustered now. "I'm only a couple years younger than you!"

Sute snorted at that, rolling her eyes as she just chewed on some mushrooms. "Sure, sure." A lot of people felt like kids compared to her at this point; she was originally in her late twenties when she died, so now her mental age was in her forties. Most of the active shinobi she'd met were in their twenties or thirties at oldest, still her chronological junior in terms of mind. By shinobi standards, she was old.

The boy obviously didn't know that of course, and looked at her with clear offense. "Don't just write me off because I'm younger—"

"Never mind, I'm done now." Sute rose and pulled out a sufficient amount of ryo to cover her meal, tossing it on the table next to her mostly empty plate. "Nice chatting with you, but I need to get going. I'd say 'see you later,' but let's be real here, we never want that to happen in this line of work." With that cheery take at a farewell she turned and strolled away, leaving him staring after her dumbfounded. Soon enough she heard him scramble to his feet to chase after her, but by that point she'd already reached the door.

As soon as she stepped outside she flashed through the hand seals Kisame had shown her, dropping into the ground and zooming away from the café. Once she had cleared a sufficient distance from the town she popped out inside the forest and pressed a hand to a tree trunk, quickly pulsing her chakra into it to try to use the root system to sense everyone's whereabouts. Sensing no one in her immediate vicinity, she quickly turned and took off at a run, glancing down at the strings of seals decorating her right wrist.

After the emergency patrol that marked her entry to ANBU she'd found the diamond-shaped sensory seal to be very practical, and had opted to create a modified version for her fellow ANBU. Once she'd explained the idea a few had agreed to let her temporarily ink them with the
accompanying tracking seals, Amano included. A flare of chakra caused a small light to appear in the left corner of his seal, and she adjusted her course accordingly.

It took her a little under an hour of running through the woods, cautious of any potential pursuit, until she finally reached the border of another small town. Approaching it at a brisk pace, she consulted the seal a couple more times while mingling with the sparse crowds until the light finally led her to a small bar. *Of course he's here,* she thought sarcastically as she stepped inside, hoping no one would try to bounce her or check her age.

Amano had horrible taste in bars. The acrid stench of smoke assaulted her the moment she stepped in, making her nose wrinkle in disgust. Her inner medic and doctor hissed in dismay at all the people here propagating lung cancer, and she stalked towards the counter where she spied Amano with a bit more agitation than usual. The man hadn't noticed her yet, just sipping away at a drink while bantering with the other bar patrons there.

Deciding not to give him a warning, Sute grabbed him by the ponytail and yanked him off his stool, the man yelping and nearly dropping his cup. "The hell!?" he sputtered. Sute didn't bother explaining, just continued to drag him away while he hurriedly staggered after her, trying to wrench free. "Hey, what's the big idea!? I wasn't done there!"

His complaints continued until they reached outside, at which point she finally released his hair and readily sucked in a nice gulp of fresh, clean air. "Leaf ninja are hanging around," she told him in a low voice. "Chances are there's some operation in the area we don't know about. I got made at a café in the other town. We need to report back ASAP."

Almost instantly Amano's demeanor changed, his irritated-looking scowl still in place but his eyes growing serious as he stood up straighter. "Shit. Alright, let's go." Nodding, the pair turned and casually sauntered towards the entrance to town, Amano still rubbing at his head where her grip had tugged harshly at his roots.

Once the buildings disappeared from sight they broke into a run, moving swiftly through the forest while keeping their guards up. After a while they briefly stopped at a cave and took turns changing while the other stood guard, Sute finishing considerably faster than Amano thanks to her storage seals. After that, they only had to run for another hour until a cabin came into sight.

Expertly hopping along some large stones and logs that had been carefully arranged to avoid stepping on the ever-fragile leaves littering the ground, they both breathed a sigh of relief as they reached a clear area and slunk towards the door. The cabin looked largely dim from the outside, but when Amano knocked and the door opened warm light bathed them from behind an old man's silhouette. "Can I help you?" he asked, squinting at them suspiciously.

"We're looking for shelter from the steam," Amano replied flatly. The man's face crinkled with recognition of the secret code phrase and he nodded, stepping aside to let them in. As he closed the door behind them his features shifted, the wrinkles smoothing out and his white hair growing fuller and darker as the transformation faded. A burly-looking man wearing the Kiri ANBU uniform occupied his place now, his mask strapped to his hip.

"Mission status?" he questioned while Amano removed his mask.

"Success," he reported dully. "Target was located and eliminated approximately four hours ago."

"Why the delay in returning?" the other ANBU questioned. Sute answered this time, removing her own mask as she slid into the dull monotone of mission debriefings.
"Due to completing the mission objectives earlier than planned, we decided to stop at local restaurants to procure dinner in interest of preserving the limited rations at base. We chose to split apart to avoid drawing attention. While waiting for my meal I was approached by a boy, a few years younger than myself and clearly shinobi based on his dress and stature. Conversation confirmed he's aligned with Konoha. He inquired about my purpose and I proceeded to deflect his questioning before leaving and alerting my partner. We then proceeded to return to the base, but had to delay our return to minimize leaving any trails."

The partial lie rolled easily off her tongue. The outpost couldn't be formally restocked on a regular basis without potentially drawing attention, so it was common enough for ANBU to go to local restaurants to avoid digging into their reserves when returning from missions. In any event their commander seemed to accept their explanation, nodding to himself in understanding. "Very well. They must have noticed then."

"Noticed?" Amano repeated, his gray eyes sharp as they followed him. "Is there an operation involving Konoha?"

"Not particularly. Two other agents reported finding the remains of a Leaf team while en route from their own mission about two hours ago." Sute and Amano's gazes sharpened at that, looking at him with renewed interest.

"Where?"

"About two kilometers southwest. Some kind of nasty battle happened down there, said they could barely identify the corpses as Leaf." Their commander paused then, sparing a glance over his shoulder at Sute with a spark of inspiration in his eyes. "Ringo, you like performing autopsies, don't you?"

"I do," Sute agreed, already seeing where this was going. "You want me to investigate?"

"We don't know who killed them. Better to figure out what we're up against in case their opponent takes an interest in us."

Sute nodded, feeling a small smile spread across her face. Looks like her evening just got a lot more interesting.

Chapter End Notes

And I am back! Thank you for your patience, I have finally graduated.

I apologize for the wait, and thank you all so much for your patience! Being able to focus on my final semester was great. I didn't end up making a full video game with graphics (that was a bit ambitious of me in retrospect), but I DID make an interactive story called "Memories of Laika", complete with its own website and a comic! It's pretty tonally different from Bloody Oracle, but I'm pretty happy with it and plan to expand on it in the future. Feel free to give it a shot! There's a total of seven endings at present.

With the self-plug out of the way, we return and skip straight to action. Not much to say about this. I've actually finished writing this entire arc for the most part, just have some tweaking to do with the last couple of chapters to be satisfied with them, so I'm
planning to try to get back to posting once a week since I have a decent buffer now! Get ready to see an old face, and a glimpse at Sute's skills. Of course we can't focus on a normal mission, now can we?

ALSO! There's some awesome/adorable fan art of Sute on DeviantArt by MissNanamiChan! I never thought I could fully envision Sute as cute, but I was proven wrong. And over on Tumblr, unpleasantpink made a GREAT drawing of Sute, Utakata and Mushi-Mushi from Chapter 12! That one was actually done last year in August, but I forgot to mention it in the last chapter. It's totally on-point for how I imagined the scene, Sute looks so smug and Mushi-Mushi is so cute~

Thanks again for being so patient with the break! I'll see you guys later this week!
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Sute gets to play detective! But then things go wrong.

Chapter Notes

Warning: Descriptions of graphic violence and injuries.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 24

Finding the remains of the battle proved more leisurely than Sute expected so far. She leapt through the trees easily, enjoying the breeze and passing scenery as she steadily headed southwest. The sun had begun to enter the descending portion of its daily arc across the sky, still a few hours away from touching the horizon and dusk tinting the air, but still low enough to let her know that evening would arrive soon.

For once, Sute was running in her usual shinobi gear and alone, instead of being fully suited up and backed by a team or partner. Since she had already been seen by a Leaf ninja, they decided it would be best to send her alone in case she ran into anyone, to hide their numbers. It would be safer to keep their hand close to their chests, especially so close to the border. If Konoha had any reason to suspect Kiri had an ANBU outpost around here, it would be far more trouble than it would be worth.

Running a fully-sanctioned solo trip without her mask was a real novelty. Sute couldn't remember the last time she'd been not only allowed by her superiors, but officially ordered to roam alone outside brief tasks during active missions. It occurred to her that right now would be an excellent opportunity to defect. She wasn't expected back for probably at least two hours, which would give her a decent head start, especially if she headed in a completely different direction than ordered.

Too bad I'm not ready right now, she mused almost regretfully. She still didn't know enough about Hunter-nin tactics to feel safe leaving, and her house back in Kiri had too much to randomly leave behind. In particular, her giant book of seals was still hidden away in her study, and who knew what they could do with that. She didn't even know everything that was in there yet.

No, her departure would have to be much more premeditated and planned than other people's.

She pushed the thought away as she consulted the seal on her wrist, using it as a compass to get her bearings. By her estimation she'd already traveled almost two kilometers by this point, so she changed course to scale the nearest cliff for a better look at the surrounding area. Her colleague who'd seen the bodies said the scene hadn't really stuck out too much, no major devastation to signal something had happened like other battle sites. They only noticed because one wanted to collect some local mushrooms for his own poisons.
It's actually kinda nice to have another poison specialist to talk to around here, she thought absently as she skimmed the area. They said it had been in a particularly dense grove near a cliff, so maybe... Aha. Her eyes settled on a tight cluster of trees, the branches partially bare and allowing little glimpses of the ground below. More notably she saw a glint of metal on one branch, telltale signs of an embedded kunai.

She climbed over and dropped down, landing a few meters away from the trees and strolling over at a cautious pace. As she approached she spied a dash of dark red smeared across the ground beneath the fallen foliage, almost blending in with the shadows and autumn hues of the leaves, but she had seen enough blood to recognize the colors it turned when dried. Judging by the humidity levels in the air and the relative vividness of the color, she estimated less than a day had passed since it had been shed. It probably happened last night.

As she drew closer, she found her suspicions only bolstered as the full remnants of the battle became visible. Two bodies lay sprawled across the ground, disfigured and coated in enough blood and dirt to largely mask the otherwise notable dull green and navy of the Leaf uniform. Tattered scraps of cloth also littered one area, the edges burnt and blackened, the brown hue almost perfectly camouflaged with the surroundings. She knelt next to one scrap, lifting it to rub between her fingers. Canvas. A tent?

Already she could piece together what had happened. The Leaf team had likely set up camp in this location the previous night, only for someone to get the drop on them. The ensuing struggle had been sudden and brutal enough to keep them from engaging at full power, and after the battle ended the attacker burnt the tent to hide at least some of the evidence. The fact only the tent was burned meant it had been ignited specifically, rather than get caught in the crossfire of a battle.

Yet they didn't try to dispose of the bodies, she thought with a glance to the two corpses. Once again she was struck by the brutality of the attack, the bodies barely even looked human anymore. If the guy burned the tent, why not burn the bodies too? Maybe the attacker was wary of the stench? Burning bodies were pretty pungent after all, it would likely be noticed by other people. Her nose wrinkled as she recalled the last time she'd smelled it, tongue sticking out in disgust as she hurriedly pushed the thought away.

Lingering bodies aside, there were a couple other details that merited immediate investigation. Usually, camps like this have a lookout... She frowned, letting the cloth flutter to the ground as she straightened to her full height and looked around. On an impulse she scaled one of the nearest trees, peering at the surrounding area for anything off. Soon enough she spied something pale, high in the branches of a particularly thick tree nearby.

One chakra-powered hop later found Sute standing on the branch, staring down at the remains of another Leaf ninja. Found the lookout. This guy could at least be recognized, unlike his unfortunate teammates. His glassy eyes stared up at the sky, his head almost completely severed from his neck by an ugly gash crusted with dry blood that spread to stain his shirt and the surrounding bark. His body had been dumped near the trunk where the branches originated, only his ghostly white hand dangling over the edge.

With this, Sute could form a much more solid picture of the attack. The attacker had snuck up on the lookout and slit his throat from behind—though that wound looks more like they sawed his throat, ouch—before descending onto the camp. With the lookout dead, his teammates had no warning before the assailant struck, abandoning stealth for a much more brutal approach which the just-awoken shinobi would have no ability to defend against.

All in all, a pretty textbook ambush. But even with the rough events figured out, it just raised more
questions. Why dispose of the tent but literally nothing else? The lookout's body hadn't even been remotely hidden beyond what would naturally lay outside of view from the ground. The killer should have had plenty of time to dispose of the remains since it was an ambush; even if they were on a tight schedule, they'd want to cover their tracks.

Unless... They weren't completely alone?

The thought gave her pause, eyes flicking down to the remains of the camp with renewed interest. It wasn't often Sute got to encounter a genuine mystery in this line of work. Investigating the remains of battle sites and performing autopsies, sure, but an ambush with mysterious motives? This whole setup was tapping into that lifelong love of detective novels.

A giddy grin of almost childlike glee spread across her face as she surveyed the site, practically bouncing with excitement. Oh my gosh, I get to play detective! It was with a barely contained laugh that she jumped down, eager to resume her investigation.

And that laugh died when she felt a sharp ping on her inner wrist mid-fall, her face wiping into a blank mask almost immediately.

The moment her feet touched the ground she jerked her wrist upwards and twisted the wrist-guard around to expose the string of tracking seals connected to the ANBU currently stationed at the base, a total of five at present.

Only four seals remained.

A chill had run down her spine, her mouth pressing into a thin line. These seals, like many experimental ones, weren't permanent tattoos but instead temporarily drawn with a special chakra-infused ink. These particular seals only faded if she removed it, broke the connection on her end... or if the other person died.

Had someone been injured on a mission? It wasn't unlikely; Sute had no idea what missions the other ANBU might have, just a basic time frame for their anticipated return. But if that were the case, as the assigned medic she should have been alerted if someone had been injured upon her return to base, or at least held back if they anticipated injuries. The remaining four seals all pointed to the exact same direction, suggesting they were still at base, so it wasn't like someone had died on their mission.

As she puzzled over it her thoughts ground to an abrupt halt as that familiar ping surged again, and another seal faded before her eyes.

Sute froze, and then spun and took off towards the base.

Shit. Shit shit shit. As she ran she bit down on her thumb and swiped it over a storage seal on her left arm, unsealing her bokken and catching it without breaking her pace. If she was lucky, the two deaths just happened to be in the same direction as the outpost. If not though, then that meant someone had managed to locate their base and take down two people in a short amount of time. She could be dealing with anything from a particularly stealthy assassin, or a powerhouse whose skill made stealth unnecessary.

Another ping alerted her to a third seal fading four minutes into the run, and she silently ticked the odds in favor of the second possibility as she picked up pace. It took another ten minutes before the woods started to give way to familiar landmarks signaling the cabin wasn't far off, at which point she forced herself to slow and prioritize stealth over speed. Her heart pounded as she pressed a hand to a tree in passing, checking the root systems for any hints as to the situation.
The mental map her senses conjured made her falter, her eyes widening. One person halfway between her current position and the cabin, slowly crawling her way. And the cabin... Everything felt too still there, her mental map unable to reach inside, but the area around it feeling off. Sucking in a sharp breath, she moved at a slightly more brisk pace towards the crawling individual, her steps silent as she kept close to the foliage.

Only when the person finally came into sight did she drop stealth and rush forward, recognizing the torn uniform of the Kiri ANBU instantly. Even then, it wasn't until she got closer that she managed to identify the man as Amano. Bloody cuts marred his face and uniform, a deep cut slashed into his side through the armor, and the black fabric over his left leg seeming to cling to his skin too closely to be normal. He weakly lifted his head to look at her as she approached, his hand clenching atop the dirt.

"S-Sute," he sputtered, and Sute dropped down to examine him. Her breath hitched as she saw inky black spreading through the veins along the side of his neck, the skin taking a yellowish-green tint. Poison. And the nasty kind too.

"Report," she ordered even as her hands lit up with healing chakra to assess his state. Amano started to speak but coughed instead, grimacing as his eyes briefly squeezed shut. Seeming to think it over, he snapped his fingers to draw her attention to his hand before he began signing, the motion clumsy and shaky but still recognizable.

'Hostile invaded. One killed in bed, one near bed. Hostile dealt heavy damage. Commander engaged hostile for extended period. Ordered retreat.' Out loud he added, "To f-find you." So you could heal me and we could send a full report, he didn't add, but Sute understood anyway.

She cursed under her breath before glancing back at his injuries. She could tell from the diagnostic jutsu that the fabric of his pants had essentially fused to the skin, a strong indication of being burnt. More than that though, a good deal of his skin felt... loose? "Were you boiled alive?" she asked incredulously, and he managed an affirmative-sounding grunt.

Another curse slipped out, followed by yet another when she felt a fourth seal fade on her wrist. Their commander was officially dead. Lovely.

Glancing above Amano towards the direction of the cabin, she made a decision and got up, reaching into the pouch on her hip to pull out a silver case containing her emergency stash of poisoned senbon. "We need to relocate before they find us," she informed Amano bluntly as she selected one in particular. "I'm going to knock you out and transport you somewhere safe."

Amano offered no protest, just closed his eyes and rolled his head to the side to further expose his neck. Sute jabbed the senbon into his neck, sending harmless sedatives coursing through his system and swiftly knocking him out. Once his body visibly relaxed she returned the senbon and case to the pouch before slamming her hands together and calling on her greatest natural affinity. Roots sprouted from the ground below the unconscious ANBU and wrapped around him to form a giant wooden cradle with large handles on either end. Two nearby trees began bulging and twisting until two copies of herself emerged from the bark, each grabbing a handle and running. Sute herself used a quick doton jutsu to smooth the ground to hide the evidence of her mokuton manipulation, and then leaped onto a nearby branch to follow her clones from the trees.

Sute rarely allowed herself permission to use mokuton, especially to an extent like this, but right now she was willing to make an exception if she saw anyone pursuing them. She still had no idea what they were up against, but Amano's condition made it perfectly clear she couldn't hold back. Once the river came into sight she dropped down just as her clones set the cradle on the banks,
hopping inside and sitting next to Amano's head.

Her clones pushed it into the water and the makeshift boat rocked slightly before steadying, remaining thankfully afloat as the currents began carrying it downstream. She looked at the pair and barked a short, "Find shelter." They nodded and skipped across to the other side before disappearing into the forest, while Sute twisted her head to keep an eye out for any pursuit.

Ten tense minutes passed before her clones finally reappeared, silently signaling they had found shelter. One walked onto the water and grabbed the front handle to drag the cradle to shore, Sute hopping out to follow as they carried it much like before. Soon enough they were holed up in a cliff side cave, the cradle and clones reduced to harmless piles of timber used for a campfire to heat a pot of water while Sute bent next to her unconscious teammate to begin treating him.

Now that she had a chance to perform a more detailed examination, Sute could safely confirm that Amano had, in fact, been boiled alive. Along with her unfortunate experiences with the subject in her first life, she had seen her fair share of hot water jutsu back in Kiri because sometimes they had idiots who thought using a geyser or hot spring as a water source during a spar was a brilliant idea.

That was the key part here, though: **they used an outside source.** Controlling the temperature of water used in suiton techniques was technically doable, but it had an incredibly limited range. Otherwise, anyone would be able to freeze water into ice or make it hot enough to evaporate into steam. Sute had experimented with the latter and managed to pull it off by using fuinjutsu in conjunction with the ninjutsu, but the fact still remained she required external resources to do so.

There were no hot water sources near the cabin that could be used, meaning that the person almost certainly had a bloodline limit. Her eyebrows furrowed at the thought, biting her lip even as she carefully cut away Amano's armor and shirt to get full access to the giant cut on his side. No clans in Kiri had a bloodline like that, so it probably wasn't a former Mist ninja with a grudge. There went the most obvious suspects.

Her mind flashed to the decimated Leaf camp as she began mending the largest cut. *Same culprit?* She hadn't examined the two bodies on the ground before she got the alarm from her seals, but thinking back they both had distinctly red tints to their skin beneath all the dirt. They *might* have been boiled, she'd have to go back to check.

She had plenty of time to consider this as she went about treating Amano. With the largest cut sealed, her largest priority was the poison in his neck. She grabbed the pot of now-sterile water from the fire and set it next to him, taking a deep breath as she dipped her hands into it and guided the water towards his chest. Pulling poison out with water took time, giving her all sorts of flashbacks to Sakura using the same technique on Kankurou at the start of Shippuden. She could only hope this poison wasn't the fast-acting kind, and she'd have time to find the original and produce an antidote.

Stabilizing his condition took longer than she would have liked, the work in extracting the poison slow and tedious. After the better part of an hour she deemed she'd removed enough and moved on to treating the rest of his injuries. Another half-hour later she finally let the glow of her healing chakra fade, wiping her brow in exhaustion as she surveyed her teammate.

By this point she'd managed to treat the worst of it, leaving him nestled atop several clean towels and his clothes largely replaced by bandages. Removing the pants had been a difficult decision, because with the way the fabric had been melted to his skin it would be impossible to remove it without taking a layer of flesh with it. Even now the bandages began to tint red, making her grimace.
Transporting him back to Kiri would be hell. She winced in sympathy as she imagined the pain he would feel at even the smallest movement, unable to resist a shudder as she realized she'd also likely have to carry him. Sedatives could only work so well before crossing into dangerous levels, and Amano's immediate future guaranteed unholy levels of pain.

She sighed as she pulled out her fuinjutsu set, scribbling out a quick seal to keep him unconscious and hopefully keep the wounds sterile. As long as he didn't wake up and move, it should repel any bacteria and dirt, but it wouldn't work as a permanent or even long-term solution. **Note to self, speed up work on the stasis project at home,** she thought as she applied the tag to his forehead and activated it.

With Amano now in relatively stable condition, Sute finally allowed herself to slump to the ground with a tired groan. Between the mission that morning, running a total of four kilometers within one hour, using her mokuton, and the meticulous processes involved in treating Amano, she felt thoroughly exhausted. Her clones had applied some premade security seals to the perimeter before she'd used them for firewood, and she pulled out the paper tags paired with them and clutched them tightly in her fist.

Tomorrow, she would have to go track down his attackers and try to retrieve either the original poison used, or even better, an antidote. For now though she had to acknowledge she had no energy left and so she let her eyelids fall shut, sleep claiming her within seconds.

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A burning warmth in her fist snapped Sute out of her slumber, her eyes popping open as she immediately snapped to alertness. She didn't sit up right away, moved her arm closer and loosened her grip on the tags to glance at them. Two of them glowed brightly, radiating a sharp sort of heat that warmed her palm, and even as she looked a third lit up.

**Intruders steadily approaching. Less than a minute until arrival.** Silently shifting and getting to her feet, she grabbed her bokken and crept towards the mouth of the cave, eyes narrowed as she pressed against the stone. The sky outside was pitch black, the sun long since set and night in full swing.

Her eyes flitted towards Amano's still form, quickly assessing his condition from a distance. Even in the darkness she could see him shivering lightly, sweat glistening on face. **Feverish and sweaty, but no notable signs of significant deterioration.** She felt the fourth and final seal activate in her palm, and exhaled quietly through her nose as her eyes darted to the ground by the entrance. **They're here.**

Sute kept her gaze trained on the ground, and the moment she saw a shadow she thrust into motion, exploding out of the cave and swinging the bokken in an upwards diagonal arc. The intruder jumped back but not fast enough to completely avoid it, the wood managing to whack against their chest.

The second she felt contact she pulsed chakra into her fingers and activated the seals on either side of the hilt, causing the blade's dull edge to momentarily sharpen enough to cut. She heard the distinct rip of fabric and flesh being punctured, and jerked the bokken away with a vicious satisfaction. **Contact made. Poison distributed.** In one fluid motion she rolled the wooden blade above her head and swung it down towards their skull, the other person barely managing to dodge.

As the figure skipped back moonlight caught on silver hair, making her freeze. Her stance shifted away from offense to a less aggressive, more defensive one, her eyes narrowing even as her heart began hammering in her chest. "Well, long time no see," she drawled, and Hatake Kakashi glowered at her from several feet away.
Sorry for the delay! I meant to post this last week, but it was Erasermic week in the MHA fandom, and it's legitimately my first OTP ever, so I ended up writing an eight-chapter fic for it here on AO3. It was actually pretty refreshing, and for once it DIDN'T spiral into some epic so hooray!

Anyways. Say hello to Kakashi! It's been a long time hasn't it? Considering the fact he's listed as one of the four primary characters on FF, he's barely appeared at all in this story. He and Sute have a LOT of catching up to do.

Not much else to say. Next chapter is fully written, but I'm iffy about some of the chapters beyond that and want some time to rewrite them, so I'm not going to commit to a specific day to post it. I definitely plan to post it next week though! That's all for now.
Chapter 25

After three years, Hatake Kakashi had definitely changed.

He looked much more mature than the last time she'd seen him, taller and more muscular rather than a scrawny teenager. He still didn't wear the jounin uniform she'd grown used to from canon, instead wearing black shinobi pants and a sleeveless top with his famous mask attached to the collar. He didn't even have a hitai-ate, instead just keeping his implanted eye closed by sheer will. Components of the Leaf ANBU uniform? The thought sent a shudder down her spine even as she stared him down.

Night had fallen since she'd fallen asleep, the shadows of the forest making it hard to see many features even without the dark mask obscuring his lower face, but even so she recognized how his shoulders tensed with pain. "Ringo Sute," he forced out, his teeth audibly clenched behind his mask. Yep, definitely in pain.

Her gaze darted to the long gash across his chest left by her bokken, a thin line of red spanning the exposed flesh, before returning to meet his one open eye as she forced her expression to harden. Leaf ninja almost never worked alone, so it would be best to make her edge known now.

"This bokken is laced with a powerful poison made with mamushi venom," she informed him bluntly. "In five minutes it will begin circulating through your body and the wound will begin festering, and within the hour you'll be completely incapacitated. I have the antidote, but if you or any of your allies make any sudden or hostile moves, I can guarantee you'll never get it. If you have any allies here, I suggest they come out in the open."

Kakashi stiffened at the threat, his open eye narrowing. Moments later two figures materialized next to him, apparently deciding not to wait for his input. Unlike Kakashi, the taller of the two wore no traces of the ANBU uniform, dressed in civvies with a bandana tied over his shaggy hair. The smaller one, however, drew her attention more, recognizing him instantly. It was the same kid she'd seen at the café that morning, still dressed in the civilian shirt and shinobi-grade pants and sandals, though he had since added plated arm braces to his forearms.

Sute only had time to look at him for a second before the other man raised his hands in a placating manner, drawing her attention towards him. "Calm down, we don't really want a fight right now," he drawled. "How about we just talk peacefully?"

Her eyes narrowed, shifting her stance slightly to angle towards him just a little more. Something about his face and the way he spoke sparked a note of familiarity in her brain, but she couldn't place it at the moment. She pushed it aside for the time being, coolly demanding, "What is your business here?"

"We're looking for some Leaf ninja that went missing," the man responded surprisingly easily. Sute might have suspected him to be lying given how easily he gave that away, but judging the way the boy tensed and Kakashi shot him a harsh glare, she decided he was likely telling the truth. The man calmly shrugged at their silent rebukes, meeting the one-eyed glower with cool indifference. "Don't look at me like that. We don't really have much time to waste on drawn-out confrontations right
"I need more details than that," Sute interjected, arching her eyebrows, and the man glanced back to her with a nod.

"We got notice a dangerous fugitive was sighted in this area. One of our teams happened to be in the area and they didn't report back, so we were ordered to find them and check if they'd been attacked. So far, no dice though." He spoke smoothly and without hesitation, his stance purposely relaxed as he held her gaze. "Like I just said, we don't have time for a drawn-out confrontation right now. Every second counts, even without taking your poison into consideration."

Sute eyed him a moment longer, weighing his words against his body language and expression. Years of living with a serial killer for a father had made her exceptionally talented at picking up on small visual tells of deceit, and now that she was living in a world that operated on deception that skill had only grown further. Right now, she saw none of the usual signs that accompanied lying, his entire demeanor radiating honesty.

Still, she couldn't take a chance, so she decided to throw a curve ball of her own to test the waters. "By any chance, is this fugitive able to use hot water jutsu?" she asked.

Immediately all three reacted, Kakashi and the brown-haired man's eyes narrowing while the boy visibly stiffened. This time Kakashi spoke, his voice a low growl as he stepped forward. "What do you know about him?" he demanded shortly, and the flash of red as his other eye opened was all she needed to confirm the sincerity of their story.

She averted her gaze from his eye to focus on the other man, deeming it safer to deal with the non-hostile man than look at the Sharingan. "Someone with a hot water jutsu attacked and massacred the rest of my team," she said, and saw the group stiffen at the admission. "I didn't see him myself. I was away when the attack happened, and only heard about it second-hand from my sole surviving teammate. Along with being partially boiled alive, he's currently in critical condition because of an unknown poison."

The man's eyes narrowed at the story, clearly calculating. "Poison, huh? In that case, you probably need the antidote, don't you?" She could sense where he was trying to steer the conversation, and felt a small smirk play across her face as she nodded once.

"I do. If I want to save him, I need to find the attacker and retrieve either the antidote, or at the very least the poison so I can produce one."

"I see, I see," he hummed, smirking as the others side-eyed him.

"Genma," Kakashi said in a warning tone, and the newly identified Genma glanced at him with a shrug.

"What?" he asked innocently. "I'm just saying, it looks like our interests align right now."

"He's right," Sute interjected with a nod, and that seemed to startle Kakashi more than anything, those mismatched eyes snapping to her sharply. "Don't act so surprised. Just because I'm from the 'Bloody Mist' doesn't mean I'll launch headfirst into fights with every random shinobi I meet for kicks. In case you don't know I'm a medical ninja, which means I need to be a bit more careful with my life than others."

"And fighting us would be totally unnecessary," Genma added with a smirk. "We're all after the same guy and it's not like our objectives clash, so wouldn't it be smarter to combine forces instead
of compete to find him? Especially now that you've been poisoned." He nodded at the cut across Kakashi's chest. With her eyes increasingly adjusting to the darkness Sute could faintly see the skin around it starting to discolor, and she knew it probably tingled right now, a telltale sign of poisoning.

Kakashi's hands clenched at his sides, clearly still on the fence about the idea about working together. "Working with a Mist ninja?" the youngest of the trio murmured, sounding almost confused by the notion. Humming, Sute twirled her bokken and the trio tensed in anticipation of an attack. Rather than move forward she let it slide through her grip so the tip rested on the ground harmlessly, resting the hilt against her largely open palm.

"I'm not opposed to it," she said with a shrug. "Beats fighting four people instead of one. As long as I get the antidote, I care about literally nothing else." She reached into the pouch on her hip and pulled out a glass injector vial with an amber-colored liquid, setting it on the ground and nudging it with her foot to roll towards them. "That's the antidote for my poison, I recommend you use it now. I'd apologize for the rude welcoming, but given the aftermath of the other late-night ambush I saw, I think I'm justified in being careful."

That particular remark seemed to grabbed their attention, their eyes snapping up from the antidote. "Other ambush?" Kakashi repeated, and she nodded.

"Yeah. Inject it and I'll explain on the way, it will be quicker if we talk while we move." She paused, inclining her head as she met his mismatched gaze evenly. "And if you still have any doubts about that being the antidote, just keep in mind, that poison in your system is already lethal. I have nothing to gain by poisoning you further."

She saw his eyes narrow at the remark but Kakashi said nothing, and the seconds ticked by slowly as they stared each other down evenly. In her peripheral vision she could see the boy standing perfectly rigid and looking uncertain how to react, while Genma seemed relaxed and ready to accept either outcome.

Finally, the silver-haired man broke eye contact to bend down to swipe the vial from the ground, pressing it against his arm and pushing the button to inject its contents into his veins. A pleased smile spread across Sute's lips at the compliance, nodding as she pulled up her bokken and started towards the trees. "Come on, I'll take lead."

With that she stepped away from the cave's entrance and gave them a wide berth as she headed towards the trees, intentionally turning her back to them. A carefully calculated display of vulnerability, to ease any misgivings or concerns of her attacking first. A few moments later she could hear them follow her, filling her with a surge of satisfaction. She was glad they couldn't see her face as she suppressed a giddy grin, her chest fluttering with excitement.

First a legitimate mystery, and now a chance to work with one of her favorite characters from the show. Could have done without her colleagues being massacred, but otherwise, this was looking to be a very good night.

Five minutes later found the group running through the forest, Sute taking lead while the three Leaf ninja followed behind. She could feel Kakashi eying her back warily, moving just slightly ahead of the other two. He clearly didn't trust her despite their current alliance, and she didn't blame him. Trust was a risky business for shinobi after all, and Sute had proven herself to be dangerous on more than one occasion.

She didn't bother commenting on it, instead listening as Genma—who she still found familiar, but
couldn't place his face or name—filled her in on their target. "We're after a fugitive by the name of Amagiri," he began bluntly. "We're not sure where he's from, but he's been on Konoha's radar for the last three months. He has some kind of secret technique or kekkei genkai that lets him produce scalding water, but he's skilled with suiton in general. He's incredibly skilled and dangerous, even without that technique, and has wiped out three teams of veteran chūnin and two jūnin. An A-rank threat at least—S-class at worst."

"And yet no one knows where he came from?" she asked as she paused next to a tree to look around and orient herself, suitably skeptical. Powerful shinobi didn't pop up from nowhere after all. People only reached that level with proper training and combat experience, and it made no sense that absolutely no one would notice the guy until now.

"He wears a disguise," Kakashi said gruffly. "A blue oni mask and black clothes. Amagiri is just the name he gave himself." Sute hummed, nodding in understanding and acceptance as she resumed her run, altering the course slightly.

"So could be a defector, or a false-positive who just trained this technique secretly."

"False-positive?" the youngest of the Leaf trio repeated quietly, and she made a thoughtful noise.

"Ah, right, guess that's not really a term Leaf-nin would need. We use that to refer to people who fake their own deaths to defect."

"Is that really that common?" he asked, sounding rather surprised, and Sute tossed a grin over shoulder that made the boy stumble slightly. Despite the fact she hadn't filed her teeth into points like the Swordsmen, her smile still looked just as sharp and dangerous as the woman who raised her.

"We have a branch of ANBU dedicated to chasing down defectors for a reason, kid." She turned back in time to smoothly sidestep a tree, continuing in a casual tone that was at distinct odds with the subject matter. "The Land of Water's history can best be described as 'never-ending civil war.' People have been faking their deaths to get out of Kiri since the last Shinobi War. Hell, I probably could've gotten away with it back then after my last deployment ended with the rest of my platoon dead, and I was only, like, ten."

She threw out the last comment thoughtlessly, only remembering Kakashi's presence after she said it. She didn't know if he'd make the connection, since he wouldn't know about her platoon's slaughter prior to their encounter, but considering everyone else who'd been chasing them had been just... decimated, she wouldn't be surprised. The memory of Kakashi's arm penetrating Rin's chest made her mood a bit somber, her amused smile fading.

If Kakashi did make the connection, he didn't say as much. "That's the most likely scenario," Genma agreed. "Guy's too well-trained to just have spent his life wandering. Like I said earlier, the three of us happened to be in Hot Water on unrelated missions when we got notice from Konoha he'd been sighted here. Given some previous patterns, there was concern he'd target a team assigned to the area, so we got sent to check for them."

She noted he kept the wording vague, not detailing what previous patterns existed or why he'd target the team specifically. Not that it bothered her. That sort of detail could expose a bit more about their own weaknesses, they had to keep some secrets. "Now that we've briefed you on Amagiri's profile, where are you leading us?" Kakashi questioned. "You said you'd explain what you meant by 'other ambush' after we started moving."

"Of course," she agreed. "If you'll recall, I said I was away from my team when this 'Amagiri'
character attacked. That's because I was sent to investigate a campsite belonging to a team of Leaf ninja."

*That* got their attention, and even without looking she could feel their gazes intensifying on her back. "Where is it?" the youngest asked, sounding almost eager. Sute came to a stop and turned to face them, a smug grin on her face.

"Right here," she said with a theatrical wave of her arms to indicate the space around them. The trio stopped and looked around, clearly surprised and suspicious. She could see the moment Kakashi saw the outlines of the two bodies partially buried beneath the fallen foliage, his Sharingan-eye squinting narrowly. A few seconds later a sharp intake of breath told her the other two noticed as well.

"That was... conveniently close," Genma commented even as he walked over to inspect the body.

"Coincidence," Sute responded with a shrug. The river happened to run southwest, and her clones had likely used the mental map from her initial search for the clearing to find the cave. Kakashi turned to regard her, leaving the initial inspection to Genma for the moment.

"How did you find this place?" he demanded, and she shrugged, leaning against a tree casually.

"A couple of my teammates reported noticing it while en route to the rendezvous point. Said it looked destroyed."

"And since you're a medic, they sent you to investigate," Genma surmised from where he knelt next to the body, and she nodded, flashing another sharp grin.

"Yep. By the way, since you're already there, is the skin red or loose at all?" she asked, turning to look at him curiously. "When someone's boiled alive it loosens the skin. Try poking the body and seeing if it slides off." Genma flinched at the explanation, shooting her a grimace while Kakashi just looked at her blandly.

"That is incredibly specific," he noted dryly.

"I am a medical ninja in a village predominantly geared towards water-based jutsu," Sute replied flatly. "Sometimes we get idiots who think using a geyser or hot spring as a water source in a spar is a brilliant idea." The deadpan remark earned a small snort from the youngest member of the group, who quickly flinched when Kakashi shot him an unimpressed look.

Soon enough Genma made an audible noise of disgust. "Fuck, it did slide off," he groaned, and Sute perked up instantly, craning her head to look.

"Really? So they were boiled alive? Guess it's Amagiri after all."

"If you inspected this place earlier, why didn't you check the bodies then?" Kakashi asked, turning back to her.

"Because I got a signal that my teammates were being attacked." She left it at that, knowing he wouldn't press for specifics, and her expression smoothed to something more thoughtful as her head tipped back to stare at the trees above them. "Ah, right, since it's on my mind. Whoever did this probably ambushed the camp at night, since they targeted the lookout first. Body's up there, I'd just found it when I got the signal."

She gestured to the branch with her head, the pale hand hanging over the edge just barely visible in the darkness. Kakashi followed the movement before slanting a glance towards the youngest and
nodding subtly. The boy immediately vanished as he leapt upwards, presumably jumping up to inspect the tree, and a few moments later he reappeared with a grave expression. "One body, male in his thirties. Slit throat."

"Slit throat?" Kakashi echoed thoughtfully.

"'Sawed' might be more accurate," Sute interjected, thinking back to her earlier observations. "Head was barely attached. I figure your fugitive attacked him first, and saved the flashier stuff for the guys who were still sleeping down here. Like I said, didn't get a chance to examine the other two bodies before I got the signal. So I have no idea where the fourth member is."

The off-hand remark made all three Leaf ninja freeze, Genma and the boy slowly turning to look at her while Kakashi's gaze hardened. "How do you know there's a fourth person?" he demanded sharply, and she rolled her shoulders in a light shrug, undisturbed by the harsh scrutiny.

"The guy burnt the tent, but didn't try to dispose of the bodies and just buried and hid them with the foliage. Burning a body takes time, and creates a more notable odor. It could be strong enough to cover up their tracks from trackers," she mused as she tipped her chin back, "but it would also attract their attention in the first place. The best reason I can conceive for him to hide the bodies instead is that he felt rushed and wanted as much of a head start as possible."

She straightened her head to meet Kakashi's suspicious gaze dead on, fearlessly gazing into his Sharingan as she finished, "And the most logical reason for that would be if he'd captured someone, and needed to move them as quickly as possible."

Silence followed her proclamation, the group stewing over her words grimly. Externally, Sute remained cool and aloof as she awaited their responses. Internally, she was squealing with delight that her deduction had been correct. Sute loved detective novels after all, and getting a chance to share her deductions brought back warm memories of staying up late to watch Case Closed with her dad as a kid.

In retrospect, probably weird her dad let her watch a show about solving gruesome murder cases before her age was even in the double-digits. Even weirder that he'd compliment the realism of it, and bought a few volumes of the Detective Conan manga (in the original Japanese, no less) to read in his spare time.

She pushed the thought away as Kakashi visibly exhaled a silent breath as if to compose himself. "You're right," he confirmed reluctantly, voice calm and level, and Sute perked up. "This team was a four-man unit. We have strong reason to suspect Amagiri would target the fourth member."

Revealing this information to an enemy must have gone against every instinct he had, and he looked rather frustrated confirming it, but she didn't care. She was too busy just cheering in her head.

"So I was right," she mused to herself with a small smile, the only sign of her sheer internal glee she allowed to show. Her silent congratulatory cheering soon ended though as Kakashi slammed a hand on the ground, a puff of smoke appearing. Her smile faded as the smoke cleared to reveal three small canines in blue jackets, standing a bit straighter. Ninken?

"Hey, Boss," the pug—was that Pakkun?—greeted gruffly. "Whatcha need this time?"

"Someone attacked this site and kidnapped a fellow Leaf ninja," Kakashi said bluntly. "I need you, Bisuke and Urushi to find his scent and track it."

"Got it," the pug—and yes, that was Pakkun—said with a nod, the other two canines already
moving to start scenting the area. Pakkun remained seated for a moment though, glancing over at Sute. "Any reason she's here?"

"Temporary truce," Kakashi replied, and Sute would have made some remark if not for her current shock and awe. Dogs. There were three dogs right in front of her. Sute hadn't seen a dog aside from Inuzuka ninken since being reincarnated into this world. While she loved her snakes, part of her missed being able to pet something soft and fluffy. The only soft and fluffy animals she got to interact with on a regular basis were rabbits and boar she had to skin for meals on missions.

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Suddenly it occurred to her she'd probably been silent a little too long, as she noticed Kakashi sending her an almost incredulous stare in her peripheral vision. She blinked and shook her head, schooling her face to something more professional. "Ignore my scent," she told Pakkun. "I was here earlier, but they were already dead by that point. Also, at least one of my comrades came by looking for mushrooms, so it's safe to ignore his scent too."

"Brat, we can tell how fresh a scent is," Pakkun informed her dryly. "We'll just look for the ones that aren't older than the bodies." Sute paused, and slowly nodded.

"Oh. I see. I'll just be quiet now." She backed away, shooting curious looks at the other two ninken as they searched. Part of her wanted to ask to pet them, or take a page from Pakkun's book and ask to touch his paw like he'd offered during the invasion arc, but she kept her mouth firmly shut. Even she could tell it would be weird, and Kakashi was already eying her suspiciously enough.

Fortunately they soon picked up a scent, and then the group was chasing after them in silence. By this point, she suspected twenty-four hours had already passed, and in other circumstances that would make her weary of finding him. Considering he'd attacked her teammates a few hours prior though, she held onto hope that he'd still be in the general area. Hopefully the scent would at least lead to his base where he'd stowed his prisoner, and from there they'd have a fresher trail to follow even if he'd left.

About a kilometer out the dogs came to a stop in a large clearing though, one's pointed ears flattening against his head while the other hound snorted. "Scent's run cold," Pakkun reported grimly, making the group glance at each other.

"Did they cover it up or jump into the trees instead?" Genma muttered with a frown, but Pakkun shook his head.

"No, it vanished dead-center here. Don't think they could just jump to a tree from this distance, either," he added, nodding at the beagle-like hound who had taken to sniffing a nearby tree. He shook his head, confirming no scents remained.

"Did they just... teleport?" the still-unknown boy asked, looking around uneasily. "Is that a thing people can do?"

"Yes," all three other shinobi responded without hesitation, and Genma and Kakashi both paused to glance at Sute almost suspiciously. She just held up her hands and said, "Hey, the Yellow Flash was your leader. Kid should know this."

"Well, the chances of it are low anyway," Genma commented after a few seconds. "The Fourth took years to recreate the Hiraishin, and he had access to notes about the Second's research thanks to his connections. I don't think just anyone could figure out how to recreate it, so doubt we're dealing with teleportation here."

*Unless Tobi's involved*, Sute thought, thinking to the orange-masked man. He had been her first
thought when teleportation was mentioned, even before recalling her first encounter with the Yellow Flash. Come to think of it, the Akatsuki did have other members before the final lineup. Orochimaru for one, and aside from him it was mentioned that Kakuzu had a habit of killing his assigned partners before Hidan. Amagiri could be a prospective member Tobi wanted to personally monitor.

Sute had to suppress a visible grimace at the thought of him lurking around. She still wasn't sure if he was actually Uchiha Madara, or if the fan theories about him being Obito were right, but it didn't matter. The man was dangerous, pure and simple, and she'd rather avoid meeting him anytime soon. Hopefully he had nothing to do with it, and they'd find another explanation for the disappearing scents.

The gentle rush of air from above was the only warning they received.

Kakashi whipped his head up in the corner of her eye, and visibly stiffened at whatever he saw. "Get down!" he yelled, and everyone dove to the side just in time to avoid the swoop of a large creature. She felt wind ripple across her back as the creature glided right over them, briefly glimpsing the glint of sharp talons. When she rolled onto her back and sprung to her feet she saw the creature soaring into the air, wings beating silently as it did.

No way.

"Is that an owl?" the boy called, echoing the question in her mind as he jumped to his feet.

An owl.

A giant, man-sized owl was currently climbing the sky above them.

"It's gotta be a summons," Genma said, holding several senbon between his fingers as he stared up at it. "No other way it would be that big!"

"Is there a contract for every animal?" Sute asked in exasperation. The man-sized owl spun to face them, its large, golden eyes glinting in the minimal light as it prepared to dive again. A chorus of curses rose as they dodged out of its path again, Genma throwing a volley of senbon at it as they did. The needles deflected off its feathers though, the glitter of the metal falling to the ground the only evidence of their descent.

He cursed as the owl swooped upwards once more. "Shit, I think its feathers are enhanced with chakra or something!" he warned. No sooner had he spoken than several feathers came flying down towards them in the owl's wake, Kakashi hissing as one grazed his arm. Sute's eyes narrowed as she saw blood bubble along the line left by its path, the trail dark against his pale skin.

"I'm guessing their feathers aren't soft and harmless," she called.

"It felt more like a kunai than a feather," Kakashi confirmed gravely. As the owl reached the peak of its arcing ascent it released a loud, shrill shriek, making him wince and nearly cover his ears. By unspoken consensus the group quickly turned and ran for the cover of the trees before it could descend again, another shrill shriek sounding just as she dove behind the trunk.

Solid thunks echoed around the clearing as projectiles lodged into wood, and when Sute peered out she saw the owl ascending once more. Her heart hammered as she watched it, its dark silhouette nearly invisible against the night sky.

Okay, so to recap, a giant, man-sized owl was attacking them with razor-sharp feathers. Under other circumstances Sute might have found it laughable, but right now she felt paralyzed as she
pressed against the tree, transfixed on its large, yellow eyes as it circled above the clearing. An
instinctive chill ran down her spine, recognizing the glare of a predator.

From what she could tell she had run in the opposite direction from the Leaf ninja, able to see them
peering out from behind the trees on the opposite side of the clearing. The only good news was that
the owl seemed focused on them, its sharp feathers peppering their trees rather than the ones she
hid behind. Her pulse quickened as she watched it, wincing and snapping her head back out of sight
as it released another high-pitched shriek.

Flying opponents were far beyond her area of expertise. Her preferred fighting style was more
suited for close combat, and while she had a slew of long-range suiton jutsu at her disposal, they
still worked best with an external water source. Mokuton was also out with three Leaf ninja nearby,
she couldn't pass off trees coming to life as anything else.

She frowned, gripping her bokken tighter and reaching into her pouch for a poisoned kunai. Aim
for the eye, she decided. Penetrating its feathers with senbon or kunai didn't seem too likely given
how the other guy's attempt had gone, but the eyes had no such protection. The owl was focused on
the others rather than her, and she peeked around the trunk to watch as it circled once more, waiting
for an opening.

"Ringo Sute?" She stiffened at the voice, whirling around to see a blue demon mask mere feet
away from her. Amagiri.

Immediately her reflexes kicked in, jerking the kunai upwards to slash at him. The man side-
stepped it and caught her wrist, twisting it easily and making her drop the kunai. Her brief hiss of
pain was drowned out by another shriek from the owl, and as the sound died away the man spoke,
voice smooth and calm as he maintained his grip on her wrist. "Please, there's no need for hostility.
I'd like to make a proposition."

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for another slightly long delay! My sleep schedule has been really screwy lately,
so it's been messing with my writing ability (and... everything else, too) and I wanted
to get a bit ahead in the draft. I wasn't 100% happy with this chapter either, the pacing
feels a bit fast for my liking. Might have to do with the fact that originally the middle
scene was from Kakashi's POV. But switching from Sute, to Kakashi, then back to
Sute felt weird to me. It also feels kind of cheap ending two chapters in a row with a
cliffhanger like this. But you've all waited long enough, and I'm happy with the setup.

It's been fun reading everyone's theories! A few people suspected Han to be the
culprit, but nope, just an OC. An OC with owls. Also, we get to see Sute freak out over
dogs! We don't get to see more mundane aspects of her first life since her abnormal
upbringing has a much more active impact on her life, but honestly aside from the
serial-killer-father thing, she overall had a pretty nice life. Keep in mind, Sute lived in
upper-class USA. That means she got to see a LOT more dogs than in this life, and
definitely had a few as pets. She might like snakes, but humans and dogs have a
unique connection that just can't be matched.

Final note: after thinking it over, I think it's best if I stick to an every other week
schedule. My sleep schedule is just REALLY screwed up right now, which cuts in my
motivation for... pretty much everything, really. Having an extra week to work on stuff will help me make sure I can produce quality content.

Thanks for reading!
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Sute makes some new friends.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 26

Not a sound could be heard as the owl circled above the clearing, its flight eerily silent despite its large size. Kakashi leered at it from behind a tree with narrow eyes, his Sharingan tracing its path. A little under four minutes had passed since they'd been forced to take shelter in the trees, and while it hadn't moved to dive at them or tried to hit them with feathers again it showed no signs of leaving anytime soon.

The situation had become highly unfavorable for them. Genma couldn't reasonably use his poisoned senbon with its defenses, and the only long-range jutsu Kakashi knew would require a lot of chakra expenditure—chakra he'd rather save for when they caught up to Amagiri. The only other one with long-range techniques was Tenzo, but they couldn't risk him using the mokuton in front of Sute.

He turned to look at Genma and Tenzo, finding the two watching him expectantly with kunai and senbon in hand. They gave a small nod, and he then turned to Bisuke and Urushi, the pair standing tense and ready. At his nod the two dogs burst into the clearing, running as fast as they could towards another section of trees.

The burst of motion drew the owl's attention, a loud shriek sounding as it dove towards them. At the same time Kakashi and Genma took off to the side while Tenzo and Pakkun stayed behind, moving within the cover of the trees while the owl was distracted. As he ran Kakashi saw the glint of the owl's sharp talons stretching towards Urushi, the tips grazing the back of his vest. The canine dove and slid forward, the momentum just barely carrying him to the safety of the trees alongside Bisuke.

Its quarry out of reach, the owl ascended once more with an enraged screech, and Kakashi could see feathers lodge into the trunks near his two ninken. By this point he and Genma had taken up positions on opposite points along the ring of trees circling the clearing, the other man's pale face barely visible in the shadows when he peeked out. Kakashi pulled his head behind the trunk and took a deep breath as he palmed several shuriken, steeling himself for the next part.

He gave a low whistle, the sound barely carrying through the clearing but more than audible to the dogs and owl. Moments later Pakkun and Tenzo both burst out of their hiding spot, Tenzo rushing forward and lobbing his kunai at the giant bird. It deflected the blade with a single beat of its mighty wings, the resulting gust of air sending it plummeting back to the ground before it dove towards the young ANBU.

Kakashi and Genma reacted instantly, throwing their preferred weapons of choice right at the owl's eyes just before it could reach Tenzo. Caught mid-descent, it couldn't use its wings to deflect them,
and it *screeched* as the shuriken and senbon both hit their marks. Tenzo ducked to the side as it abruptly drew up and nearly crashed into the ground, head shaking wildly with its eyelids squeezed shut and leaking blood.

With a final, agonized shriek it swiped a wing at the spot Tenzo occupied, the boy narrowly managing to dodge the barrage of feathers save one that merely tore his sleeve. Then it vanished in a puff of smoke, leaving the clearing in dead silence.

For a long moment all was still, the only sound Tenzo's heavy breathing as he stood in the center of the clearing. Pakkun gently pressed a paw against his leg as if to support him, and almost as one everyone else emerged from their hiding places, converging next to the pair. "Good job," Kakashi praised with a nod, and Tenzo offered him a shaky smile, wiping his forehead.

"Th-thanks, senpai." He sounded a bit winded and shaken, not that Kakashi could blame him. They'd faced plenty of shinobi and situations far more dangerous than the owl, but there was a certain instinctive chill that even the most hardened veterans had trouble shaking when faced with giant predators. Darting into the open as bait went against every instinct, both as humans and as trained shinobi.

"It shouldn't have taken us that long to come up with that strategy," Genma groaned, picking up one of his fallen senbon, and Kakashi silently agreed.

To be fair, they'd identified the eyes as the ideal weak point early on, but the issue had been figuring out how to actually *strike* them. The owl's eyesight would be more than sensitive enough to pick up on projectiles being tossed its way, and its wings allowed it to easily deflect them. Those sensitive eyes also made it harder to reposition themselves to more strategic locations for a pincer formation, until they decided to use the ninken as a distraction.

"You two are getting extra steak when we get home," Kakashi promised Bisuke and Urushi, checking over the latter to make sure the talons hadn't actually done more than rip the vest. The two canines perked up at the promise, their tails wagging eagerly as they yipped while Kakashi withheld a breath of relief at finding nothing wrong. Rationally he knew they'd be fine and could just unsummon themselves if the owl got too close, but it was still a bit nerve-wracking to watch.

If Pakkun was bothered by not being included in the promise he didn't show it. Instead the pug had turned his attention to the edge of the clearing, sniffing at the ground with a distinct frown. "Bad news, boss," he said, glancing back.

"Sute's gone," Kakashi guessed tiredly. Her lack of action hadn't gone unnoticed, it had been part of the reason they'd waited before putting the plan into action, just in case she'd do something to contradict their strategy. He'd already surmised she had probably fled since she hadn't come out even after the owl had been unsummoned. It didn't surprise him.

Frankly, he hadn't put much stock in the alliance. The only reason he'd relented to it was because it would be better to keep an eye on her than let her operate independently. He knew from the scent of blood in the cave behind her that she'd been telling the truth about her injured companion, so he knew she would search for Amagiri as well. While he didn't trust her to not double-cross them if the opportunity arose, even a false truce would be smoother than the risk of her interfering with the search. So really, the fact she ran at the first chance didn't surprise him.

Pakkun nodded, still looking grim. "Yeah, but it gets worse. Amagiri was here too—and they went off together."

The three Leaf ninja went rigid at the news, the atmosphere growing heavier. *Shit.* The situation
Sute followed Amagiri in silence as they ran atop the river towards his hideout, the trees lining the banks passing by in a rapid blur. He'd used a series of hand seals she'd never seen to make the water move even faster, using it as a sort of extra spring for their steps. Between that and their long strides she estimated they'd managed to travel more than two kilometers in the short time she'd been following him. A shame she didn't have the Sharingan to copy that technique.

*Suiton must be his natural element,* she thought idly as she studied his back. So far they hadn't spoken much, choosing to focus on covering as much ground as possible over conversation. It gave her plenty of time to analyze him, not that his appearance gave her many hints. He wore rather basic black clothing, no obvious hints to a specific country of origin, and she didn't know enough about culture to place if the blue *oni* mask had a regional origin. His hair, while visible, was an unremarkable shade of dark brown that seemed to be common across all the countries in this world.

Except the Land of Lightning. Kumo's existence still threw her for a loop.

She pushed the thought aside as Amagiri's pace slowed, prompting her to slow as well. He hopped onto land easily, the artificially hastened current slowing to its original pace as Sute followed him. "Not much further," he told her, walking at a brisk pace. "We'll be there soon." She hummed and nodded absently, idly examining their surroundings. She hadn't been to this area before, so everything was unfamiliar to her.

As she casually catalogued their current direction she commented, "You sure your owl will be able to hold them off? They had Kakashi with them you know, and he's pretty smart."

"Chairoha will at least be able to buy us some time," Amagiri replied dismissively. "Even if they manage to get past her, the river will dilute our scents enough to make tracking difficult. By the time they find our trail, we'll have had more than enough time to pack up and get another owl to help us move."

Sute hummed, accepting his words at face value for the time being. She doubted the others would expect them to traverse two kilometers in such a short time, and even then they wouldn't know which direction they went. "They'll probably split up to search each direction," she remarked thoughtfully. "Regrouping once they find the trail would take time."

"And even if they find us, we should be able to handle them fine," Amagiri finished smoothly. "After all, I doubt Kiri's 'Bloody Butcher' has let her skills diminish since her last major appearance."

Sute scoffed at the moniker, her features twisting in distaste. "Ugh, don't use *that* one," she groaned. "It makes me sound like I'm just a violent bloodthirsty tank, totally doesn't match up with my style at all. If you want to use one, then 'Poison Apple' would be a *way* better fit."

"Or perhaps, the 'Bloody Oracle'?" Amagiri suggested wryly, a hint of amusement creeping into his tone. Sute huffed through her nose, eyes narrowing slightly at his back.

"...Yeah, I guess that works too," she allowed after a moment, silently marking him as a Leaf ninja. She'd only seen that nickname scrawled in the margins of Leaf-issued bingo books after all. *That's one mystery solved at least.*

Amagiri hummed, not bothering to look at her. "I'm quite curious about the accuracy of that particular moniker. I never fully understood the origin of it, as it doesn't seem like you've made
many major predictions. The closest I've heard is you predicting the rise of Namikaze Minato as the Fourth Hokage."

"Yeah, I don't really get the origin of it either," Sute admitted easily. While she never tried particularly hard to hide her foreknowledge, she also didn't have many opportunities to shove it down people's throats either. Most of the series followed a bunch of Leaf ninja, and she'd encountered very few people she recognized from canon during the war.

At this point, the title amused her more than anything, given just how limited her knowledge really was. Most of it wouldn't be relevant for nearly ten more years, and by that point she suspected her presence would muck up the timeline enough to render a good chunk of it moot, if not all of it. "I wouldn't put much stock in that particular moniker," she added. "Believe me, I'm not actually psychic."

"I assumed as much," Amagiri chuckled. "Your 'Oracle' status isn't why we approached you anyway, so it doesn't matter to me. I, for one, am much more interested in you as a fellow child of Uzushio."

Sute eyed him silently for a moment before slowly nodding. "Uzushio, huh," she murmured quietly to herself. Hearing the name brought back memories of a dark cave and agonized screams echoing off stone walls, of warm brown eyes filled with fear and sadness in equal parts.

Sute had learned a little more about Uzushio since that bloody day—it was impossible not to come across it at some point when one chose to study fuinjutsu. Uzushio was infamous for its prowess in the art, feared enough that Kiri had opted to strike the village and slaughter everyone there.

Even without looking beyond the most superficial information about the village, Sute knew she almost certainly hailed from there. That giant book of storage seals and its contents obviously came from someone well-versed in fuinjutsu. Looking back she suspected that even Ameyuri had made the connection, given the way she'd insisted on hiding the tome when they returned to Kiri.

Yet despite knowing this, she never pursued it further. While it might be part of her genetic heritage, in the end Sute was not of this world. She had no reason to feel attachment to a village or family that she never knew, no reason to feel anger on behalf of her ancestors or pride in some unknown lineage. Uzushio no longer existed, so researching it wouldn't provide any immediate advantages for her situation.

So to meet someone who could apparently identify her heritage on sight, and expressed a sense of kinship over it, made her feel... strange. She eyed Amagiri thoughtfully, silently mulling over the mysterious masked man. "You come from Uzushio too?" she asked, and he hummed in affirmation.

"Yes, my parents were refugees, as I suspect yours were."

"Then, your hot water jutsu...?" Sute trailed off so he could fill in the blank, and he did not disappoint.

"Fuinjutsu." She could imagine a sly grin spreading across the man's face behind the mask, his tone carrying a faint hint of smugness that reminded her of a snake. "I am not a master by any means, but I've dedicated much research to how to combine it with ninjutsu. Altering something as simple as the temperature can have quite fascinating results."

"That's pretty creative. I dabble in fuinjutsu myself. Do you have notes on it?"

"Of course. I'll set them aside for you to read later, seeing as we're here." Even as he spoke he came
to a stop, facing a nondescript clearing near a cliff. He performed a hand seal and the air in front of them began to shimmer, a wooden hut seeming to fizzle into existence in front of them. Sute let out a hum of admiration as she watched it take shape.

"A genjutsu? Clever." She hadn't seen many genjutsu actually in use, as Kiri had very few specialists and during the war most of their enemies tended to focus on more direct tactics to fight against the Seven Swordsmen. She didn't let herself admire it long though, continuing in a nonchalant tone, "But Kakashi has the Sharingan, so it's kind of pointless."

"It won't matter for long, we'll be gone soon," Amagiri demurred smoothly, peeling a paper seal off the door before striding inside with Sute close behind. She could tell even before looking he'd set up base here for some time, noting the air lacked the copious amounts of dust that accompanied long-term abandonment. For the most part the room lacked furniture, a hammock set up in the far corner in place of a bed.

Bottles of unknown liquids and piles of books and notes lined the lone table, and as Amagiri approached he removed his mask to set it next to an unlit lantern. His face looked utterly average and unremarkable, his eyes on the narrower side and his most defining feature a thin scar jutting from the corner of mouth. Overall, the kind of man who could be found any country. Perfect for espionage, but also a bit of a letdown compared to the colorful canon cast.

He picked up a lighter on the desk and used it to light the lantern, the warm glow illuminating the hut's interior more clearly. Sute could now read the labels on the various bottles on the desk, idly noting the names of various poisons. "Are those the ones you used on my team?" she asked, and Amagiri made an affirmative sound as he carried the lantern towards a back corner.

"Yes, though I can't take credit for their creation. They're quite useful though." Sute hummed absently, casually swiping and pocketing one of the bottles as she trailed after him. Amagiri had crouched and set the lantern on the floor so he could lift a tatami mat, revealing a trap door locked with a paper seal. With a quick flare of chakra he peeled it away and lifted the door open, grabbing the lantern and beckoning for her to follow as he began descending the steps.

Sute followed behind silently, and as she neared the bottom she briefly paused when the light caught on a figure. A boy with dark hair and clothing sat huddled in the far corner of the cellar, posture hunched and distinctly defensive. He looked rather pitiful at the moment, arms bound behind his back and legs tied at various points, preventing him from stretching out his limbs or even standing.

His head lifted slightly as Amagiri approached, the light reflecting off the dark fabric of a blindfold and gag, and she suspected he would've glared at them if his eyes hadn't been covered. Even with so many of his features covered, she could tell he was even younger than her.

"So this is the prisoner?" she asked aloud, tone light and casual even as she automatically began cataloging his visible injuries in what little light the lantern provided. *Breathing's shallow, potentially broken ribs. Heavy bruising visible around right eye beneath blindfold, could be swollen shut. Overall coloring is pale, natural coloration or blood loss?* Some Leaf ninja she'd seen had obscenely pale complexions, and the bad lighting made it hard to tell if that was the case with this boy.

Either way though, he was not in good shape.

"He's quite the special one," Amagiri noted as he set down the lantern and reached for the boy. He flinched and shrunk back against the wall as the man grabbed his arm, roughly dragging him towards the light and forcing him to half-stand. "Recognize the curly hair?"
"Not particularly," Sute denied with a head shake, and Amagiri offered her a thin smile, eyes glinting in the lantern light with malicious satisfaction.

"Shisui of the Body Flicker," he told her, and the name tugged at her memory—not from her past life, but this one. Without thinking she slipped her bingo book from the pouch on her hip, flipping through the pages until she found the entry.

_Uchiha Shisui_. The details accompanying the name and picture made her eyebrows arch in surprise, the only indication of her shock as she glanced up at Amagiri. "He's eleven?" she asked, silently congratulating herself for keeping her incredulity out of her voice.

"And already on track to become Jounin," Amagiri commented with a quiet chuckle. "He's one of the top prodigies in Konoha. Activated his Sharingan even before the war ended—and according to some rumors, his eyes are quite unique even among the Uchiha." The boy in question released a frustrated growl, trying to wrench free of his grip. Amagiri responded by shoving him back to the ground, and he made a muffled but clearly pained yelp as he landed on his ankle.

_Sprained ankle_, Sute absently tacked onto her mental list of injuries. "Why keep him alive?" she wondered aloud. "Wouldn't it be easier to just take his eyes and eliminate him as a threat now?"

"It _would_ be, but his Sharingan is highly valuable. And besides..." Amagiri's smirk became vicious, his tone a little more gleeful. "Lord Orochimaru made it clear he preferred a living specimen over mere eyeballs."

Shisui notably stiffened at the name, while Sute merely nodded in understanding. "I suppose that makes sense," she allowed. "You can gather a lot more data from a complete specimen than just a mere part of one after all."

A pleased smile spread across Amagiri's face, friendly yet exuding an undeniable air of sinister intent, a serene sort of evil shown only between like-minded collaborators. "Ah, I _knew_ you'd understand. You and Lord Orochimaru really are cut from the same cloth in that regard, aren't you?"

"Perhaps," Sute responded, allowing a small smile of her own to slip through.

Amagiri just nodded at her, stepping away from Shisui and picking up the lantern. "I need to go upstairs and pack," he informed her. "While I do that, would you mind taking a look at him for me? I'm afraid I had to be quite rough with him, and I want to make sure he'll survive the trip. And perhaps you could... _persuade_ him, to cooperate with us more," he added almost as an afterthought. "After all, it would be much smoother to travel with a willing guest than a defiant and struggling prisoner."

"Of course," Sute agreed, pulling her knapsack off her shoulder as she strode to over to the boy. Crouching down next to him, she reached into the bag and pulled out several candles and matches, followed by her first aid kit. "I'll come up when I'm done or whenever you come grab me. Whichever comes first."

Satisfied by her compliance Amagiri headed towards the trap door with the lantern, lingering just long enough for her to strike a match just before it closed and sealed them in total darkness. As she went about lighting the candles Shisui scooted back towards the wall, clearly recognizing the ill-intent present in the room, though for the moment she ignored him.

Lighting the final candle, she quickly arranged them to provide adequate lighting before turning her attention to the captive Uchiha. Shisui had pressed against the wall during her preparations, the
furthest he could get from her, not that it would do him any good. She grabbed his arm and pulled him over towards the light none too gently, spinning him around and untying the knot on his gag.

"I'm not going to go peacefully," he said the second it was removed, his voice steely and cold in sharp contrast to the high prepubescent pitch. "I don't care what you do to me, I'm not joining you guys."

"Is that so?" she asked, dropping the gag to the floor as she grabbed his blindfold. She tugged the knot loose and tore it away, and his eyes blinked a few times in surprise at the sudden exposure to light. Just as she suspected his right eye had an ugly bruise swelling it shut, his other eye only half-open. His head twisted to look at her, defiance clear on his face, but it quickly vanished as he nearly fell in shock upon spying her.

"Ringo Sute," he whispered, his face rapidly draining of color. Sute smiled sweetly and waved, fully aware of the menacing shadows cast on her face by the candlelight.

"Yo."

Meanwhile far away in the forest a trio of Leaf ninja and three ninken stood next to the river, the atmosphere grave and filled with dread. "The river?" Genma muttered, squinting at the stream cutting through the trees in front of them. "Shit, that's not good. I doubt they just crossed to the other side."

"Water dilutes scents, doesn't it?" Tenzo muttered to himself with a frown, and glanced at the ninken. "So if they walked on it and got out far enough away, you guys won't be able to pick it up, right?"

"That's how it generally goes," Pakkun confirmed with a grim nod, while Kakashi mentally cursed. Amagiri and Sute both had rather subtle scents, too weak to linger if they ran across the water. Splitting up to search either direction would be near-suicide against Amagiri and Sute's combined skillsets; he couldn't think of any configuration that would give one team a significant enough advantage to win without suffering significant harm.

Beyond that, they lacked the necessary equipment for long-distance communication. Their best option would be to send a shadow clone with each team to summon backup if they found them, which would be a massive drain on chakra. And that didn't account for the time it would take for the other team to catch up—time which could easily turn the tides of battle, or allow their quarry to escape.

And if they got away now, then it would be a near-guaranteed death sentence for Uchiha Shisui, and an even more devastating force added to Orochimaru's already immense power if their suspicions were correct.

Teeth gritting in frustration, he tugged his mask down just enough to fully expose his nose. His sense of smell wasn't any better than his ninen, but if they were lucky and the breeze was just right, he might be able to pick up a trace and give them a clue on which way to go—

He froze as one scent instantly jumped out at him, at the same moment Pakkun added almost casually, "But in this case, I think we've had a lucky break."

Almost as one the three humans turned to see a kunai lodged deep into a nearby tree, a trail of deep gashes visible in the trunks of the trees beyond it lining the river. Wrapped around the handle was a scrap of dark green cloth, a perfect match for Sute's shirt.
So. Absolutely NO ONE guessed Amagiri worked for Orochimaru. Genuinely surprised. Funnily enough some people DID guess Shisui would appear... just, not as a prisoner. Also, we're getting some more info on Sute's connection to Uzushio, and a little bit about Amagiri too.

Big news: Bloody Oracle has reached 3,000 followers on FF! Just. Wow. I am so excited to reach this milestone! And we'll probably pass 1,000 reviews pretty soon, which is just... amazing. I think I should have some sort of reward/prize for the 1,000th review. I did something similar with Echoes of Light a long time ago (and that will FINALLY come into play with the next chapter I post of it), so... yeah. Right now the only thing I can think of is to ask for a name for some characters who will appear in the future. Two would not appear for quite a while though.

Honestly, I REALLY want to figure out a good comparative contest for AO3. I can't exactly do it based on comments though, since my own comments add to the overall comment count. Any suggestions?

Thank you so much for your support! Next chapter is going to have some fun info-reveals about Sute's backstory.
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Sute has a lovely chat with Shisui about her family. Shisui tries not to have a panic attack.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 27

"Please, there's no need for hostility. I'd like to make a proposition."

"A proposition?" Sute repeated in a hiss barely audible over the owl's screech, glaring at the masked man as he held her wrist. "What kind of proposition?"

"An invitation, if you will," Amagiri replied smoothly. "I'm certain you find Kiri just as stifling as we found Konoha, and my master would be very pleased in having you join us. He's already expressed interest in meeting you, we feel you would get along with him splendidly." Already she could feel a sense of foreboding creep up her spine, her eyes narrowing.

"And who, exactly, is your master?" she questioned lowly, and she swore she could feel him smile behind that mask.

"The Legendary Sannin Orochimaru, of course."

oOoOo

Shisui, at the ripe age of eleven, had admittedly been in better situations. Sitting tied up in an enemy's base, his body littered with injuries, surrounded by hostiles and blindfolded on top of all that?

Definitely a low point.

As he listened to his captors talk he tried to remain calm, ignoring the pain in his ribs as he focused on analyzing the situation. Amagiri had been suspected for some time to be connected to Orochimaru, and the conversation he overheard only confirmed it.

_They're planning to take me to Orochimaru as an experiment_, he noted, trying to push down the rising panic and anxiety at the thought. Orochimaru was one of the most nefarious traitors to ever leave Konoha, second only to Madara, and that was only because Madara had been one of the founders. Orochimaru experimented on _babies_, for crying out loud! And it looked like he'd be next.

As Amagiri left and the woman prepared to heal him, Shisui resolved to do everything in his power to get out of this mess. He had no idea if or when help would come, so it'd probably be up to him to escape. It would be tricky and difficult, but Shisui felt _somewhat_ confident he could succeed as long as he endured the pain long enough to wait for an opening.
That was the plan. A horrible, shitty plan that would likely be more doomed to failure than success, but it was better than nothing.

Then the blindfold was torn away, and his mind went blank as he found himself staring into bright green eyes that seemed to glow in the candlelight.

"Yo," Ringo Sute greeted flatly.

*Strike that. He might actually die here.*

Shisui grew three shades paler as he stared at the grown-up version of a face he'd seen only in genjutsu and photos, recalling the stories he'd heard about her from the survivors he'd met in Konoha—and that was the best word to describe the people who encountered Ringo Sute in battle: survivors. Even after four years since her last major appearance, her reputation in Konoha had not dwindled. If anything, it grew even *deadlier*.

Dozens of Leaf ninja *still* suffered the consequences of their encounter with the girl. Several had to have limbs amputated either due to the excessive damage she caused or because the field medics couldn't prepare an antidote for her poisons before it could spread. Yashiro, one of the only Uchiha to have met her, had a permanent desk job at KMPD after suffering severe nerve damage and permanent paralysis in his left arm thanks to a slash from a poisoned kunai.

Worse than her poisons though, *she was a medic*. Many people claimed the only reason they'd survived the war was because she went out of her way to heal them, whether she'd been the one to hurt them or not. That seemingly benevolent action often did nothing but prolong their agony, leaving people to die over several long hours on the battlefield as opposed to a swift and relatively merciful death.

Still *more* people suffered intense psychological damage after being captured and tortured by her, being healed repeatedly so she or her allies could begin again. He hadn't heard as much about her torture skills as everything else, since usually people didn't return after being captured, but enough had survived to make *everyone* want to avoid getting captured by Kiri now.

Maybe Sute wasn't as powerful or vicious as the Swordsmen, or have a high body count or some monumental achievement like the Yellow Flash, but she had done enough smaller-scale damage to earn a reputation as one of the most savage prodigies to ever haunt the Elemental Nations. Perhaps her infamy came from the fact she had been a *kid* back then, barely older than Shisui was now.

And he was now completely at her mercy.

"Hello, Uchiha-chan!" she greeted cheerily. "Your name is Shisui, right?"

Shisui just stared, too stunned and terrified to speak. *She's a medical ninja. She can remove my eyes.* That single chilling thought pushed him into action, chakra pumping to his eyes. *If I can just use my Sharingan, the Kotoamatsukami—!*

Sute surged forward almost too quick to follow, slapping a piece of paper on his forehead. He jolted in shock as it stuck and he felt the power around his eyes fade, the chakra wavering and refusing to respond while his vision returned to normal. "W-what the hell?" he whispered, growing increasingly panicked as he twisted his head to try to shake the paper loose.

"Just a little disruption to your chakra coils," Sute hummed, waving at him dismissively even as he grew another four shades paler. "Don't worry, it's not permanent."

"How?" he gasped out before he could think.
"Fuinjutsu, of course!" she chirped brightly. "Turns out screwing with people's chakra systems is really easy when you're just disrupting it instead of completely sealing it. I mean, technically you can still use ninjutsu right now if you focus hard enough, but your coils should be just screwed up enough to keep those pretty little eyes pitch black and safe for me." She smiled at him even as he stared in growing horror, his stomach sinking more.

"You—you know fuinjutsu?" he whispered hesitantly, and she beamed, suddenly leaning right in his face with a sharp grin and manic glint in her eye. He yelped and tried to lean away only to fall flat on his back, leaving him feeling all too vulnerable as she practically crawled on top of him, her hair dripping around her face and tickling his shoulders.

"Fuinjutsu is amazing," she breathed, her eyes legitimately sparkling in the candle light. "You can do almost anything with it, even revive the dead! Even mistakes can turn out to be useful in the end and inspire other seals and uses! It's like a puzzle, you just need to know the right components and figure out how to fit them together in different ways, and then the possibilities are endless."

Oh shit, Shisui thought, only able to stare at her in even more horror. That sort of passion didn't come from an amateur, and given her prodigious reputation he wouldn't expect her to be anything short of a master. No wonder she hadn't been seen outside Kiri since the war, they'd want to keep their own fuinjutsu practitioners as heavily under wraps as possible. Not many fuinjutsu masters remained anymore, and the few who did were all terrifying in their own right.

And now she was going to work with Orochimaru.

As he dwelled over the potential terror of that combination in ever-mounting horror Sute pulled away, giving him much-needed personal space as her smile shrunk to more normal human proportions. "Ah, I could go on for hours about how amazing and versatile it is. But alas, that's not why we're here." She offered a lazy shrug even as Shisui's blood chilled, and the young chuunin swallowed as he sat up, forcing on his sternest face possible.

"Is this the part where you start torturing me?" he asked warily, dreading the answer. Maybe if he stalled for time—maybe he could just kick her in the throat, roll around and get the tag off his face —

"You did hear what he said about healing you, right?" Sute cut into his thoughts with the casualness of a knife slicing through butter. Shisui froze, boggling her in disbelief with his jaw hanging open. Crap, he'd totally forgotten. Orochimaru wanted him in one piece, which still wasn't exactly good.

As he struggled to come up with something to say she leaned forward to touch his face, hand alight with healing chakra. He flinched and tried to pull away on instinct, but ultimately he just fell onto his back again and could only squirm as her fingers brushed against his bruised eye. His heart hammered as he felt foreign chakra seep through into his muscles, making his breath hitch with pure terror as she began rambling.

"You know, I've never actually healed a doujutsu before. Kiri isn't that keen on bloodline limits these days, and if we had any doujutsu users before, well, they're gone now. Your eye feels kinda weird compared to normal ones," she mused thoughtfully. "It's hard to describe, but it's definitely different. I can see why Orochimaru is so fascinated by it."

Shisui flinched at the name, swallowing heavily. He was starting to feel nauseous, and it took a good deal of self control to actually speak. "Do you know what he's done?" he croaked. "He has no morals! He experimented on infants!" That part made her seem to pause, the influx of healing chakra stilling briefly before resuming its steady spread.
"I'm aware," she said, tone more crisp. "More than you realize. He's a lot like my old dad."

"Old dad?" Shisui repeated, jumping on the opportunity to potentially gather information and also distract himself from the feeling of chakra in his face right next to his eye. Sute hummed lightly, her concentration not breaking.

"Before I ended up in Kiri. Good dad, but bad person. Honestly, not surprising I turned out this way. It's probably good Ameyuri found me and dragged me back to Kiri over one of the other villages, since my moral compass is screwed to hell and back."

As she chuckled softly to herself Shisui just stared up at her with his one good eye, not really sure what to make of her words. On the one hand, this information was all new, and the implications from Sute being a war orphan from outside Kiri would be very valuable information. Sute's skillset spoke of a genetic advantage as opposed to a random civilian-born child, so she probably had some sort of clan heritage. (Hadin't Auntie Mikoto's old friend Kushina been kind of obsessed with her?)

On the other hand though, Shisui didn't know if he would actually live long enough to report said information. As it stood, the feeling of her chakra coursing through his system—focused around his injured eye—sort of overrode any other thoughts. He had to regulate his breathing as he watched her smile, her eyes distant yet full of a wistful sort of fondness. "You know, I never had a mother," she said softly. "Not until I had Ameyuri."

The tingle of chakra finally faded as she pulled her hand away, and Shisui suddenly realized he could see, his eyelids no longer too swollen to open. He blinked dumbly a couple times, letting his eye adjust to the dim lighting while he just stared at her. Something hard and lumpy formed in his throat, and he swallowed harshly to shove it down as she began to prod at his abdomen instead.

"Y-you," he started shakily. "Why—?" He cut himself off with a hiss as she poked a particularly sensitive spot. Her hands took on a minty green glow as she pressed her palm against the area, her gaze focused intently on it as she spoke.

"Because my old mom died when I was a baby, I guess?" she mused, if it wasn't for his sheer anxiety he might have glared at her for blatantly ignoring the real meaning of his question. "I dunno. Blame my grandma for that one, she was a nasty piece of work. Actually, fun fact: first time I met grandma? Also the first time I saw human intestines."

"What the fuck," he blurted in equal parts shock and pain, wincing as he felt a sharp spike of pain in his rib cage.

"My old dad was a very screwed up man, but apparently he loved my mother very much," Sute replied with a shrug. "Had to, considering he never dragged her to the basement. Not sure how long he kept grandma down there, but she was still alive when I met her. Old hag deserved it though. Now shut up, I need to focus so I don't screw up and weld one of your lungs shut on accident."

"Wait, what?" Shisui yelped, trying to jerk away from her. "How does that even work?"

"Not entirely sure yet," she hummed. "Only happened to me once or twice, way more common when just learning how to heal broken bones. You'd think it wouldn't affect bronchi since those are more cartilage, but somehow it can if your focus slips. People really underestimate how dangerous medical ninjutsu can be if you're not precise with your chakra. Which is why you should really be quiet right now."

Shisui whimpered but obediently fell silent as her hands glowed once more, pressing against his ribs.
As the silence stretched he heard a quiet thump upstairs though, soon joined by yelling. Shisui felt a surge of hope at the noise, craning his head back and squinting as if he could see through the ceiling with enough effort. "Do you hear that?"

"Focusing," Sute replied in a quiet sing-song tone, and Shisui clamped his mouth shut. But even so his eyes darted to the ceiling once more, a small shred of hope curling in his chest.

When they first saw the trail of gashes in the trees lining the river, the naturally suspicious part of Kakashi suspected it to be a trick. Why wouldn't it be? They had no reason to suspect Sute to actually help them. But they had no better leads, and time was running short.

So after a few seconds of indecision, he gave the order to move. They gambled on her intent and chose to pursue the trail she left, running along either side of the river even as the trail led them further than expected. As they ran further and further but saw no other signs of their quarry he felt his stomach sink, thinking maybe it had been a false trail and they'd gone the other way.

But just as they neared the one kilometer mark and he'd been about to order them to turn around, Bisuke's ears had perked up, Pakkun and Urushi following suit moments later. "We got the scent!"

Relief crashed into Kakashi at the confirmation, mingled with surprise. So she hadn't completely abandoned the alliance then? It could still be a trap of course, an attempt to lower their guard and lead them to an ambush, but the sheer distance between the first marker and their actual scent made him doubt that. No, the evidence pointed to her probably leaving the trail without Amagiri noticing.

Now a few minutes later, that seemed to be confirmed as they stood outside a small wooden hut with no sign of an ambush.

The trio watched it from a safe distance hidden in the trees, Kakashi's eyes narrowing. The powerful aromas of Amagiri and Sute left no doubt the two were inside at that moment, and this close he could also pick up the day-old traces of Shisui's scent as well. The boy's scent had the distinct iron tang of blood clinging to it, but he couldn't detect the pungent odor of death so for now he could only assume he was alive.

Kakashi eyed the building silently for a long moment before raising a hand in a signal. The others nodded and Genma slunk towards the door while Tenzo silently ran up a tall tree overlooking the hut, perching on a branch. Sliding his sword out of its sheath, he paused and took a breath to center himself before leaping down.

Amagiri had been in the midst of sealing a box into a scroll when Tenzo burst through the roof, swinging his blade down where the man stood. The missing-nin dodged the strike with a loud curse, quickly flickering through the hand seals for one of his signature hot water jutsu. He cupped his hand around his mouth and spewed a stream of water, steam rising off it even as it surged towards the boy.

Tenzo dodged artfully while Genma took advantage of the chaos to open the door and slip inside, flinging several senbon at Amagiri's back. The man sensed their incoming trajectory though and twisted his head over his shoulder to check their path before dodging out the way, dropping into a roll. When he sprung back to his feet he slashed out with a kunai at Tenzo as the boy lunged at him, Tenzo pulling back to avoid it and the tip barely grazing one of his arm bracers.

Amagiri tossed the kunai towards Genma before flashing through seals for another burst of boiling
water, twisting his head to shoot it in a wide arc. The two Leaf ninja had to duck and roll under it, the walls behind them splintering and crashing under the powerful pressure of the stream. Once it finished they were on their feet and charging again, forcing the man back.

As the battle unfolded Kakashi hovered by the door, waiting for his teammates to distract the man before charging inside. He ignored the instinct to jump in and assist in the battle and instead made a beeline towards the trapdoor where Shisui and Sute's scents both emanated. He flung it open without fanfare, and he could see flickering candles in a large circle on the floor.

Kakashi nearly barreled down the steps at the visual confirmation, and just as he reached the last step he saw Sute hunched over the bound form of Shisui. The boy seemed to be almost gasping for air behind her as she pulled her hands away, not turning even as Kakashi held a kunai to her neck.

"Step away from the boy," he said lowly. Below her Shisui practically bolted upright, his eyes blown wide with equal parts terror and panic. Some sort of tag dangled on his forehead, but Kakashi didn't have much time to look at it.

"K-Kakashi!?" he sputtered. His nerves seemed shot, clearly struggling to string together a coherent sentence. "Wait—w-watch—behind—clone!"

The last word made an electric jolt run up Kakashi's spine, instinctively yanking the kunai against Sute's neck even as he spun around. As the blade sliced through her neck he felt her "body" collapse into a giant splash of water, drenching his arm and dousing a few of the candles, but he paid it little mind. The real Sute stood at the foot of the stairs, her knapsack slung over her shoulder and one hand gripping the hilt of her bokken.

"Hello, Kakashi," she greeted, calm and placid as ever. Her green eyes held a hint of mischief to them, the candlelight making them spark with a glowing sort of intensity. A small smirk curled across her lips, the shadows giving her face an ominous edge and sending a reflexive chill down his spine. "And goodbye."

Kakashi tensed at the ominous words, swiftly placing himself firmly in front of Shisui and bracing himself for her attack... only for her to leap backwards up the steps and then slam the trapdoor behind her.

For a second he just sat there, stunned. Did she just... did she just run away? The abrupt retreat caught Kakashi off guard, his tense stance faltering for just a second. Another crash sounded above them then, telltale signs of the battle raging outside the small basement, and the trance was broken.

Kakashi's muscles coiled as the instinct to follow her called for him to move, but he quickly quashed them and turned his attention to Shisui, the boy still staring wide-eyed at where Sute had been. The paper tag still dangled on his face attached to his forehead, and Kakashi strode over and tore it off, not wanting to chance it exploding. The paper disintegrated almost immediately upon removal, catching him by surprise.

Its removal seemed to jar the boy out of his own stunned stupor, because Shisui jolted and gave a large gasp. "She's even more terrifying than the bingo books said!" he whined. His voice was so childish Kakashi almost snorted, but he could see genuine fear and unease in his eyes.

"Did she hurt you?" he asked, pulling out a kunai to cut through the ropes binding him. The sooner he could get a confirmation on Shisui's status, the sooner he could rejoin the others to assist in fighting Amagiri.

The boy paused, hesitating to answer. "I don't... think so?" he said uncertainly, and Kakashi gave
him a sharp look.

"You don't think so?" he repeated with no amount of gentleness. Shisui bit his lip, rubbing his now-free wrists anxiously.

"Well, Amagiri told her to heal me so she fixed my eye, but then she moved on to my chest and said something about accidentally fusing my lungs if her concentration was broken...?"

...Kakashi had no idea how to respond to that, so he decided to keep silent and pull the now-cut ropes off his legs. "Do you have any other injuries?" he asked, and the boy had to think, wiggling his limbs experimentally as they were freed.

"Most of it's fine now, I think. I mean, I'm still breathing normally...?" His voice rose slightly with anxiety, before he quickly shook his head. "Other than that, my ankle's busted, but—forget about me! They're working with Orochimaru!"

His words made an icy pit sink in Kakashi's stomach, confirming their worst suspicions about Amagiri. They'd suspected it this whole time—who else could hide a shinobi of Amagiri's talent, one whom even Danzou couldn't claim as his own given the man also attacked Root bases—but still, the confirmation left him feeling almost nauseous.

He pushed the thought aside, turning his attention to the trap door. "Both of them?" he asked as he started approaching it, steps perfectly silent.

"Yeah. Amagiri specifically mentioned wanting me to get there in good shape, and she said a whole specimen is better than parts." Well, that definitely sounded pretty damning, Kakashi wouldn't deny it. No wonder the kid was so freaked out. He cautiously pushed open the trapdoor and peered around the room, finding it empty, and paused when he noticed a large hole in one wall.

Well, at least the battle moved outside. He quickly returned to Shisui's side, scooping him up as he yelped in protest. "What are you doing? Leave me and go help!"

"You said your ankle's bad, but you can still use chakra, right?" Kakashi countered as he started towards the stairs. The boy fell silent at the reminder, face momentarily blank. For such a lauded child prodigy, he had missed a rather obvious detail. Kakashi decided to just write it off as stress this time, and focused on moving upstairs.

The battle may have moved outside the cottage, but that didn't make it safe. He darted for the door, keeping close to the walls to avoid being seen through the large hole, and once he got outside he rushed to the cover of the trees. He circled towards the battle cautiously, giving the area a wide berth and keeping low to avoid being seen.

As the fight came into view he saw Amagiri first, currently whirling to face Genma. Kakashi paused and quickly pressed against a tree as the man spewed a steaming stream of water in their general direction in an attempt to hit the tokujo, who replaced himself with a log. A tree near their hiding place shattered under the pressure of the boiling water, sending a prickle of danger down his spine.

His Sharingan traced Amagiri's movements as Kakashi peered around the trunk, catching the heavy slump to his shoulders as he heaved a large breath afterward. It was clear from a glance that their surprise attack had pushed him to his limits. Without his trademark blue mask Kakashi could clearly see the signs of exhaustion on the missing-nin's features, face twisted into something vicious and almost desperate as he rolled out of the way of a volley of senbon from Genma.
Only when Amagiri turned to deflect a slash from Tenzo from behind did Kakashi resume moving, setting course for a group of boulders surrounded by thick bushes. He dropped to a crouch behind them and set Shisui down, glancing in the gap between the stones to watch the battle. "Is this good?" he asked quietly, and Shisui nodded, eyes already bleeding into the familiar red of the Sharingan as he peered through the gap.

"Yeah. This is perfect."

"Good, then I'll trust you to provide support. I'm going after Sute." The comment made Shisui pause, shooting him a brief side-glance before quickly turning back to the battle. The boy seemed hesitant, but he gave a terse nod.

"I'll tell the others after we take down Amagiri. Be careful." Kakashi nodded and stepped back to retreat into the woods, secretly grateful the boy didn't try to protest or push for an explanation. Leaving his comrades to fight Amagiri alone left a bad taste in his mouth, but he could see the visible signs of exhaustion in the man's frame. Usually Amagiri was the one to take people by surprise, and now that the tables had been turned it appeared he couldn't hold his own nearly as well.

For now, he needed to trust that his comrades could handle him, that Shisui's presence would provide the last push needed to overpower Amagiri once and for all, and focus on finding Sute.

_Just wait a little longer, Kushina. I'll bring her to Konoha._

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the slight delay in posting this chapter, I wasn't happy with the first draft and wanted to have the next chapter finished. Some people have asked how Sute got such a deadly reputation despite being a support-type role in the war—well, now you know. Also get a glimpse into a bit more of Sute's first life. One of these days, I'm going to include a full-blown flashback to her first life explaining everything about her dad and upbringing. Until then, you can speculate on what Grandma did.

By the way, we hit 1,000 reviews on FF. I'm still in slight awe. I was at 949 when I posted the last chapter, so that means I got over fifty reviews on one chapter. This story is seriously so much fun to write, and I'm so excited to see how much people enjoy it! The lucky one to leave Review #1,000 was dmalf, who has already supplied a name for a future semi-OC. (What do I mean by "semi"? You'll see.)

On that note, I've come up with an equivalent contest to use here on AO3: Any comments left on this chapter and the next will be put into a raffle. The winner will get to name another semi-OC. I'll choose a chapter at random, and then choose a random comment from that using random.org. Seems like a decent compromise.

Thank you everyone for reading and commenting! Next chapter will wrap up this arc! See you in a couple weeks!
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

A confrontation four years in the making finally happens.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 28

Darkness coated the forest, only the chirps of crickets breaking the silence. Kakashi moved swift and silent, leaping from tree to tree to avoid the crunch of dead leaves that littered the ground. Clouds covered the moon, rendering the path even darker than before, but that suited him fine. It made it easier to focus on the scent, the strange blend of forest and marshes still recognizable even after all this time.

His chest twisted uncomfortably as he picked up his pace, pushing away the memories of the other times he'd smelled it.

(—of the lingering traces clinging to his mask as the acrid taste of an unknown antidote still lingered in his mouth,)

(—of the faint traces leading to the cavern alongside the familiar pine and mint of his teammate,)

(—of the way it drenched Rin's still chest as heavily as the dried blood coating his arm when he woke up.)

He grit his teeth and shoved the thought down as hard as possible, pushing himself to run even faster. He resisted the urge to open his gifted Sharingan to try to see through the darkness, knowing he couldn't afford to waste a shred of chakra. He had no idea what skills Sute had amassed since her last sighting, and he sincerely doubted she limited herself to just poisons and medical ninjutsu.

As if to confirm that thought, as he touched down on a branch the trunk suddenly exploded. He found himself in a free fall, barely having time to roll into a safer position before he hit the ground. He rolled a few feet away and quickly sprung to his feet, staring at the tree wide-eyed. The explosion had happened to his left—the side with his eye closed—so he had no idea how the tree exploded.

Explosive tag, maybe? It hadn't been tied to a kunai or he would have heard it hit the trunk, so it would have to be placed there in advance. But then, how did it trigger with such perfect timing? Standard explosive tags had a fuse which couldn't be modified, at least not to time the explosion so precisely. It happened the second he stepped onto the branch, and despite her "Oracle" moniker, he doubted Sute could have predicted the exact moment he'd reach that tree.

He didn't have time to think on it long before he felt a rush of air behind him. Immediately he ducked to the side just in time to dodge the swing of the bokken, the wooden blade swinging down where his skull had just been. He palmed three shuriken even as he dodged and flung them at the arm holding the bokken... and then watched her collapse into a puddle of water.
A water clone. Of course. That helped explain the lack of scent, at least a little.

Actually, no, it didn't. Even water clones usually had *some* scent. The fact he hadn't picked it up set his nerves on edge, because if she could hide the scent of a clone, then what's to say the scent he was following was real? He grit his teeth, opening his implanted Sharingan just long enough to do a quick perimeter scan. He saw no signs of movement in the darkness to indicate her presence though, no signs of a genjutsu to conceal her form.

After a few seconds he quickly closed it again to conserve chakra, slipping a kunai from his pouch if only for the sense of security. His senses were on high alert now, wary of her attacking from nowhere. He at least confirmed she wasn't using a genjutsu, which meant she had some other method to mask her scent, but he couldn't waste any time to think on it.

He burst into movement, deciding that standing still would just leave him vulnerable. As he passed the limit of the perimeter he'd scanned earlier he opened Obito's eye once more, deciding that the chakra drain would be worth the security of having full vision. Because of that decision he spied a flash of white on a tree trunk ahead to his left, instinctively altering his route to avoid passing it directly.

As he skidded around the tree he glanced at the mysterious white object, and in the split second he allowed himself to look the Sharingan identified some kind of paper seal. Alarm bells rang in his mind instantly, because whatever that seal did, he'd never seen it before. It wasn't standard-issue, which meant it was either Kiri-specific... or had been made by Sute.

Before he could think of the ramifications of that he saw the ground begin to shift near his feet. He quickly leaped out of the way just as hands erupted from the soil, narrowly dodging the attempt to grab his ankles. Sute twirled as she fully emerged, unleashing a volley of senbon his direction as she spun to face him.

Kakashi substituted his body with a log before they could hit him, hiding himself high in a nearby tree. Sute huffed as the log fell, swiftly cycling through hand seals to submerge herself underground again before he could attack. Kakashi remained in the tree for the moment, watching the ground closely. With his Sharingan he could see the soil *rippled* around Sute's feet like water instead of solid earth, and even now he could loosely trace the ripples surging away.

First water clones, and now *doton*. Two C-rank jutsu from different elements, but then most chunin could accomplish that so it didn't provide any noteworthy hints about her proficiency. What *did* matter was that those techniques would each require a sufficient amount of chakra, and yet she showed no signs of exhaustion so far.

That particular realization sent a thrill of foreboding down his spine, making him warier than ever. During the war she had rarely used ninjutsu aside from healing, so most people had assumed her to have smaller chakra reserves. A typical case among medical ninja, since smaller reserves made it easier to learn the precise chakra control needed for healing. But before this fight she had already made at *least* one water clone in the basement, on top of healing Shisui. Not to mention the chakra needed to heal her teammate before they caught up to her.

Conclusion: Sute had naturally large chakra reserves.

*Shit,* he cursed silently. His own chakra reserves were average and already running lower than he'd like. By his own estimate, he had enough left to use the Chidori two times if he didn't use any other powerful ninjutsu, though that would leave his reserves too low to safely do anything else. Even using it just once would drain him more than he'd like. Engaging her directly would require a lot of cunning.
A sharp yelp caught his attention, his blood running cold. *Urushi!* He turned his head towards the source, now picking up on the scents of Pakkun, Bisuke, and Urushi nearby, their canine musk mingled with the aroma of freshly churned soil. A pit of horror gathered in his stomach as he turned and leaped towards their location soundlessly, taking care to avoid any more tags that might be attached to the trees.

He came to a halt several yards away from a large, four-sided pyramid, the earthen walls offering no hints of what lay inside. Pakkun and Bisuke stood next to it with their hackles raised, and since Kakashi couldn't see Urushi despite his strong scent he assumed he'd been trapped inside.

More worryingly, Sute stood on the pyramid's other side, head tilted as she studied it. She had one hand loosely resting against a tree, her close proximity to the trunk suggesting she had likely been hidden behind it to scope the situation. "Huh," she said thoughtfully. "Didn't expect you guys to trigger it." The two canines outside the pyramid glared at her, their stances aggressive and teeth bared.

"What the hell is that thing?" Pakkun snarled.

"An experimental barrier triggered by proximity. It was *meant* for your master, I did not expect you three to follow him." As she spoke Kakashi began circling the area carefully from the trees, keeping as silent as possible as he slowly moved behind her. He knew Pakkun and Bisuke noticed his presence, and he didn't need to tell them to distract her.

"If Urushi's hurt," Pakkun said warningly, but she waved the hand she had pressed against the tree. "Don't worry, your friend's fine. It's just a barrier, I don't have spikes inside it or anything." Kakashi carefully avoided a branch with another unknown tag attached to the trunk, landing on the tree she currently stood against. He crouched on the branch as he peered down at her, taking a quiet breath to steady himself as he pulled a kunai from his pocket. Sute had her attention focused on Pakkun, offering a roll of her shoulders as she commented, "If he doesn't like it, he can just unsummon himself anytime."

"Yeah, sure," Pakkun huffed. "But really? Do you think a small Doton jutsu would stop Kakashi?"

"Of course not," she deflected. And then she tipped her head back to smile up at Kakashi as she added, "But you have to run out of energy sometime."

Kakashi surged into action, leaping away from the branch while flinging his kunai at her. He knew better than to attack her directly when she'd clearly noticed he was there. She ducked out of the kunai's path, and his ninen took advantage of her momentary distraction to lunge from behind. Sute glanced at them and then jumped to the side, narrowly dodging Bisuke's jaws and sliding into the shadows between two trees.

Kakashi himself landed on a branch not far away, and moved to pursue her when a startled yelp sounded from within the barrier, making him tense. He snapped an alarmed look at the pyramid, half-expecting to smell blood. "Urushi?" he called sharply. A muffled series of barks sounded, and Pakkun frowned.

"He says he tried to tunnel out, but he hit some kind of barrier." A barrier? Kakashi's eyes widened, and he turned to stare into the darkness.

"That's not doton, is it?" he called loudly, mind racing.

"Do you really expect me to reveal my hand?" Sute's voice came from behind, and he whirled
around but saw no sign of her. Not that he expected as much. He remained tense and ready to spring into action as her voice continued, "We're shinobi, Kakashi. Revealing all our skills to our enemies is just asking for trouble."

As if to punctuate the point a volley of senbon suddenly shot out from his left, prompting him to dodge to the side. However, as he did his Sharingan picked up on a patch of white to his left, and his head snapped towards it wide-eyed to see another seal attached to a tree trunk just above knee-level. A seal he now passed not even a full meter away.

*Shit.*

The seal triggered instantly, the trunk exploding and sending chunks of wood flying everywhere. Kakashi substituted himself with a log but even so he couldn't avoid all of the splinters, hissing quietly as he reappeared on a nearby branch clutching at one arm. His muscles ached around the small wood fragments embedded in his arm, the force of the blast driving them deep into his flesh to the point he couldn't even see them anymore.

Below Pakkun and Bisuke had dived for cover behind the pyramid trapping Urushi, fortunately sparing them from damage. Kakashi grit his teeth, sniffing at the air but finding no trace of Sute's scent to hint at her location. He focused on his hearing instead, which was the only reason he heard the quiet swish of a kunai slicing through the air behind him.

Once more he found himself dodging, jumping to the ground to avoid it, and the fact he'd spent most of this battle dodging didn't evade his notice. All of her movements seemed to be angled towards pushing him to specific locations or directions, a fact made all the more dangerous by the traps. He couldn't get the upper hand at this rate, he had to constantly pay attention to his surroundings to avoid the traps she'd set.

With that in mind he didn't go into hiding this time, turning to address the forest as whole while scanning for more tags. "We don't have to fight, you know!" he called. *Three tags currently in sight, nearest one three meters away. "You can come peacefully."

"And why would I do that?" Sute's voice taunted. Another volley of senbon flung towards him, but this time he dodged the opposite direction from the nearest tag, neatly avoiding the trap.

"You don't belong in Kiri!" he shouted even as he moved. "Have you ever heard of Uzushio?" The question apparently caught her off guard, because when she barked out a sharp laugh he turned and saw her half-hidden behind another tree, her teeth flashing white in the darkness as she grinned at him.

"Really? Uzushio? That's your argument?" She shook her head, rolling her shoulders in a shrug. "I don't know much about it, but I know it's gone now."

"Exactly," Kakashi agreed at a more sedate volume, turning to face her fully. "It was destroyed by Kiri." Sute paused at his comment, that flash of a smile fading as her expression hardened.

"And what, exactly, are you getting at?" she asked coolly, and Kakashi took a breath.

"Kiri destroyed Uzushio because they feared its fuinjutsu masters. Almost everyone there died, all the survivors scattered and forced into hiding because Mist ninja continued to search and *slaughter* them. And you're descended from them." His hands tightened into fists at his sides, meeting her gaze evenly. "I know about the bloodline purges in the Land of Water right now. Even if you don't have a kekkei genkai, do you really think they won't turn against you when they find out you're from there?"
Sute didn't immediately respond at his comment, but he could read body language just as well as verbal conversation. He could tell from the tension in her posture that he'd struck a nerve, her shoulders stiff and her hand clenched tightly into a fist at her side. "How do you even know I'm from Uzushio?" she asked lowly. "No one from Kiri's figured it out yet, and yet you and Amagiri both seem to believe it."

"It's your eyes," Kakashi responded, staring into those vibrant green orbs. "They're trademarks of the Yorozuyo clan." Even as he spoke his mind flashed back to a quiet summer morning in Minato's kitchen, eating breakfast with the remnants of his team while Kushina carded her fingers through Rin's hair with a soft hum.

"Why are you so obsessed with Ringo Sute?" he asked, the question slipping out unplanned as he studied the latest bingo book. Kushina's hand paused, pulling away from the teenage girl and turning to him with a soft smile as she leaned over.

"Do you see her eyes?" she asked, and he nodded, peering at the bright green eyes the same hue as granny smith apples. "Those are Yorozuyo eyes."

"Yorozuyo?" Rin repeated curiously, crowding around Kakashi to peer over his other shoulder. "Is that a clan?"

"Yep, the second oldest one in Uzushio right after the Uzumaki!" Kushina responded proudly. "They were such a cool clan, but they were just so random. I swear, you never knew what the kids would inherit, or maybe I'm just biased because all of us Uzumaki had red hair. But the one thing that did pass down," and she smiled, leaning forward to tap the photo of Sute, "were those super-bright green eyes.

"I don't know what happened to her parents, but Sute's definitely Uzushio, through and through. And that," and she broke into a bright, beaming grin, her violet eyes glinting warmly, "Makes her family!"

"Konoha and Uzushio were allies," he said to one of the last survivors of his dear friend's home. "We couldn't get there in time to save it when Kiri attacked, but the least we can do is offer shelter to its descendants. Just come peacefully, and I promise you'll be able to find a place there."

Her face twitched minutely, her mouth pressing into a tight line as those bright green eyes glittered with something dark and unfriendly. "And then what, spend the rest of my life under suspicion?" she asked darkly. "I'm not an idiot, Kakashi. Even if I'm descended from some dead village you used to be allies with, I was raised in the Bloody Mist. I know I've caused plenty of permanent damage to other Leaf ninja, ended careers."

She spat the last word with venom, her features twisting into an angry snarl. "I've seen my Bingo Book entries and what kind of notes people leave about me. They're not just going to magically forget it overnight and accept me as one of their own. I'll be under watch for the rest of my life, have to constantly look over my shoulder waiting for someone to stab me in revenge for either themselves or someone they know!"

"So, no," she growled, her snarl fading to a more petulant scowl. "I am not going to Konoha. Not now, not ever."

"Is that really any different than living in fear in Kiri waiting for someone to notice?" he challenged. "You're obviously aware of the dangers there. Can you really guarantee they won't turn on you if they ever figure out your heritage? At least in Konoha, you'll be protected under our laws"
and we'll punish anyone who tries to harm you."

Sute remained silent, her vibrant green eyes seeming to glow in the shadows of the trees as she met his stare. Kakashi didn't shy away from her gaze, just focused on her and waited for her to respond. Eventually she huffed a small breath through her nose, pulling back from the tree.

"Forget it. I wanted to see which of us was better, but I'm not in the mood anymore." She raised her hands into a seal, making him tense in anticipation of an attack, but instead the earthen pyramid dissolved to reveal a rattled-looking Urushi. Four tags fluttered to the ground, and with a twitch of her fingers they flew towards Sute, Kakashi's Sharingan barely able to pick up on chakra threads.

_Of course she uses those_, he thought sourly as she slipped the seals into the pouch on her hip. She didn't withdraw her hand empty though and instead pulled out a glass bottle, dark liquid sloshing inside as she held it for him to see. "I already snagged the antidote, so I'm heading out. I suggest you go back to your team. That Uchiha kid's stable, but you should get him to a medic in Konoha ASAP. I didn't get to finish completely healing his ribs before you showed up."

She slipped the antidote back into the pouch on her hip and turned to saunter away, apparently uncaring of the possibility of an attack. Kakashi grit his teeth in frustration at the silent slight, struck by an impulse to lob a kunai just out of pride, but he forced himself to remain still. Prolonging this battle would do him no good at this point. Even if he managed to beat and subdue her, his team would be too tired from fighting Amagiri to guarantee they could contain her.

Still, letting her leave like that left a bad taste in his mouth, and he found himself calling out one last time. "Why did you help us?" he questioned. It echoed the question at the beginning of their unlikely truce, the words that set off this entire crazy night, but now it held far more weight than ever.

Their truce had been built on two completely unaligned goals that bore no connection save for a shared target. Moving together would simply prevent the risk of conflict if they'd tried to operate independently. Once she'd gotten a chance to meet Amagiri alone, gotten him to lower his guard, there had been no reason to continue their alliance.

Ringo Sute had a silver tongue, a natural and trained charisma that allowed her to twist words to sway people's hearts to suit her purposes. He had only seen a glimpse of it so far, but he could sense the deeply honed skill beneath her words. He had no doubts that she could have easily convinced Amagiri she intended to join him and Orochimaru, lowering his defenses and making any attacks that much more surprising and lethal.

Even if she had planned to double-cross Amagiri all along, there had been no reason to leave a trail for the Leaf ninja to follow. She could have retrieved the antidote and killed him _and_ Shisui, returning to her teammate and departing long before Kakashi and his team could find the corpses. It would be more logical in the long run than honoring an unsteady truce.

Sute paused at the query, standing motionless for several long seconds. Her head turned slightly, a single green eye glinting at him with a stony look. "Because I know what Orochimaru's capable of," she told him bluntly. "And I'd rather not give him _any_ advantages."

With those final words she turned and disappeared into the shadows, and Kakashi let her. He exhaled through his nose and turned to his ninken, finding them watching him with heavy looks. "You can all dismiss yourselves," he said. "Urushi, that goes for you too." Bisuke and Urushi nodded, vanishing in a puff of smoke, but Pakkun lingered.

"You sure you're okay, boss?" he asked gruffly. Kakashi eyed him for a moment before turning to
return to his team, not bothering to answer. By the time he arrived the others had successfully taken down Amagiri, managing to incapacitate him with a mixture of Genma’s poisoned senbon, Tenzo’s mokuton bindings and a genjutsu from Shisui.

The successful capture did nothing to wash the bitter taste of failure from his mouth though. He knew that when he returned to Konoha, it would be a long while before he could face Kushina’s grave again.

Chapter End Notes

And the arc is over! So last chapter, a lot of people apparently assumed Kushina survived because of Kakashi’s promise. That is sadly not the case. The Kyuubi went on his rampage back in Chapter 10, and I think it’s impossible for her to survive having a giant fox ripped out of her. I’m sorry to disappoint anyone who thought she survived. I am now also highly disappointed by the realization Kushina and Sute will never meet, they would terrorize the world together.

I did not plan for the last chapter to just be Kakashi’s POV. Balancing the fight proved to be trickier than expected, because after I started writing it I realized Sute had the total advantage even without mokuton. Since we never saw her side, to summarize her actions: she has a LOT of pre-prepared seals in her pouch, and just slapped them on trees. She also used a scent-blocking seal, previously mentioned when she first began studying fuinjutsu. Also, we got to see the return of the barrier from Chapter 11! Have to say, really neat to have her reuse a seal and improve on it. Every time she was touching a tree, she was mapping Kakashi’s location. Her chakra reserves were actually running a bit lower than she showed.

Otherwise, this arc was really fun to write. The outcome completely switched from what I intended. Originally Shisui was just going to be held prisoner by the Kiri ANBU, and it ended with Team Ro rescuing him and Sute running away. Did not plan to have Amagiri, and also did not plan to have Kakashi reveal that bit to Sute directly. I’ve been hanging onto that flashback with Kushina for a long time now. Remember the name Yorozuyo, this won’t be the last we hear of it.

That’s all for now. My buffer is now at exactly one chapter, so might take a short hiatus to try to plot the next arc and what happens next. I think I’ll have one more arc until the defection. Thank you all for reading, see you soon!
"So she's a fuinjutsu master now?"

Raidou's voice took an almost incredulous note as he stared at Genma, who merely snorted and tossed back another gulp of shochu.

"Yep. Kakashi said she booby-trapped the forest when he chased after her. Explosive tags that triggered and blew up trees when he passed by them, and even a freaking barrier that sprung up when one of his ninken got too close. And according to Shisui she managed to disrupt his chakra just by sticking one to his forehead."

"Yikes," Raidou breathed with a sympathetic hiss. "Damn. Poor kid must've been traumatized meeting her."

"She's definitely something," Genma muttered, taking another shot. Raidou had just returned from his own month-long mission and the two had wasted no time meeting up to share on the latest news. After catching him up on the hottest gossip, it had only been a matter of time before Genma's own disastrous mission came up.

Even though his original mission fell under the usual ANBU secrecy guidelines, Amagiri's defeat and the reappearance of Ringo Sute had made the emergency rescue a bit more open than usual. While the finer details had still been classified, like who exactly had been involved, Genma could still share some details. It was understood among ANBU that as long as missions hadn't been given the highest classification that they could vent to other operatives and confidants, and man, did Genma need to vent.

Fighting Amagiri had been a nightmare in itself given the man's reputation and track record. Even with their surprise attack clearly throwing the man off his game he'd still been quick to react, and threw around his signature hot water jutsu with increasingly reckless abandon as he became more desperate. The number of close calls had left him covered in goose bumps. One stream managed to singe the tips of his hair and required a trim when they got back.

Beyond that, seeing Ringo Sute had brought back a slew of bad memories. Their only encounter had been when his team had been cornered by the Seven Swordsmen. Even now, he could still feel that cold pit of ice he'd felt in his stomach while knowingly staring down his own impending death. Sute's presence had been just a brief blip, a small respite from the terror filled with confusion and wariness.

"She knew their names," he muttered lowly, drawing Raidou's attention.

"You mean Kakashi and Shisui?"

"No. Gai and Ebisu. Back when we first met." He could see Raidou minutely tense, his friend well aware of that fateful encounter. Everyone knew how Maito Dai had somehow managed to take down four of the Swordsmen in one go, but Genma hadn't ever told him the full details. He preferred not to dwell on it, especially as Sute's reputation grew. "She knew their names, but she didn't know mine."
Raidou exhaled a quiet breath, frowning as he turned his gaze to his own cup of shochu. "Doesn't mean anything. That 'Oracle' moniker's just a load of bull if you ask me. So she guessed the Fourth Hokage would be the Fourth. Big deal."

"She took one look at us, and told Biwa Juzo he'd probably die," Genma retorted with a rueful snort. "Don't think it's just a coincidence that we were the deciding factor for her."

"Genma, just stop," Raidou sighed, and Genma fell silent as he finished off the cup. Even now, he couldn't say whether he put much stock in the "Bloody Oracle" title either, but sometimes he just couldn't help but wonder. Every now and then when he felt particularly low or like he might die, he'd remember the blank look she'd directed at him after rattling off his teammates' names, and the odd certainty when she told Juzo he'd likely die that day.

Genma wasn't a superstitious man, but he hoped to hell he'd prove that silent dismissal wrong and outlive everyone.

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"Sute-senpai, will this really help me as a medical ninja?"

"Of course it will. Do you really doubt me?"

"Of course not! It's just..." Kabuto trailed off, his nose wrinkling slightly as he looked at the terrarium where Mushi-Mushi currently coiled atop a branch under the warmth of the heating lamp. He looked rather comfortable there, but offered no resistance when Sute reached in to pull him out, his tail curling around one arm while she cradled his head with her other hand. Kabuto stiffened minutely as she turned to him with the snake draped between her arms, a bright smile on her face.

"Milking snakes is always a useful skill!" she proclaimed cheerfully, and relished in the barely-noticeable flinch the younger boy gave as he stared wide-eyed at the giant venomous mamushi. Guess he's not used to snakes yet.

A month had passed since she and Amano had returned to Kiri as the sole survivors of their ANBU unit. Thanks to her medical knowledge and the antidote she'd retrieved from Amagiri, Sute had managed to save his life, but the return trip had taken a few days longer than expected since his condition had been too unstable to travel. Even now he was in the hospital, being treated for the last of the effects of the poison.

Just like the last time Sute returned with a majority of her team dead, she had been taken off the field and placed onto hospital duty, though not until after being whisked away for questioning. An entire ANBU unit being wiped out merited serious investigation after all. Even Amano had been roped into the intensive interrogations the moment his condition stabilized enough to actually wake up and speak coherently.

Unlike the last time though, Sute answered the questions with near total honesty. She made no secret of her temporary truce with the Leaf ninja dressed in partial ANBU gear, fully admitted to pretending to side with Amagiri in order to get her hands on the antidote. She told them all about Amagiri's connection to Orochimaru, and his plans to take Shisui to the Sannin to use as a test subject.

That said, she didn't tell them everything. She omitted the hand seals Amagiri used to speed their trip down the river, and the fuinjutsu used to power his signature hot-water ninjutsu. He didn't hint at his Uzushio heritage, or lightly question about her title as a Bloody Oracle. The timeline she presented had the Leaf ninja reach the hideout rather quickly after their own arrival, giving her no
time to see Uchiha Shisui for herself, let alone heal him.

They never saw her again after parting ways during the owl's attack. Kakashi never managed to find her when he tried to chase her through the forest, and he never tried to convince her to return to Konoha with him.

(She never heard the name "Yorozuyo" and the word meant nothing.)

A lot had happened during that mission to give her a lot to think about, but right now, she needed to focus her attention on Kabuto.

Her encounter with Amagiri had been the first time she'd received any sort of confirmation that Orochimaru was specifically aware of her existence. She knew his interest in her would be inevitable. After all, she was a poison mistress, highly skilled medical ninja and fuinjutsu master, a perfect trifecta of talents for people engaged in human experimentation. Between that and her Bloody Oracle moniker in Konoha, it had only been natural he'd take an interest in her, if not as a vessel then as a potential subordinate.

And all of that didn't even take her mokuton into account. Once that got out, his interest in her was sealed.

One day they would inevitably clash, but for now though she couldn't do anything about it. At the moment she was still safe in the confines of Kiri, the only influence he had here in the form of Kabuto. Whether Orochimaru had sent the boy or someone else did—a possibility looking increasingly likely—either way any information he gained would eventually find its way back to the snake. And Sute intended to use every advantage she had.

As far as anyone else could tell, she had all but taken him under her wing as her personal apprentice, often tracking him down in the hospital to critique his work as an "intern." No one could see the subtle game of cat and mouse the two constantly played, their words chosen carefully as each tried to tease information from the other without revealing too much of their own hands. At the end of the day Kabuto was a spy sent to amass whatever secrets he could, whether on behalf of Orochimaru or some other master, and Sute wanted nothing more than to glean his own in return.

More than that, it was a delicate dance only she was fully aware of, the young boy still unaware she knew of his spy status. It gave her an edge he would never be able to match, always able to keep several steps ahead as she easily identified his attempts to fish for information. She got to choose exactly how much to share—and that meant she had plenty of time to mess with him too.

Take today for example. Honestly, recruiting Kabuto to help her milk her snakes had made her a bit wary since it had to be done at her home, but Sute needed to restock her supply and it always went easier with help. Besides that, she reasoned it would increase his own measure of her apparent trust towards him, which would only make him more relaxed and thus more likely to slip information to her in the long run.

"Grab the tube," she instructed, gesturing to the table where a cardboard tube rested next to a jar. Kabuto did as told hesitantly, eying Sute cautiously as she stepped forward. He stiffened as she began coaxing Mushi-Mushi towards it, pushing his head towards the hole until he began slithering into it of his own accord. As far as she could tell Kabuto had yet to encounter many snakes, because the boy was highly on edge the entire time and visibly trying not to fidget too much.

The moment Mushi-Mushi's head emerged from the other end she gripped the center of the tube with her free hand and squeezed it lightly, stopping him from moving further. Mushi-Mushi twitched and his long tongue slithered out, his tail wriggling with obvious agitation. "Move your
hand to hold it here and squeeze," she told Kabuto, who had moved the tube a little further away from himself. "Don't squeeze too hard, use just enough pressure to keep him from moving."

"R-right." His voice had the slightest hesitation as he shifted one hand next to Sute's to grip the center of the tube, squeezing ever so slightly. She released her grip and when the snake failed to escape, she gently grabbed his other hand to move it towards the end with his head, leaving it cupping the bottom and safely out of the serpent's reach.

"Yeah, hold it just like that," she said with a nod, turning to grab the jar. She'd already stretched a thin layer of latex over the opening, and she lifted it to Mushi-Mushi's head. "Don't worry, sweetheart, this won't take long. Just bite down for me and then we'll let you go back to your branch, okay?"

From there it didn't take that long to coax him to bite down into the latex, his fangs piercing the thin "lid" and dripping yellow venom into the jar. Sute watched the thin layer of venom grow on the bottom of the glass closely, and once she deemed enough had been gathered she gently pulled the jar away. "Thank you so much, sweetie," she cooed, stroking the top of the mamushi's head with one finger.

"Um, what now?" Kabuto asked awkwardly, still holding the snake in the tube with a tense grip, and she nodded towards the tank.

"You can put him back. Just tilt the tube and let up on your grip." Kabuto nodded and went to deposit the fairly annoyed mamushi back in his terrarium, while Sute lifted the jar to examine the venom more closely. It really wasn't much, but she could stretch the meager amount and use it in a multitude of poisons. She had a few ideas for some new ones she'd been wanting to try, maybe she could use it for those.

Behind her she could hear Kabuto shuffling around quietly, no doubt examining the room. Sute kept the terrarium in her "lighter" poison lab, the one that didn't need copious amounts of sterilization and protective seals and gear, and which she didn't mind showing off to other people. The walls were plastered with notes on various ideas for new poison formulas and antidotes, as well as medicines in general. Poison and medicine went hand in hand after all, she knew how to use plants to heal just as much as to kill.

Sure enough, when she set down the jar and turned around she found him studying one page in particular, his eyes wide. Sute cast a cursory glance at it and mentally cursed at herself when she recognized it, though she kept her face impassive. She crept up behind Kabuto quietly, tilting her head as she leaned over. "See something interesting?" she asked, enjoying how he startled and jumped in surprise.

Once he recovered from his shock the boy smoothed out his face, glancing back at the page. "Those are notes on suspended animation, right?" he asked slowly, and Sute mentally cursed again even as she nodded.

"Good eye," she commended lightly, showing none of her internal frustration. Those notes weren't dangerous, per se, but she didn't want people to know she was looking into it. She only kept the page up because she knew most people who visited her house wouldn't understand it—but then, Kabuto wasn't most people. "I'm not too far in yet, it's mostly in the theoretical stages since I've been busy."

The boy's mouth thinned, glancing at the page with a slight crease in his brow. "But... why?" he asked after a moment. "It doesn't seem like something Kiri would care about."
It was a fair question. While Kiri valued each medic closely, it did not particularly care about the intricacies of their work beyond what was necessary to keep its forces alive and battle-ready. If a patient had severe injuries that would require extensive resources and time to treat and return them to fighting condition, they'd often be told to just write them off and do the bare minimum needed to keep them alive. More than once her colleagues had taken pity on a few of those cases and quietly put them out of their misery.

The sort of injuries that would call for the use of suspended animation would likely be deemed too extreme to bother wasting resources on, save for the most valuable shinobi. It would only really be used to transport injured comrades from the field to the hospital, but it would require a skilled medical ninja to execute and maintain anyway at which point it would probably be simpler to just try to heal the damage on scene.

So yes, Kabuto had a fair point. She hummed thoughtfully as she silently weighed how to best answer him, not wanting to reveal too much of her intentions. Telling him too much would prove to be a hindrance in the future once he returned to Orochimaru's side, rendering any knowledge he had as the Sannin's by extension. And any information on Sute's skills would give him an advantage when they finally fought. Sute knew the Snake would find her skillset too enticing to ignore once she defected, and she knew it would take a lot of work to survive any encounter with him.

For now though, Kabuto was just a rookie spy. Just a kid more focused on trying to survive long enough to pass on his information than actually gaining it, and that gave her some slight leeway. "It's more about keeping my options open," she finally allowed.

"Your options?" Kabuto parroted curiously, and she nodded, choosing her next words carefully.

"I have some experiments I want to try out. Experiments that will work better with a live subject than dead, or at the very least one that's fresh. Transporting a living person is hard though, especially a shinobi. So the best option is to knock them out and put them into suspended animation so they can't fight back."

Kabuto's eyebrows scrunched together as he listened, a thoughtful look on his face. "But... if the training's the problem, why not use a civilian subject instead? They can't really resist, right?"

"You don't bring civilians into shinobi business," Sute snapped curtly, her face hardening and her eyes growing dark. Kabuto flinched at the sharp rebuke, his eyes wide as he stepped back, and Sute breathed a small sigh before continuing. "Civilians already have enough on their plates without having to fear getting kidnapped by shinobi for less-than-ethical experimentation. Our lifestyle causes them plenty of trouble just from the wars and dropouts who turn to crime, we don't need to add to their concerns directly."

Kabuto was silent for a long moment, just staring at her in shock before adjusting his glasses. "That's surprisingly thoughtful of you," he murmured, and hastily added, "Not to imply you seem particularly cruel! Most Mist ninja just don't seem to care about civilians, even in the hospital."

Most Mist ninja didn't grow up in a civilian world with a serial killer father with interests on par with Orochimaru. Sute kept the thought to herself, instead shrugging and saying, "I have to draw the line somewhere. Despite my specialties, I'm not a bloodthirsty psychopath. I'd actually like to be able to sleep at night," she added with a wry twist to her mouth.

She turned back to the jar of venom and picked up a tape roll, leaving Kabuto to stew over her words. Sticking a piece of tape on the jar's side, she uncapped a marker and scribbled the date onto it before carrying it to the cooler in the corner of the room. As she lifted the lid to store it with the others, she almost lost her grip when Kabuto finally spoke up behind her. "Can you teach me about
Sute fumbled to catch the jar before it could fall and break, twisting her head to stare at him in shock. The silver-haired boy had a surprisingly earnest look on his face, his eyes stony behind his glasses. "Why do you want to learn?" she asked after a beat, carefully placing the jar inside before turning to face him fully.

"I... Like you said, I want to keep my options open," he replied, pausing to think for a moment. Already she could tell that would be the most she'd get out of him, and she hummed quietly as her eyes narrowed, deep in thought.

"Kid, this is a pretty intensive topic," she finally said. "I don't really want to spend time going into all the specifics with you. Besides, there's other stuff I want to study that takes priority."

"Like what?"

"How to disguise a corpse as someone else." The blunt admission surprised him, his resolute expression breaking with a startled blink. Sute saw no reason to lie, she had been casually pursuing the topic for a few years now but hadn't devoted much time to it. Without easy access to corpses to practice with, she hadn't many chances to really do anything beyond the theoretical research.

She expected Kabuto to ask why, and was already preparing another vague explanation of "classified activities". However, rather than do that he took a deep breath and stood straighter, meeting her gaze squarely. "What if I teach you?"

Sute perked up a bit, allowing her curiosity to show on her face. "Oh?" she asked. "You know how to do it?" Kabuto nodded tensely, fists clenching at his side.

"My... Kaede, taught me," he said haltingly, spinning the lie on the spot. "We had to leave our home suddenly once due to some people searching for her, and she left two fake bodies to buy us time to escape. She taught me how to do it afterwards, just in case we had to do it again." He took a deep breath, his voice firm as he finished, "If you agree to teach me about suspended animation, I'll teach you everything I know about it."

Sute hummed, folding her arms as she considered the offer. Sharing her research with Kabuto left a bad taste in her mouth, giving him a potential tool down the line when they would meet again as enemies. Worse, it would give Orochimaru a potentially invaluable tool for his own nefarious research.

But at the same time, wouldn't they inevitably look into this anyway? Preserving subjects as long as possible would be a high priority for them, and she doubted her own findings on the subject would be revolutionary. The ripple effect would be bad, but on the other hand, learning how to disguise a corpse now would give her an advantage in the immediate future. She doubted his technique was perfect—even as an adult in Shippuden, his work with Sai's corpse had ultimately been identified by Yamato—so the more time she had to tweak it, the better.

And besides, she was supposedly Kabuto's unaware "mentor." She had no reason to refuse from his standpoint. Doing this would only cement his trust further.

A twisted sort of smile flitted across her lips, her true selfish intent hidden behind an almost kindly façade. "Alright, Kabuto," she agreed. "You've got yourself a deal. Now sit down and get something to take notes, I'm not going to repeat myself."

An almost childish delight filled the boy's face even as he scrambled to obey, anticipation evident
in the way he hurried to comply. Sute silently smirked to herself as she plucked her notes from the wall, skimming over them to figure out a good starting point.

One month later, she arrived to the hospital for her shift to be accosted about whether she knew where Kabuto had gone, being told the boy had left the previous day and never returned.

Two days after that, the remains of a half-eaten body were found by a lake near the foot of the mountains, the face too mangled to identify but the build and clothing matching one Wakahisa Kabuto. It only took one glance at the remains to determine that he had been mauled by a bear, a rare but not unheard of occurrence. Genin or not, he was still quite young and clearly hadn't been equipped to deal with an attack from a bear twice his size.

They held a brief funeral service the next day, only a handful of medics from the hospital attending. With no relatives to claim the body they opted for a simple cremation of the remains and left it at that, his name soon fading from their memories.

(Only Sute had noticed the extra scar on the body's left hand which definitely hadn't existed before, but she never told anyone. She continued her studies on disguising corpses in secret using the notes he'd given her, just as she expected him to still work on the suspended animation theories she'd shared with him. She had no idea if he might end up using it, or if he'd even be able to ever utilize it. Her research into the subject was still in such early stages after all, and she herself wouldn't perfect a working version for another two years.)

(She wouldn't find out until years later just how this decision would alter the course of history.)

Chapter End Notes

Goodbye for now, Kabuto. I'm sure you can all figure out why Sute wants to know how to disguise corpses. The ripples of what she taught Kabuto in exchange will be pretty significant though.

So real quick, a few things. One, I got some FANTASTIC fan art of Sute from XKatelyn-LeeannX over on FF! Check it out!

Second, are there any other Danganronpa fans here? If so, consider checking out PotatoSorcerer's stories over on FF! He's been working on a series of stories called Another Hope about a character named Albert Wright who ends up in the DR universe. It's largely a rehash of the games with some added twists and extra world building tacked on thanks to Albert's presence, and it's definitely a fun read in my opinion. It has a good balance of angst and humor, and Albert's a pretty well-rounded character. We've been talking over PMs bouncing ideas for the series for a while now, and his current story is going to have some MAJOR surprises in store. So please check it out! ^^

And on a final note: this Friday I'm starting at an internship working on web and mobile app design! I don't know what my schedule will be like yet, but for now, Bloody Oracle will be going on a brief hiatus. I have only part of one chapter written up after this one, and I want to finish this next arc before I start posting again. This next arc will be the last one before Sute's defection.
That said, I also plan to start posting this My Hero Academia fic I've had on the backburner since last August. The draft's at ~15 chapters right now so, yeah. It won't really cut into my writing schedule right now, even as I get busier. So if you're in the MHA/BnHA fandom, be on the lookout for that!
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Everything is about to change, and a new mission begins.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 30

It happened one late evening towards the middle of December. Sute had been nearing the end of a twelve-hour shift at the hospital and silently bemoaning the lack of field missions, having only been sent out a grand total of three times since the debacle in Hot Water. Close calls like that always reminded them just how valuable their medics were, so she didn't expect to be sent back into the field regularly anytime soon.

As she walked down the hall contemplating the possibility of her unofficial ban from field work being lifted in the new year, she paused as she heard fast footsteps approaching her. She turned to see a tall man with long brown hair striding towards her way at a brisk pace, spectacled gaze focused on her.

"Doctor Ijima," she greeted respectfully. Ijima Shizuo was one of her more favored colleagues, a veteran of the Bloody Mist days who had spent his entire career in the hospital as a surgeon. Technically he had retired after a wrist injury, moving out of Kiri proper to start a small clinic in the countryside where he could care for his young orphaned nephew, but he still returned once a month to restock on medical supplies and assist with some of the trickier operations.

"Sute," he said, returning her nod as he drew close. "Mind walking with me?" She nodded wordlessly and followed him down the hall, his steps still brisk and faster than his usual sedate pace. He carried an unusually grave air about him, his expression blank but eyes hard and serious as he stared ahead.

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"Do you have a problematic patient?" she wondered, keeping her voice low.

"You could say that. I'll apologize now for extending your shift."

"If it means assisting you in a surgery, I won't complain."

"It's not exactly a normal surgery," he replied cryptically, and she shot him a curious glance but got no opportunity to ask further before he turned down the hall to the morgue. The hairs on the back of her neck prickled at the sense of being watched, cluing her in that ANBU guards had been posted and hidden along the hallway. She kept quiet as Ijima continued down to a bulky door leading to an autopsy room and pushed it open, and she trailed behind warily only to freeze as she saw the body lying on the table.

Oh.

The body of the Third Mizukage lay on the cold metal table, eyes closed and face void of color as his chest remained perfectly still.
The Third Mizukage was pronounced dead at 8:37 PM on December 14th. He had abruptly collapsed in the midst of a meeting with his assistant, victim to a brain aneurysm at the age of 57. A mundane cause of death for such an experienced veteran, but one that not even the most powerful shinobi could predict and prevent.

News of his demise would be withheld from the general public for the first two days, giving Kiri's upper echelons time to arrange Yagura's ascension to the position. He would be setting a record, only a few weeks from turning seventeen. That in itself had been a surprising revelation, as Sute had believed him to be younger than her. Apparently he just had a severe case of baby face.

In any event, as one of the few people aware of the Mizukage's demise due to her participation in the autopsy, Sute had been sworn to utmost secrecy. Still, she could tell the higher-ups didn't want any word slipping, no matter how trustworthy she'd proven herself, so they decided to take extra measures to lower the chances for her to tell anyone. And she had absolutely no complaints about their method.

"Hold on. We're going on a mission together?"

Utakata's eyes looked ready to bulge out of his head as he stared at Yagura, his jaw only not dropping because he rarely emoted to that extent. The future Mizukage simply nodded, undisturbed by his shock. "Yes. Will that be a problem?"

"Well, no, but it's just sudden, and also will you stop bouncing so much!?" Utakata shot Sute a rather annoyed look, which she ignored as she continued to practically vibrate with excitement next to him, a giant grin splitting her face.

"I can't help it, we've never gone on a mission together!" she squealed, throwing her arms around him and eliciting a squawk of dismay. "This is so exciting!"

"Let go of me!" Utakata struggled to break free of Sute's grip as she laughed, Yagura watching blank-faced as ever. Normally Sute did not engage in such blatant public displays of affection (or even in private), but ever since learning about the mission from her ANBU superiors she'd just been so eager she made an exception.

Despite knowing Utakata for five years now and training together regularly, the pair had never actually been sent on a mission together. As a jinchuuriki Kiri wanted to keep Utakata as close to the village and country as possible, and the missions he received rarely required a medic. Sute meanwhile spent most of her time in the hospital with the occasional field job as a combat-ready medic before entering ANBU.

In short, their specialties just didn't overlap enough to justify assigning them the same mission, no matter how good their teamwork had gotten. It had been one of the more disappointing facets of her life, and she had fully expected to leave Kiri without ever working together properly with him. But now because the Mizukage had died so suddenly, an unexpected opportunity had arisen!

She allowed Utakata to pry her off himself so they could continue the briefing, Yagura waiting patiently for the theatrics to end. "One week ago, we sent Terumii Mei to the Land of Frost as an escort for a minor noble woman for an arranged marriage," he informed them. "Since her departure, we received valuable intelligence that leads to an urgent opportunity. It is too sensitive to risk being intercepted, so we sent a messenger hawk to tell her to wait at the port for further instruction.

"Your task will be to rendezvous with her and deliver this mission brief," he continued, holding up
a scroll. "Arrangements have already been made for a boat to take you to the city with expectations to arrive tonight shortly before six, at which point you will need to locate her on your own. Once you deliver the brief, Terumii will take over as mission lead and decide how to proceed."

"Yes, sir!" Sute and Utakata chorused, professional and synchronized. Nodding in approval, he silently handed the scroll to Utakata, who stowed it in a pouch on his hip, before giving them directions to the boat. Less than five minutes later they departed the administration building to return home and pack for the mission, planning to meet at the village's main entrance half an hour later.

Sute didn't need much time to prepare, she had already been briefed about the mission by her ANBU command the previous night. While she didn't know what the mission sent to Mei entailed, her own primary mission was simply to serve as an escort and discreet guard detail for Utakata. He had only been sent outside the borders of Water a handful of times, and they couldn't risk letting a jinchuuriki roam unattended.

Part of the plan to unveil Yagura as the new Mizukage included a demonstration of his skills as a "perfect" jinchuuriki. The display of power would help soothe fears of him losing control over the Sanbi and cement his strength despite his age, lowering the chances of someone challenging his appointment. Mist ninja respected strength above all else after all.

The administration's main concern was that Utakata did not have such control over the Rokubi. While it hadn't tried to assume control in the past, they worried the slug might become agitated upon sensing the large surge of chakra from the Sanbi during the demonstration. Thus, they decided to play it safe and send Utakata out of the village, and since they needed Harusame on standby in case anything went wrong with Yagura it fell to Sute to accompany him.

No one had said as much, but Sute suspected that they also wanted to use the mystery mission to keep Mei out of the village as well. Given her vague recollections of her wearing the Mizukage hat in artwork her friends showed her, the woman likely had some high ambitions. If not for the current hostility towards bloodline users, she would likely have been a prime candidate for Mizukage even now.

In the end, the specifics didn't really matter to Sute though. She would be able to go on a mission with Utakata for the first time ever, AND work with her favorite fellow kunoichi. She had absolutely no complaints about this job, it could turn out to be a honeypot mission and she wouldn't mind. Between the three of them she doubted even the Akatsuki would dampen her excitement.

...Okay, scratch that last part. She would definitely complain if they had to fight the Akatsuki, or Orochimaru for that matter. But she doubted either would pose an issue right now. As far as she knew Orochimaru should still be part of the organization right now and/or setting up Oto in the Land of Rice Fields, and the Akatsuki shouldn't have enough members to extract a Tailed Beast. So they probably wouldn't target Utakata just yet.

Reassured by her own reasoning, she pushed aside any worries and focused on just enjoying the rare chance to travel with Utakata. Which proved very fun so far, for multiple reasons. The boat ride proved to be overall uneventful, boarding just after eleven in the morning and setting off at a swift pace. Kiri had procured the services of a cargo ship for the trip, the duo spending most of their time on the deck enjoying the sea breeze.

"Okay, are we sure that sailor isn't a spy?" Utakata whispered to her as they watched a man lean over the boat rails to heave his guts out. Sute shrugged, idly watching the man from the corner of her eye as she reclined against a wall with a novel. The guy had been occupying that spot for a majority of the trip now, and he didn't look like (or sound like) he'd be moving away anytime soon.
"Heck if I know, not like we chose the crew. If he is a spy, I don't think he'll be able to do anything anytime soon. But I'm pretty sure Kiri thoroughly vets the crews for out-of-country missions, and if the mission's as 'sensitive' as Yagura implied he's probably clear."

"Maybe he was just already sick," Utakata muttered to himself with a small frown, shooting the vomiting man another suspicious look. "Or it's his first time out at sea. Maybe I should ask the captain about him, just to be safe."

"If it makes you feel better, then sure. We're less than an hour out though, so not sure it would make much difference."

"We could throw him into the ocean to drown."

"That might actually give him an advantage if he just has motion sickness. Just bean him over the head instead and dump the body. Not like he can defend himself." Her remark earned an amused snort and eye roll, Utakata shaking his head slightly.

"Fair." Apparently the conversation had defused his tension as he relaxed against the wall, turning his gaze to her now. "So, have you ever been to Frost before?"

"Nope. You?"

"Do you even have to ask?" he deadpanned, and this time it was Sute's turn to snort.

"Yeah, should've seen that coming." She looked up from her book to glance past the vomiting man to the distant port city now in sight, the boat about an hour away from docking. "I don't know much about it. It's cold, and that's it." Sute hadn't really been able to follow international politics due to Kiri's isolated nature, and none of her missions as ANBU took her to Frost. Most of their missing-nin avoided it due to its coldness and proximity to the Land of Lightning, and for the same reason Kiri typically avoided having a heavy presence there.

It made her wonder about the mission scroll currently tucked away in the canvas bag slung over Utakata's shoulder. It may have been a partial ruse to keep Utakata (and Mei) away from Kiri until Yagura finished his transition to power, but they wouldn't just assign a made-up mission. It had to be something at least a little worthwhile, something that would benefit Kiri in some way. Unfortunately the scroll was sealed, so they couldn't exactly peek at it. It would have to wait until they met Mei.

Utakata huffed a quiet sigh, frowning at the ever-closer port. "We're getting closer. As good a time as any to put on the final touches." Sute hummed in agreement, sliding a bookmark between the pages of her book before following him to the cabin where they'd stowed the rest of their stuff. Leaving their stuff unattended left a bad taste in her mouth, but they were both dressed in civvies and civilians didn't exactly have shinobi-level paranoia.

Walking around with their hitai-ate on display would draw too much attention, especially so close to Lightning. Fortunately, the winter weather made their disguises simple enough. Thick wool coats and scarves let them easily hide their muscular builds and faces, and Utakata switched out his kunai pouch for a more ordinary bag used by travelers. They looked like any other civilian at this point, and as the boat drew closer to port Utakata plopped a knit hat on Sute's head, surprising her.

"Your seaweed hair sticks out," he told her with a huff when she shot him a questioning look. Sute just blinked, head tilting slightly.

"You know the last time a kid said my hair looked like seaweed I cut off his toe, right?"
"I also know you don't actually care that much. And you know I've got a point." She hummed, adjusting the hat to help hide her hair a bit more. The color did stand out, even if it wasn't particularly bright like pink or blue. Combined with her eyes, it would make it easy to identify her even in civvies. She'd have to think about that whenever she finally left Kiri.

Soon after that exchange the ship docked and the two disembarked, the poor sailor who'd spent the entire ride sick and miserable collapsing onto solid land behind them with a moan. They had arrived slightly later than Yagura's prediction, closer to six thirty than six, and the sky had already taken a dark tint. Sute tugged the scarf over her mouth as she trailed close to Utakata, the pair heading towards a string of restaurants with warmly lit windows.

"Any ideas what kind of places she'd go to?" he asked lowly.

"Not sure," Sute replied just as quietly. "We only ever hung out a couple of times, and we usually chose the place based on convenience more than taste." Finding Mei without having a set meeting place would be tricky, especially since neither of them had skills particularly suited for tracking. Sute's sensory trick with trees wouldn't work in a developed area like this.

Debating where to go in quiet tones, they decided to just poke their heads in restaurants to see if she might be there. To justify the quick checks Sute played the annoying tourist angle, loudly whining that she didn't like the menus before dragging Utakata out to check the next place. Purposely drawing attention like that bothered her and went against her instincts, but she figured that if Mei turned out to be in disguise the brief scene would be enough to get her attention so she could follow them.

It paid off, because after the fourth place someone tapped their shoulders, and they turned to see a plain-looking woman in dull brown wool clothing. "That's certainly a clever way to search," she remarked with a wry smirk, and her voice confirmed it to be Mei.

"Well, you look different," Utakata drawled. Mei had used a transformation to give herself a dull shade of dark brown hair, freckles dusting her cheeks and her nose now more hook-like. Her eyes still had the same shade of green, but they drooped at the outer corners to look more soft and gentle, a stark contrast to their usual sharpness. She probably looked normal and average to strangers, but to Sute it looked bizarre, just different enough for her brain to try to correct the image before her.

Mei led them to an inn where she'd gotten a room, and only after they entered did Sute realize how cold it had gotten outside. She made a beeline for the portable heater in the corner of the room, grateful that the Naruto world had some technological innovations. While she switched it on and unwound the layers of her disguise Mei shed her transformation, smoothly sitting on the bed. "I was told to wait here, but I had no idea they'd send you two," she commented, eying them speculatively.

Utakata huffed, withdrawing the scroll from his pouch to toss her. "Yeah, well, it's apparently urgent or something. I think we were just chosen for convenience." Mei hummed, breaking the seal on the parchment and unrolling it while Sute dug a couple of privacy seals from her own bag to slap on the walls and window. The inn looked to be sturdier than some she'd seen, but it wouldn't do to risk someone overhearing.

Ever the professional Mei skimmed through the scroll quickly, finishing her initial perusal within two minutes before huffing a quiet breath. "Well, this is interesting," she mused, her lips curving slightly into a small smirk. "There's a new trade route passing through Frost and Hot Water connecting Kumo and Konoha."
That got their attention instantly. While they hadn't been outright fighting, even after the war ended tensions had still remained quite strong between Konoha and Kumo. Kiri had a pretty insular atmosphere making it hard to follow foreign politics, but even they knew the two villages' shinobi got into conflict more often than not when meeting in neutral territory. Trades between their countries had been nonexistent up to now, and would be a major step.

"Harusame-shishou mentioned hearing rumors about a treaty between them," Utakata murmured thoughtfully, eyes narrowing. "I didn't think it was true though. Could this be connected to that?" Mei nodded once.

"It is. Recently our intelligence division received confirmation of intentions to sign a treaty later this month. It won't be a full-fledged alliance, but the peace treaty could still cause problems. This trade route is meant to help foster good relations in anticipation of that, and two days ago we got a report on that the first group from Kumo will use it this week." Her gaze sharpened as she rolled the scroll, finishing, "They want us to sabotage it."

Sute and Utakata nodded in unison, serious and professional. Sabotaging a trade route was different from their usual work, and the political slant to the mission would make this tricky. "If it's the inaugural group, they'll definitely have a stronger shinobi escort than usual," Sute murmured. "I'm guessing we can't just pass ourselves off as run of the mill bandits, or let it get traced back to Kiri."

Mei nodded in confirmation. "They'll trade off with a group of Leaf ninja at the border to Hot Water three days from now. The specifics of how we do it are unimportant. All that matters is we make sure the traders don't reach that point, and we leave no evidence of our involvement." She leaned forward, eying them intently. "So, any ideas?"

"...Do they need to be left alive?" Utakata asked after a few seconds, and Mei smirked, just as sharp and dangerous as any Mist kunoichi.

"It doesn't say, so I'm assuming that's optional."

"Then this should be interesting," Utakata declared with a small smirk of his own, and Sute couldn't agree more. This would be very interesting.

Chapter End Notes

And we are back!

I'm sorry for the long hiatus. Between getting a new job and some other stuff in my life I didn't have much time to work on Bloody Oracle. Honestly I know pretty much exactly what I want to happen in this arc, so it felt like a lower priority than the fics where I DO have some block. I am so sorry!

Good news though, we're now in the endgame of Sute's time in Kiri. This is the final arc, and I'm pulling out all the stops. I'll probably stick to posting every other week, since I've written only up to Chapter 33. I want this arc to be perfect, for many reasons.

Also for those unaware, I've started posting an MHA/BnHA fic called Ignite to the Call! It's about six students ending up in another dimension where villains kinda rule. It's already at 15 chapters. (For the record, most of them were written before Bloody Oracle's hiatus so it didn't cut into the writing time.) If you're into MHA, check it out!
Welcome to the wild ride that is Ringo Sute's life!

So, if it's not obvious, this is an SI/OC story, but it has some... twists. Like Sute ending up in Kiri instead of Konoha. And also her lack of angisting over preserving or changing canon. Or debating the ethics of killing. Or basically just the fact that her moral compass is already screwed up in general thanks to her first life.

I'll be blunt: this story will have some seemingly-crack moments throughout it, especially around the start, but it is most definitely NOT crack. Sute is just a very screwed up person who had a VERY screwed-up first life. This is going to be a wild ride, with lots of dark, twisted humor, and some pretty crazy experiments on my part at breaking canon from afar. I can't say much more without going into spoilers.

Please leave a review, I'd love to hear what people think! (I wonder if anyone picked up on some of the more subtle clues I left to some of the twists.)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!