**Flip the Coin**

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### Summary

"*When you think about it, Sasuke, we could be standing in each other's place right now*"

Naruto grows up shunned, hated, without support and full of rage.

Sasuke grows up determined to step out of his brother's shadow and be recognized for his own merits.

In which Naruto is the one who runs and Sasuke does the chasing.
Part 1 (pre-Shippuden) is now COMPLETE.
Part 2 (post-two-year gap) is ongoing.
IF YOU ARE GETTING INTO THIS STORY NOW THAT IT'S "COMPLETE"

Be aware that this fic is marked complete but the story is not. This is a canon rewrite series and this is only part 1, covering their childhood up to the Valley of the End and the two-year gap. Part 2 picks up after the gap. So when you'll reach the end of all 330k of this, it won't actually be done at all. I know some of you don't want to get into in progress fanfic, so you've been warned!

So, a few weeks ago I posted that silly comics and the story that goes with it (which is full blown spoilers for this fic so you've been warned) and I said something like "haha maybe I'll write that someday". Which was actually code for "I already wrote 10k words and mapped out the entire story I just don't know if I should talk myself into starting publishing another WIP or not". Welp, I am now haha.

This spun from that moment in chapter 485 where Naruto comments that their role could have been reversed. Well, they are now. Fair warning, poor Naruto is not going to be a happy bean in this. He'll look more like pre-chunin exam Gaara than his usual cheery self... Believe me it hurts me too. Generally speaking they're all worse off than canon in this... Except for the Uchiha I guess haha. We'll have fun with them too.

I'm always nervous about posting Naruto fanfics, I don't know, I find the fandom intimidating. But I've been playing with that AU for weeks and I don't like to just sit on my writing without posting it so. Here we go. Enjoy!

EDIT 19/7/2020 - chapters are beingbetaed and will be updated gradually, currently done up to chapter 3.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Something had happened.

Something bad. Not bad enough that the civilians were informed, but bad enough that even they somehow caught a whiff of it, whispering worriedly between themselves on street corners and in the shops.

Naruto wasn’t quite sure what it was. Someone was dead, but that was hardly noteworthy. They had been killed – better, but not that uncommon yet.

Not that he really cared. He was just bored, and trying to eavesdrop on the jounin was always good training. It also provided him with a lot of information and stories he thought might be of use someday, if only to get back at the nastier ones.

Soon he would start the Academy, at long last, and that would at least provide him with some entertainment and a place to be, things to do during the day. There was only so many hours a day he could train on his own in the forest and his pranks demanded less and less time and effort with how he had perfected them over the years. In the Academy he would learn to be a proper ninja, to
get stronger, and once he was strong enough he wouldn’t be bothered by anyone anymore. For that, he was willing to sit through any number of boring lessons.

Speaking of the Academy, it was possible that Something had happened there. It was mentioned several times, although… No, not the place. The Someone.

An Academy teacher.

The name Umino Iruka only conjured a very vague image in Naruto’s mind, from passing by the Academy when the classes were done for the day. A man with a vertical scar on the bridge of his nose and a friendly smile. Well, a friendly smile for his students and their parents. Certainly not for Naruto.

The teacher had died. Had been killed.

What seemed to be really important though was the How and the Who. Naruto kept walking quietly the corridors of the Hokage Tower, slow enough that he could catch words of the whispered conversation around him but with enough purpose that he wouldn’t look like he was wandering and draw attention on himself. He still got some nasty looks, but they had to think he was here for a reason, whatever it was. Practicing this move day after day had paid off – half of the shinobi working at the Tower were convinced he had an actual reason to be there so often, instead of him just being nosy.

He had to find some joy somewhere.

He caught the name "Danzo" not far from the Hokage’s office, whispered by two jounin with grave expressions on their face, so low it was barely audible. This one, Naruto knew, and he knew the face to go with it too, even if he had never dealt with the man directly. Naruto avoided him like the plague, partly because he was always looking like he wanted to talk to him when they happened to cross path, and mostly because he was terribly creepy. Not physically – ninjas hiding half or all of their faces and bodies and wearing weird clothes and weird objects were less than a curiosity in Konoha, and Naruto had grown up surrounded by people who looked way scarier than they actually were. But that Danzo guy, oh, he was a creep for real. Naruto hated to feel his eyes on him. It always gave him the urge to hide away, to remove himself from his sight, to get out of reach. The man was supposed to be an elder of the council, from what Naruto had gathered, and also managed a lot of shady things it always felt best left alone.

It wasn’t Danzo who had killed the teacher, but he was responsible somehow.

The Danzo wouldn’t be seen around the village anymore is what Naruto got out of this. Good riddance. If he had caused the death of another shinobi without a good reason, it was understandable. Somehow, it felt like it was more than that though. It wasn’t just about the death of the teacher.

What Danzo did…

Naruto heard that several times. What Danzo did. And it wasn’t about the teacher. It was bigger, in the long run. Things that had been unearthed, either by the teacher or by his death. Or maybe that’s the reason why he was dead? There were a few people looking sad when saying his name. He seemed well known and well loved around the Hokage Tower.

Naruto couldn’t relate.

After a third tour, he started to feel the eyes on him get suspicious, so he decided to finish up his
visit by the Hokage’s office, to see if the old man’s mood and company could tell him more about what had happened. And if he could get an extra allowance this month to buy some more kunai at the weapon shop. That was the initial purpose of his visit.

The doors to the office were open, and even if the two jounin standing guard leveled him a disapproving look, they didn’t try to stop him when he stepped into the room.

The old man was sitting at his desk. Naruto’s steps faltered, because the man looked ten years older than the last time Naruto had seen him. The wrinkles on his face were deeper, the weariness in his expression, in his whole posture, heavy enough that Naruto could see them plain as day. The man barely glanced at him, and okay, Naruto had expected him to still be mad about his latest stunt at the fish market the week before, but it was more than that. The old man’s face didn’t budge, didn’t even try for a smile.

Maybe Something was worse than Naruto had thought.

“What is it, Naruto?” the old man asked, his tone clearly conveying now wasn’t a time for being rude or wasting his time. Naruto opened his mouth but was interrupted by a jounin rushing into the office and almost stepping on Naruto in his haste, who sidestepped him just in time with a long practice of avoiding hurried adults for whom he was just too small and unworthy to take notice of.

“Hokage-sama, yet another report. Among the children that were taken, there was…”

The old man raised a hand to silence the jounin and turned a pointed stare at Naruto, who had hoped to be forgotten long enough to catch some more information.

“Naruto. Leave. Don’t come back before…”

The old man got lost in thought for a moment, considering.

“…Before I visit you.”

Both men waited patiently until Naruto had cleared the room. He heard the Hokage extend the command to his guards so that they knew he wasn’t to be allowed in anymore.

Whatever. It didn’t matter. He could find other ways to occupy himself and other shinobi to stalk and spy on. He didn’t care much about those matters anyway. So what if that Danzo was out of the picture? That sounded like good news as far as he was concerned. Especially if there were… kidnapped children involved? He always knew this man was nasty.

As for the Academy teacher…

Well, it was certainly sad. Probably.

Naruto didn’t care much though. He had to go train, to become strong. Strong people didn’t fear death.

.

Something had happened, of that Sasuke was certain, but he had no idea what and no one would tell him anything.

Just because he was a kid didn’t mean he was an idiot. He caught on some things. Like how stressed his father had been lately, and how Itachi worked more and more and spent less and less time at home, even if he wasn’t on a mission. He caught on things being whispered around in the
Uchiha district, how worried the adults looked sometimes.

That was nothing though compared to the chaos of this day. His father had been running around between the Hokage Tower and the Uchiha district since dawn, face screwed up into a worried frown, and his mother, although she hadn’t said it is so many words, had advised him not to get too far from the house.

But the most obvious sign was Itachi. Because Itachi actually looked affected too. For real. He was following their father, which was shocking in and on itself, since their relationship had been strained for months now, and that they hadn’t been seen sharing a space anymore that was strictly necessary – or imposed by their mother who would never stand by either of them eating in another room to avoid the tension of the dinner table.

Sasuke learned that one of the Academy teachers had died in mysterious circumstances. Itachi knew him, but he hadn’t been taught by him when he was at the Academy, and Sasuke doubted that was what made his stoic older brother so shaken up. Not that he looked shaken up. In fact for most people he probably looked as aloof and calm as ever. But Sasuke could see it and judging by the frown on his mother’s face, she could too. Itachi was upset, and Sasuke didn’t know why.

He went to see Shisui, since he was about the only one who didn’t treat Sasuke as a bothersome kid, but even he was surprisingly tight-lipped this time. He looked sad too, and Sasuke couldn’t decide, between him and Itachi, on who the expression felt the most alien.

“You’re too young to be involved in all this,” he said, but when Sasuke started to protest, he got a dark look on his face and said, more serious than Sasuke had ever heard him be, “it’s a lucky thing, Sasuke.”

Frustrated, Sasuke went back home and sulked in his room for a while, until his mother called him down for dinner. Nothing of importance was discussed at the table – nothing was discussed at all, really – and Itachi followed their father in his office once they were done. They closed the door tightly behind them and his mother stopped him from approaching the room. She was apologetic but firm in the command that he was to leave this alone for now. He would be told when the time was right.

From experience, Sasuke knew it could be in literal years, but it’s not like he could do anything about it, so he decided to let it go for now.

Whatever it was that had happened, it didn’t seem inherently bad. There was no immediate danger, no sense of panic. On the contrary, Sasuke was surprised to notice subtle changes in the days and weeks that followed, that didn’t look much, but that he couldn’t help connect for some reasons. He had never realized how truly tense the residents of the Uchiha district were until it started to loosen bit by bit. He started to see more and more Uchiha in the streets outside of their own district, and even more surprising, to see non-Uchiha walking their own. They didn’t discuss it properly with the other kids, but they all got the feeling that an unspoken ban had been lifted. They went to play on the square next to the Academy and the feeling of being unwelcomed that had always clung to him when he was out of the Uchiha district was dimed out by a wild margin.

This was nothing though compared to the biggest change of them all – Itachi and their father started talking to each other again.

Like, talking for real. And spend time together too. Sasuke went back home several times to find them sitting in the garden, deep in conversation, or even, and he had to do a double take on that one, training together. Sasuke wasn’t sure it had ever happened in his lifetime, not since he was old enough to remember anyway.
It was a good thing, really, it was. His mother looked happier too, and she announced one day at dinner that she was going back to the shinobi forces as a jounin sensei. Sasuke had never even known she was one. Itachi took less and less missions outside the village, spending more and more time at the Hokage Tower and with the Intelligence Division. His father too spent a lot more time out, mostly with other clan heads, as far as Sasuke could tell. It was frustrating because he didn’t know what had prompted all those changes, but they weren’t bad changes, so he didn’t want to complain.

Except if his father had been a little more focused on Itachi than Sasuke before, it was nothing compared to how things were now.

Sasuke understood on some level that something bad had happened, or could have happened, and that Itachi had gone through something they needed to work out. And he had always known, always accepted that Itachi was simply better than him, more worthy of attention. It didn’t sting so much because his brother was better than anyone really. It looked like their father didn’t intend to leave him to his own devices anymore. He got involved in his training again, in his life in general.

Sasuke didn’t think his father could be any less involved in his life, but oh, how wrong he was.

Itachi and their father had mended whatever rift there was between them. And Sasuke had all but disappeared from their sight in the process.

They both promised to be there for his first day at the Academy, and made it as far as the gate to the Uchiha district before a chunin hurried toward them, telling them that they were needed urgently at the Hokage’s office. They both apologized before leaving Sasuke alone with his mother.

It was fine. Sasuke knew he had nothing on the village’s politics in their eyes. As it should be, really. They were discussing important matters with important people, Sasuke’s first day at the Academy was meaningless in comparison.

He would have to be Hokage to hope to get their attention.

Huh. Now that was an idea.

Chapter End Notes

A general note if you're getting into this story - I usually ramble in the endnotes, about my thought process during the chapter, and about things that are to come. Feel free to skip it if you don't want any kind of spoiler or foreshadowing!

So I don't have the details (because I didn't want to think about it) but the gist of it is that Iruka stumbled into Danzo's shady shit somehow and the old creep had him killed, but couldn't get away with it this time. The whole drama with the Uchiha clan came out and they decided to deal with it by actually talking about it like grown-ups are supposed to do, and came to an agreement that didn't involve mass murder. We'll go back to the more political side of things at some point probably but for now it's from the kids' point of view and the kids don't know shit.
Anyway let me know what you think and I hope you'll stick with me for a while. Upcoming chapters should be longer, we're in for a loooong ride. Bye!
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

The beginning of a great relationship

Chapter Notes

I have this slight problem where I'm addicted to feedback, and since I have several chapters done in advance for both my Naruto fics, I actually have to wrestle myself into not posting them everyday just to keep the comments coming... Also when it's done I just want to publish heh.

Whatever, here is chapter two where we actually get into the story I guess. Not super long chapter, I'm hoping the following will get longer... My ideas of what I'm doing here is so vague people. We'll see where it goes. Find me on tumblr for fanarts and updates, and enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Don’t come back before I visit you.”

Famous last words. Naruto hadn’t seen the old man in over a year.

It was probably petty of him to take the command so literally when he had never bothered to listen to anything the old man told him. He didn’t care. It was better this way, actually.

Whatever the details of that Thing that had happened, it was huge. It was easy to see in the way the masked shinobi that were supposed to keep an eye on him all but disappeared in the following weeks, obviously busy with more important matters. He still received his monthly allowance, albeit not exactly on time, but that was the extent of how involved in his life the old man and his shinobi were after that.

It was really better this way. Naruto was free to roam around the village and the forest without the constant presence of his guards on his back, or worse, their stern command for him to go back home when he had stayed out too long for their taste.

The only problem was it also meant he had no option left for when he was short on money. Fortunately, this was easily solved by the latest skill he had decided to work on – pickpocketing. Given that he was very likely to get thrown out or beaten when walking down the market anyway, he had decided that he might as well get something out of it. It was going pretty well. The few times he had been caught, the villagers had been strangely reluctant to actually go against him, and he’d slipped past their grasp before they could call the police.

He was seriously starting to consider this as his main career path, because the Academy, as it turned out, was B O R I N G.
Not only that though – it was disappointing in every way. Naruto had been excited to finally get proper reading and writing lessons – his meager knowledge from the orphanage drastically lacking for anything harder than deciphering a restaurant menu – but if they did indeed have lessons, it was clear that they were supposed to be for strengthening their level, not building it from scratch. All the kids around him could already read the textbooks and scrolls with ease, having been taught by various family members or mentors. Naruto did his best to follow, but he kept mixing everything, and it’s not the teachers that were going to be any help.

Speaking of the teachers, they were all assholes without fail. Naruto was used to being shunned for no reason, but it was one thing for a woman at the shop to cast him dirty looks from behind a counter, and it was another entirely to be targeted at every turn by a teacher in a class full of rowdy kids. No matter what happened and even if he was napping on his desk, he was always accused of every single misdeed in the classroom and sent out several times a day, which made it quite hard to follow any lesson. It was either that or being ignored completely, to the point where his turn was skipped during individual exercise, and he wasn’t paired with anyone during training.

To top it all, if the kids weren’t as outward hostile as the civilians were, or quietly disapproving like the shinobi, none of them looked like they wanted to befriend him either. They already had their friends, they groups and cliques, and he was made to feel like an outsider in every aspect of the Academy life.

Skipping class wasn’t going to make it any better, but going wouldn’t either. So Naruto had taken to going to the market instead, and to keep training on his own. He spied on the older shinobi working through their routine on the training grounds and did his best to copy them, but he lacked an actual adversary, instead of a tree or a wooden dummy.

Basically, everything sucked, if not harder, then the same amount as it did before.

“Shouldn’t you be going to class?”

Naruto shrugged as the old Teuchi put a ramen bowl in front of him. Naruto felt no remorse paying for it with the wallet of a mean old hag who had insisted she wanted to buy the last of the apples of the fruit merchant just when Naruto was eyeing them, all twenty of them. She had been mortified to have the man pack them all, only to be unable to locate her money.

“In a minute,” Naruto said, slurping loudly at his noodles. Old Teuchi was the one and only person in the entire village that didn’t treat Naruto like a chewing gum stuck to the sole of his shoe. Well, as long as Naruto paid for his meals, anyway.

“It’s important to go to class,” the old man insisted. Naruto didn’t answer. What could he say? How could he explain how awful it made him feel, to be alone in a room full of kids his age, to be told constantly he was stupid, incompetent, insolent and troublesome? He wanted to learn, he did. But no one wanted him to.

The old Teuchi had been heartbroken by the death of that Academy teacher a few months back. He kept saying Konoha had lost one of its very best teachers, and Naruto couldn't help but wonder if it was true, if that man was really that good, good enough that he would have taught even Naruto, who was too dumb to even learn to read properly. He would never know, so it was pointless to imagine. But imagining ways his life would turn a little better was all he had sometimes.

Since he didn’t want to be lectured again, Naruto promised he would go to the Academy that afternoon. They had taijutsu practice after an hour on the history of the shinobi world, and he would actually get to beat up some of the other kids.
Naruto was decent at taijutsu, if only because he trained his body enough that he had more brute force than most of his classmates. What he lacked was proper practice at hand to hand combat, since all he knew he had learned by spying on older shinobis training, but he had never actually sparred with another person. The kids of his class made for poor opponents. Naruto had to hold back, actually, if he didn’t want to seriously injure one of them and get punished for his aggressiveness. Weak, the whole lot of them.

Except when it came to the Uchiha kid.

Uchiha Sasuke was the target to take down in taijutsu lessons. Not only was he stupidly fast and agile, he was also super efficient, never wasting a move, and usually laid Naruto down in five moves or less. He wasn’t even smug about it, just indifferent, like it was routine for him. To be fair, it kind of was, and at least Naruto did hold for five moves (or less), whereas others didn’t last even one. But it was still infuriating.

He was also the only one that Naruto could actually improve with, since none of the other put up a decent fight or even tried to. Being as diligent as he was, Sasuke didn’t have the other kids’ tendency to just pick another partner when paired off with Naruto because they knew the teacher wouldn’t care. Not that it mattered since they were all useless in a fight.

“Are you alright?” Sasuke asked, like the bastard he was, going as far as extending his hand to help Naruto up. Naruto had half a mind to swat it away, but he was well aware of what trouble any offense done to “Sasuke-kun” would bring down on him, courtesy of his gaggle of fangirls. Sasuke pulled him up to his feet before turning away, ready to move on to the next partner.

Naruto wasn’t though. As much as he hated getting his ass handed to him, Sasuke was indeed the best of the class. Naruto wanted to get strong – it was the only reason why he hadn’t abandoned the Academy entirely. Sasuke was the strongest, therefore Naruto had to beat him, and then he would have gotten a little closer to his goal.

“Let’s go again.”

Sasuke raised a skeptical eyebrow, but Mizuki didn’t look like he gave a damn about what they were doing, busy as he was chewing one of the girls out, probably over a minor and unimportant mistake. Mizuki had to have the award for worse teacher of that goddamn school, and that was without taking into account how poorly he treated Naruto in particular. The man was nice enough, at first glance, but all had grown to quietly despise him. He was creepily praising and pampering to the clan kids and put down anyone else with a friendly smile. Naruto had seen even Sasuke, of all people, tense up at his stupid comments.

Honestly, Naruto found his power of annoyance to be pretty mild compared to the insults he had received before. What really sucked was his tendency to systematically throw Naruto out after five minutes of class. Not that his lectures were interesting, but well… Naruto had to pass his classes somehow.

“…Fine,” Sasuke said eventually, falling back in position. Most of the kids had abandoned practice since their teacher didn’t look like has going to pay attention to any of them any time soon, but Naruto didn’t want to let go now. He wanted to punch someone, and dammit, he would.

The sole advantage Naruto had over Sasuke was that picking up all kind of moves from a wide variety of people had made his own fighting style unpredictable. Sasuke’s style was more complex and advanced than the Academy standard, but very academic still, and not all that diversified. Naruto had been slowly learning all his moves, and he intended to make good use of it.
He held on for six moves. The next time, seven. Sasuke was growing more serious and more into it, and it was probably the first time Naruto was seeing him kind of enjoying himself. Naruto didn’t get his appeal to the girls – the boy was gloomy and boring, never spotted having any fun at all.

He was vaguely aware they were starting to draw attention from the rest of the class, but they were eight moves in and now wasn’t the time to lose his concentration.

That was without taking freaking Mizuki into account.

“Very good, Sasuke,” they heard from the side. “I see training with your brother is paying off.”

Sasuke’s sudden misstep and missed hit were so surprising and out of place that Naruto almost didn’t manage to take advantage of it. Spur of the moment moves where his forte though. He grabbed the fist that had missed him by a wide range and used it to pull Sasuke toward him, up over his back, and land him flat on the floor.

Boy did that feel good.

“NARUTO.”

For two hot seconds.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Mizuki asked. It was so out of place even the other kids exchanged puzzled looks, at a loss too as to what Naruto had done wrong exactly. They were used to it though, used to the randomness of Naruto’s punishment, and they didn’t question it. They didn’t care.

“It’s called sparring sensei. Maybe you’ve heard of it,” he answered mildly. The man was easy to piss off, and if he was sent out, he wasn’t actually skipping class, right?

“Sasuke, are you alright?” the teacher asked. Naruto was pleased to see that Sasuke was already on his feet and ready to go again, and that he was trying to kill their teacher by the sole force of his glare. He didn’t answer and Naruto turned away, ready to fall back into position.

“Get out of here Naruto. You’re dismissed.”

They both turned incredulous look at the man who launched into a lecture about reckless violence – in freaking hand-to-hand combat. Naruto felt the familiar heat of his anger rise from the pit of his stomach, the tension spreading in his muscles as he tensed all over, ready to snap. He wanted nothing more than to jump that moron and bite his fucking nose off, but he couldn’t afford that kind of trouble now that the old man had completely lost interest in his fate.

Naruto was sure he didn’t know yet just how bad he could be treated, and he was in no hurry to find out.

So he kept it all tightly lock inside and cast a last hateful look at their smug teacher before exiting the Academy, anxious to find a post in one of the training ground he could beat up to dust.

He was past caring anyway. Or well, it was more like he was actually in a state of constant anger that meant he wasn’t as prone to outburst as he once was. It’s not that he never lost his cool, it’s that he never had it in the first place.

What the day had proved though, was that sparring with Sasuke had to become a thing. It was stimulating in a way few things were in his life – and it felt like he was getting somewhere at last. It was the first step. Beating the best student of his class. Then the best of his rank, then the best of
any rank. Then the best of the village. The best in the world. And then…

Then there would be no one left to bother him.

“I see training with your brother is paying off.”

There was no way Mizuki wasn’t doing this on purpose. No way. Had Sasuke been sparring with anyone else, he would have been convinced it was just their teacher’s tactic to destabilize him. But why would he do that for Naruto? He hated the boy. Everyone did, for some reason.

Granted, his classmates hated Mizuki even more.

“I see training with your brother is paying off.”

In what universe. Sasuke was lucky if he saw Itachi long enough for them to exchange “hellos” these days. If anything, it proved that the “missions” had always been a bullshit excuse. Itachi was no longer part of ANBU, and he was even less at home than before.

It was even more than that though. Sasuke was absolutely convinced that Itachi was avoiding him.

His mother kept telling him he was imagining things, but he wasn’t stupid. Itachi couldn’t get out of a room fast enough when Sasuke entered it. Sometimes he stared at him and it looked like he wanted to talk, to say something, but he never did. Instead he turned away and disappeared.

They had not trained together for months. Sasuke was busting his ass off all on his own, thank you very much – and with Shisui sometimes, who took pity on him. He was no longer in ANBU either. Sasuke still didn’t know what that was all about.

And the worst thing was, for how little Itachi was in his life now, he was still there constantly. Mizuki was the worse but he was far from the only one. None of their teachers could resist making the comparison. All. The. Time. “You’re very good at this, just like Itachi!” "I remember when your brother learned this." "I would have thought you’d get a grasp at this sooner seeing how your brother…”

His classmates were in this too. Half of the girls fawning over him were just doing it by proxy, like their sisters with Itachi before them, or hoping to get closer to the real deal. "Your brother is so cool. You’re so lucky. What is he like?"

Like a ghost, that’s what he was.

Sasuke didn’t especially like the Academy. He went through the motions, doing what was asked of him and keeping to himself. He had been trained in the Uchiha’s way from a young age and most of the things they studied at school, he’d known them for at least a few years. Sometimes he had a hard time understanding how his classmates could fail at such basic things, but then he remembered the stern voice of his mother telling him that he was privileged among them and that it was never an excuse to be condescending.

He didn’t feel like he was in the wrong though, when he saw half of them focusing more on the latest manga, game, or flower arrangement than on their training and studies. Most of them didn’t seem to care much about being good shinobi, to the point where he wondered what they were doing here exactly.

He hadn’t made any friends. He hung out with the other Uchiha kids, or he stayed on his own. He
didn’t have time for friends anyway – he had to train if he ever wanted to be a blip on his father and his brother’s radar one day.

He was supposed to walk back home, but he was angry and frustrated and his mother would ask him “are you alright?” and if he said yes she’d know he was lying and if he said no he’d have to tell her why.

Walking in circles seemed like a much better idea.

“Oi, Sasuke!”

If people would just leave him alone.

Naruto fell into step with him, unconcerned with his murderous expression.

“What do you want?”

“I need us to train together.”

Sasuke stopped in his tracks to cast an incredulous look at his classmate to whom he had literally never spoken to before today. The boy was dead serious.

“What.”

"I need to get stronger and that won't happen by sparring with a tree. And you're the best in our class so it has to be you."

Sasuke was. He was the best of their year, but it hardly seemed to matter. Sasuke could best the entire Konoha shinobi force, he would still be second best.

“Why don’t you ask Itachi?” he spat, fed up with this discussion already. Naruto was a troublemaker with no friends, a permanent scowl and the worst grades out of them all. Sasuke had zero interest in training with him.

That was, until the next sentence that came out of his mouth.

“Who the hell is Itachi? Why would I ask him? Is he better than you?”

Naruto started to look mildly worried at how long it took Sasuke to produce an answer. It was just a lot to take in, since never before in his life had someone not known the name Uchiha Itachi.

“You… don’t know who Itachi is?”

"Sorry, I don't know every last loser in the village."

Sasuke held back a snort but felt obligated to defend his brother. “He’s the best shinobi of the Uchiha clan, a prodigy. He was the youngest one ever to make it jounin. He…”

“You know what, that’s great. You two should get married. But will you train with me or not?”

This was beyond surreal.

“What?”

“Are you dense? I doubt mister super jounin will want to be caught within a mile radius of my vicinity, so let’s say I’m stuck with you yeah? Are you in or not? We’ll see about beating that guy
later.”

“Beating… Itachi?”

“Yeah. Isn’t that the point of the strong ones?”

Sasuke was vaguely aware that Naruto was a training freak obsessed with getting stronger, and dismissive of absolutely everything else. He didn’t care about making friends, didn’t care about being nice, and he annoyed the hell out of most of the adults around them. Including his own parents.

It was perfect.

“You know what. I’m in.”

Naruto’s eyes open wide, clearly not expecting this turn of event.

“You are?”

“Yeah. Let’s do this.”

He had no idea what he was getting himself into, but that was part of the appeal. It was something that he would do all on his own. No clan, no parents, no brother, something for himself, that he needed no one’s opinion to decide.

“Awesome.”

Naruto grinned. Sasuke smiled back.

Chapter End Notes

Basically Naruto is the bad boy and Sasuke is momma's boy entering his rebellious phase x) Don't get your hopes up though they're very very far for becoming friends.

To clarify, the mess with Danzo killed the Sandaime a little, like he's even more useless than he ever was before. Plus the other clans flipped on him because SUPRISINGLY learning that his solution to a dissident clan was to have one of their youngs wipe them all out didn't sit well with most of them, even if that plan wasn't formulated as such back then. So he's stuck in a political and moral mess and super uninvolved and as a result, not only Naruto doesn't get his support at all, but since I imagine he had a hand into keeping people in check regarding Naruto in the series, here it's open bar, the impression that they can mistreat him and get away with it got stronger (because they indeed can). That's why everything is terrible haha.

Also Mizuki is the guy that manipulated Naruto at the beginning of the manga and that guy cracks me up for some reasons. We'll be dealing with a lot of character that barely appeared in Naruto, including, of course, the glorious mess of the Uchiha clan.

I hope you enjoyed and I'll see you soon, bye!
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Sasuke's family has Things to Say about his friendship with Naruto.

Chapter Notes

I love writing on Naruto. I just love it. It's great.

Tumblr is here for fanarts and updates and random rambling. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On one hand, it made Sasuke feel horribly terrible that it took so long for anyone at home to discover this new development. On the other hand, the more time passed, the more it meant he would be justified in being pissed off once they finally confronted him about it.

In the meantime, he trained with Naruto.

He honestly thought it would be a walk in the park. Naruto had strength, sure, but he had zero technique or finesse, and all his hits seemed to be lucky ones. Sasuke just had to be more serious than usual and it would be fine.

It took Naruto laying him flat on his back after one minute for him to review this judgment.

It hadn’t occurred to him that if he himself was holding back at the Academy, so was Naruto. Sasuke was making an effort not to use the most advanced moves he knew, which were unfair to his undertrained classmates. Naruto was making an effort not to throw his sparring partners across the field, apparently.

He was ruthless. Sasuke was kind of used to going easy during training because, well. It was training. Naruto didn’t even apologize though, for making him bite the dust so hard he bit himself for real and spat blood for their entire sparring session. He wasn’t there to do this the easy way, apparently.

His mother had frowned the first few times at his ruined clothes and bruised face, but Sasuke could adapt quickly. And as Naruto learned to be less of an unruly brute, Sasuke learned to fight for real.

Naruto observed older shinobis train all the time – Sasuke had no idea when he actually went home – and brought new moves and technics to try during their sparring. Sasuke was reluctant to include foreign moves in his own style, but Naruto didn’t have such qualms. After months of this, he was still 100% unpredictable and kept Sasuke constantly on his toes.

Sasuke had to admit it wasn’t so bad.

He had suggested training in ninjutsu and chakra control too, while they were at it, but Naruto had
declined, claiming he already had someone else for that. Sasuke had a hard time believing it, for
Naruto was always on his own. There was just Haruno Sakura who had been sticking to him for no
reason the past few weeks, but they didn’t seem to even talk to each other. Sasuke and Naruto still
didn’t interact at the Academy either. In fact, outside from the training field they favored, often
empty because too far away from the heart of the village and half hidden in the trees, they didn’t
even acknowledge each other’s presence. At first it was both their doing, but as time passed, Sasuke
began to entertain the idea of befriending the other boy for real, if only because they spent so much
time together.

Naruto was impermeable to the idea though. He just wasn’t interested. Anyone approaching him at
school or in the streets got a snarl and a menacing glare. Sasuke was special in the sense that
Naruto was civil to him during training, but that was it.

Oh, well. If Naruto didn’t want to be friends, Sasuke wasn’t going to insist.

Except if his father told him not to.

He was late again. It happened more and more as Sasuke’s stamina improved. Naruto was never
the one to call off training except on laundry day, because he was tireless, and he was greatly
annoyed by the limits of Sasuke’s body.

They had practiced grab-and-throw moves as Naruto called it and Sasuke was sore all over for
being tossed against the hard-packed dirt again and again. His pain tolerance was also increasing –
Shisui had commented a few weeks ago that he was “much less of a crybaby lately”. He guessed it
was meant as a sort of compliment.

“I’m home,” he called once the front door was closed behind him, fully expecting to get nothing
in return. His mother was on a mission with her genin team and not due back before the next day.
As for the other residents of the house, who knew. Not Sasuke.

As it was, he was very surprised to see his father emerged from the kitchen with a scowl firmly in
place, the one that guaranteed Sasuke was in for a lecture.

“We need to talk Sasuke. Come.”

His mother was sitting at the table, Itachi too, which told him it wasn’t about just being late for
dinner. In fact dinner wasn’t even set. His mother was still in her jounin uniform – freshly back, he
guessed.

“Is there a problem?” he asked, even if he could imagine where this was going. Indeed his father
wasted no time cutting through the heart of the issue.

“You’ve been training with Uzumaki Naruto,” he stated. Sasuke nodded. No use in denying it.

“This ends today, Sasuke. I don’t want you to see that boy anymore.”

Oh. Oh.

It wasn’t so long ago, Sasuke thought bleakly, that he would have agreed without even uttering a
word. He wanted nothing more than to please his father and that included never disobeying, never
stepping out of line.

But this had been going on for months. Months. He’d met with Naruto almost every single
school day. They weren’t advertising it but they weren’t making a big secret out of it either.
And now, out of the blue, his father wanted to forbid it?

No way.

“Why?” he asked, anger already rising. He never used to be angry before. He didn’t really like it.

“Because I said so. That boy is bad news and a bad influence and I don’t want you to mix up with him.”

The thing was, Sasuke was tongue-tied in front of his father. His anger and frustrating were boiling inside of him but he didn’t know what to do, what to say. Didn’t know how to outright defy him.

“He’s not! And -and we’re helping each other out. What is wrong with that?”

“You don’t need him to train.”

“Who am I supposed to ask?”

That, at least, gave his father a pause. Sasuke saw Itachi stiffen out of the corner of his eyes, but he said nothing. He never did.

“I made great progress training with him. I- I’m not gonna stop!”

The look of his father was priceless. Sasuke was sweating nervously, but he didn’t take it back.

“Yes,” his father growled carefully, “you are.”

“N - no I’m not,” Sasuke muttered, much less assured now. He wanted this conversation to be over. Why was it such a big deal suddenly? Naruto wasn’t a poster child but he wasn’t a criminal either. This was absurd, unfair.

“Yes you are!”

“No, he’s not.”

They all turned toward his mother.

She had been silent until then, as she usually was. It was their father who held the authority, who made this kind of decisions. They may argue privately about it, but she always deferred to him in the end.

Sasuke felt instantly forgotten as his parents glared at each other. There was a world unsaid between them, things he couldn’t begin to comprehend. He exchanged a quick glance with Itachi who seemed just as puzzled as he was. Small comfort.

“We’ve talked about this, Mikoto,” their father said in a warning tone.

“You’ve talked about it, and I didn’t say a thing. But I’m not going to stand by it any longer. This is wrong, has been from the start, and I know I can’t do anything about it, but I’ll be damned if I stop him too.”

Sasuke had never seen her like this. Her face was hardened by anger and… grief? She seemed so resentful, so hurt. He had no idea what they were talking about.

“We’ll talk about this later.”
It was their father’s way of cutting the discussion short, and meant they had to abide by whatever he had said last and pro bably never actually discuss it again. Except she didn’t follow suit this time.

“We will. But in the meantime, Sasuke,” she turned toward him, instantly losing some of her hardness to smile at him. “It would make me very happy, if you were to befriend Naruto.”

Their father started to protest. Sasuke only nodded dumbly and, seeing that they were about to get serious about that argument, elected to exit the room as fast as he could.

Itachi had the same idea and they bumped into each other in the corridor. Itachi was always on his side even when he said nothing and Sasuke knew he had interceded in his favor to their father many times, but it would have been nice to have some actual support for once. All he wanted was for them to talk again. He didn’t know where it went, their bond, the things they used to share.

He didn’t know what he had done wrong.

“What should I do?” he asked, hoping that Itachi wouldn’t turn away this time. That he’d say something, anything.

He took his time, as he always did. He was careful with words like they scared him. Sasuke could understand that – he didn’t trust words either.

“You should do what you want, Sasuke.”

And it could have sounded dismissive but coming from Itachi, it was a huge deal. Sasuke had the nagging feeling that he had never seen Itachi do something he actually wanted to do his whole life. He always looked so pained by everything, forced to do, forced to be. No wonder he was exhausted all the time.

“Won’t you train with me?” Sasuke asked, both challenging and a little desperate. No matter that Naruto was kind of fun and no matter his mother’s blessing – if Itachi said he wanted to train with him, Sasuke would ditch the blonde in a heartbeat.

But his brother’s face soured like he had bitten on a lemon and he shook his head.

“I’d rather not.”

And that hurt. There was not even an explanation, no excuse. At least it was clear. He simply didn’t want to.

Sasuke blinked back tears and went straight to his room.

He was planning to sulk there and skip dinner, but they didn’t even have dinner that night.

Naruto expected that kind of talk much sooner. He’d been waiting for months for the ball to drop, for Sasuke telling him that his parents, for whatever reasons, didn’t want them to hang out anymore. It had happened with every kid he ever had the slightest interactions with – including when it was just him being bullied.

The two teenagers waiting for him at their usual training ground where unfamiliar to him but it wasn’t hard to guess who they were. Dark eyes, dark hair, dark clothes, white skin, the only splash of color being the blood red of the fan on their back. They were obviously related to Sasuke, and
most likely here to tell him not to approach him ever again. They were also early. He wondered if they were just planning on waiting around like idiots or if they knew he would ditch class and be here sooner than he was supposed to.

“Hi. Can I help you?”

One had long hair tied in a low ponytail and looked bored and boring. The other was more open and cheerful, and he was the one to answer.

“Hello. You’re Naruto, right? I’m Sasuke’s cousin Shisui, and this is his brother Itachi.”

Ha. So that was the famous Itachi Sasuke couldn’t shut up about. Be it to rage or praise him, Sasuke referred to the other boy at least once a day – or Itachi was referred to Sasuke by whoever. It was hilarious to watch.

“Cool. What do you want?”

The training ground was remote, it was part of its appeal, but it had no appeal to Naruto now. They could do whatever they wanted to him. No one would come looking. No one would care.

“We know you’ve been training with Sasuke a lot, lately, so we just wanted to… get acquainted.”

At least the boy wasn’t trying to look convincing. Naruto didn’t read him as a threat, but shinobi were good at looking friendly while planning a murder.

“You should know that our parents disapprove of this,” the brother said in a deep, even voice.

“Their father disapproves,” the cousin corrected, smile still in place. “But Sasuke is free, right?”

The question was aimed more at the other Uchiha than at Naruto.

“Should I care?” Naruto challenged, fed up already. The brother didn’t like it.

“If you care about him,” he answered. Naruto snarled. Sasuke wasn’t his friend. They were sparring partners and it was already more of a connection than he had ever had with anyone, than he ever wanted, and that didn’t mean he had to braid him friendship bracelets. Sasuke’s parents weren’t his problem.

Naruto had lied, when he’d say he didn’t know who Uchiha Itachi was, that first time he’d talked to Sasuke. Well, not exactly lied – he didn’t know who he was, but he had heard his name before. Shisui’s too. Just because he was no longer welcome at the Hokage tower didn’t mean he had given up on his spying habits. He’d never went as far as peeking at official documents and meetings, but he didn’t need to. Shinobi were so nosy, and chatty. Had he cared about their secrets at all, he would have made a report to the old man about their dramatic lack of discipline and discretion.

He didn’t care though. And he had no scruple using what he’d learned.

“Wait, Itachi and Shisui, it rings a bell now… You were friends with Danzo, right?”

He still knew next to nothing about that whole affair, but he knew at least that, even if of course “friends” wasn’t the right word at all. They seemed to agree, for they both tensed, face falling into matching expressions of wariness and resentment.

“You know nothing about us,” Itachi said through gritted teeth. He was right. Naruto wasn’t about
to tell him that. The boy looked ready to attack and Naruto couldn’t help but match his posture. He was never smart enough to know when to shut up, when to lay low. Better to fight, even if he lost, than to surrender.

“You wish. Leave me the hell alone. If Sasuke wants to ditch me, he can do it all on his own.”

For some reasons this loosened the cousin somehow. He put a hand on Itachi’s shoulder, and it spoke volume about their closeness that the other teen relaxed immediately. They exchanged a meaningful look, charged with unsaid understandings.

Naruto wanted to punch them.

“There’s no need to be aggressive,” Shisui said after a pause. “He can do what he wants indeed, and he told that to his father actually.”

Naruto faltered, caught off guard

“He… did?”

“Uh huh. We just wanted you to know that things were kind of tense. Because he probably won’t tell you himself. For what it’s worth, I think it’s a great thing. As long as you two get along, we don’t have a problem with you.”

But they would at Naruto’s first misstep. The threat was clear as day, although they probably had no idea what they were supposed to be wary for when it came to the blonde.

It’s not like he knew himself.

“Do you know why?” he asked, unable to stop himself. “Why they don’t want this,” he added at their puzzled expression. They crossed gaze again.

“No,” Itachi admitted. Naruto rolled his eyes. They were useless, to top it all.

“Seriously though. What do you know? About us,” the cousin asked, grave despite his open expression. Naruto shrugged.

“Nothing more,” he assured them. It was almost the truth. “You should leave. Sasuke will be here soon.”

“Right.” Shisui turned to leave but he had to grab his cousin’s sleeve to make him move too. Itachi was staring at him with an intensity that was beyond uncomfortable. Naruto held his gaze all the same.

Sasuke reached the training ground a mere five minutes after they were gone. Naruto debated keeping the encounter from him for two whole seconds before deciding that there was no reason he was the only one in a sour mood.

“You didn’t tell me that super-jounin was your brother.”

Sasuke never looked especially joyful, but it was funny to see that he could always get gloomier.

“You met him?”

“He came to warn me about your parents. Something you want to share?”

Naruto would deny to the day he died how badly he wanted to hear Sasuke actually say it.
“No. It’s none of your business.”

It was music to his ears.

“That’s what I told them.”

“Forget about it then. So, where were we?”

For all that he complained about his parents Sasuke was very much a mama’s boy. It felt significant somehow that he was actively going against their will by being here with Naruto. And even if that was the appeal for the other boy, even if he was just looking for some rebellion, it was still nice. To not be alone, just for a little while.

“You do know, right? What’s up with the boy.”

Itachi shrugged. Shisui sighed heavily. It had become his mission in life to manage to drag Itachi out of the pit of gloom and despair he had crawled in, but it wasn’t for today, obviously. Danzo was long gone, never to return again, and their clan was safe. But it wasn’t thanks to them, and it didn’t do anything to alleviate the weight on Itachi’s mind.

“I think I do,” Itachi conceded after a few more steps.

“I guess it makes sense they wouldn’t want them to become friends,” Shisui pondered aloud. He had his doubts too. It had never been said in so many words, but Shisui was good at letting his ears wander, and shinobis were terrible gossips.

“Maybe so,” Itachi said. “None of us has any right to determine who’s the monster though.”

Shisui didn’t answer, but he couldn’t disagree. The boy looked like an insufferable brat, but he was also a freaking child. Not that it meant much of anything of course, there was no such thing as innocence to be protected for the village. They were shinobis first and people second, or maybe not even that.

That’s how it had been for them anyway. But he was convinced it didn’t have to be for those who were to come, for the kids growing up right now, for Sasuke, who was so cute and kind of hilarious with his childish tantrums and his fierce will to one-up everyone else. Shisui loved that brat, and he would do his damn best to protect him from this fucked up world.

“I guess we’ll just keep an eye on them both,” he concluded. Itachi nodded. Keeping an eye on Sasuke was pretty much his sole activity in life, besides brooding. He still wasn’t talking to his little brother though.

Shisui sighed again. They still had a long, long way to go.

“Why did you go to Naruto?”

Itachi didn’t jump – Sasuke had yet to manage to take his brother off guard – but he still turned a surprised gaze to Sasuke who had just barged into his room unannounced. He set down his brush carefully and turned away from the scroll he was filling with his neat handwriting.

“I just wanted to meet him. I was curious, that’s all.”
“If you were curious about my life, you could ask me about it.”

He didn’t know what had possessed him to be so blunt all of the sudden. Maybe he was still high on his sparring with Naruto that never failed to pump him up. He’d dropped the subject quickly with the other boy because he didn’t want him to know how he was affected by this. It had been nice that Naruto didn’t know Itachi, even in passing, because Sasuke could rant about him all he wanted without getting a disapproving or offended look. Not that Naruto was offended by much.

Just before they had parted though, Naruto had told him, casual and unbothered, “I’m kinda mad at you for suggesting I train with him. He looks like the dullest guy ever.”

It was pretty mean and entirely untrue. Sasuke had snorted all the same. He didn’t like being this petty, didn’t like resenting Itachi this way. But Itachi had taken the time to stalk his friend while he couldn’t be bothered to say two words to him.

“What have I done?” he asked through gritted teeth. His fists were closed, nails digging into his palms as he bit his lips to keep more words from spilling out. He was shaking with pent-up frustration. He just wanted to know.

“No… It’s not like that, Sasuke. It’s not your fault.”

“I can’t tell you.”

Sasuke threw his arms in the air, fed up with that same song he’d heard a million times before.

“What the hell,” he mumbled and made to leave the room, determined not to speak to his brother ever again. It was Itachi who spoke though.

“I’m sorry, Sasuke.”

It gave him a pause. Not so much the words as the tone, and the look on his face when he turned back toward his brother. Whatever it was he was talking about, it was more than the distance he kept between them, more than bothering his friend behind his back. Itachi was sorry and Sasuke didn’t even know about what. It was stupid.

“I… I just miss you.”

Sasuke felt the blush creep up his cheeks as he found a sudden interest in his socks. The left one had a hole in it – he would have to bring it to his mother so that she could mend it. Or maybe he’d do it himself. She’d been teaching him, saying it was a good skill to have. She didn’t go on that much extended missions but she too wasn’t as much at home as she used to.

Sasuke felt lonely.

“I’ll… try my best to change that,” Itachi said lamely. He seemed to found it a great ordeal, but Sasuke wasn’t asking for the moon.

“Leave Naruto alone though,” he warned. “He’s my friend.”

That made Itachi smile for some reason.

“I will.”

Sasuke nodded and left the room, feeling a little better but still very much annoyed, and decided
mending socks was a good way as any to distract himself from his stupid family.

The next day, Sasuke was first at the training ground, which was unusual. Naruto strolled him a few minutes later, supremely unconcerned.

But most importantly, not alone.

“Yo, Sasuke. This is Sakura. Sakura, Sasuke.”

“We’re in the same class, idiot. We already know each other.”

It was something of an overstatement – Sasuke wouldn’t have bet his life on having spoken to the girl even once before. She used to be more feisty and loud before the Academy, when she was friend with Yamanaka Ino, but she went unnoticed nowadays. Sasuke’s eyes flicked involuntarily to her shaved hair and the clean scar running from her left cheek to the side of her skull, cutting her ear neatly in half. She looked away.

“Yeah, yeah, alright mister sociable. Sakura here has been helping me with ninjutsu, but it turns out she sucks massively at taijutsu. Like, it’s shameful really. And since you’re still too weak to go for more than a few hours, I figured an extra would keep us running, even such a bad one.”

Sasuke waited a bit, just in case this was a joke on the boy’s part, but for all his devil-may-care attitude, hands up behind his head and bored expression on his face, he was serious. Sasuke expected Sakura to take offense on the way he talked about her, but she didn’t say a thing. Despite avoiding eye contact, she looked determined, and she even found her voice when she bowed and gave out a low “thank you for having me” to the both of them.

“We are?” Sasuke couldn’t help asking, skeptic.

“Yeah, we are,” Naruto confirmed. They glared at each other for a while until Naruto sighed. “It’s gonna be great, Sas . It’s about time you make some respectable friends yeah? And by that I mean friends you can be seen out in public with.”

Sasuke’s eyes widened, surprised enough that he didn’t pick on the absurd nickname. Was this… about his parents? It’s true that Sasuke taking on a project such as training an average shinobi into something more would sit better with his father, but it didn’t matter to him. He didn’t want to please his father.

Then again, it guaranteed his life to be easier.

He looked at the girl. There was nothing remarkable about Haruno Sakura. She was the daughter of two low-level shinobis and was pretty low-level herself, especially since she seemed to care more about being pretty than training. But a few weeks before, she had disappeared from class for days with no explanation except a “Sakura is sick” from one of the teachers. When she returned, her hair was gone, she had that scar, and she couldn’t be found more than two meters away from Naruto anymore.

No one knew what happened to her, although the rumors were running wild. Sasuke hadn’t cared much. It’s not like she had become friend with Naruto. More like he was tolerating her – she sat beside him in class and stuck close to him during breaks. They didn’t talk or interact much in any way, but more importantly, Sasuke supposed, no one talked to or approach them. Not just Naruto but Sakura as well, by extension. She had been bullied heavily since the beginning of the school year, with no one stepping in to help and no teacher to care.
Naruto was a powerful deterrent. If he had been bullied when they were younger, it had stopped when he started punching back, and later hurling kids who were mean at him across the field.

From Sakura’s perspective, Sasuke could see the boy’s appeal.

“…Fine,” he agreed eventually, with the distinct impression that he didn’t have much of a choice anyway. Naruto gave him an easy smile – he knew from the start how it was going to end. It was frustrating how often he got what he wanted by the sheer force of his power of annoyance.

“Awesome. Sakura, get in first. And I’m warning you, neither blood nor tears are a good reason to stop a fight. If you want out you’d better be dying.”

Again, where Sasuke expected the girl to protest or chicken out, she only nodded seriously. She wasn’t paying attention to Sasuke at all – her eyes were on Naruto like he was the one who would grant all her wishes.

Well, if she wished to get stronger, it wasn’t entirely untrue. Sasuke could understand. He wanted to get stronger too.

Ah. Why not, then.

Chapter End Notes

Itachi just can't deal with any emotion ever. That boy is completely inept at regular life. He'll learn though. Eventually. And Shisui is doing amazing as always, I love that dumb kid. And Sasuke is such a whiny brat x) my boy you have no idea what trauma I spared you... I love his angsty teen act though. He's allowed to be as childish as he wants. I'm so happy to write all those Uchihas. Mikoto is gonna kick ass, Fugaku watch out.

We'll see what happened to Sakura next chapter. Yeah there's no reason I'll spare her, everyone has to suffer. You know Mizuki turned out to be a traitor yeah, well I read in a fic (I think it was Soft as an Unready Mind go read it it's great) that he was sabotaging the kids all those years. That's basically what is happening here and he has an even bigger influence since Iruka isn't there to temper it. So they're all having a terrible time at school. Isn't it great.

Do you feel like this is moving too fast? I always have that impression and then I'm told the pacing is a bit slow, wtf me. Anyway, things are not gonna speed up in any way. Please leave a comment if you're enjoying this ride, see ya!
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Sakura didn’t know people could be so cruel.

Chapter Notes

I really didn’t need to go that hard on Sakura. Really, that was mean of me. But well. Hope you’ll enjoy, you’re free to visit me on tumblr, I’m always up for talking about Naruto or whatever.

WARNING - this chapter deals with bullying going pretty far and not being punished. Be aware of that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sakura didn’t know people could be so cruel.

She didn’t know they’d be so cruel for no reason.

Sakura, in many many ways, was average. Average looking girl with average parents of average class leading an average life. There had never been anything remarkable about her, good or bad. She was pretty good at school, but Mizuki sensei said it’s just because she was a good bookworm, not because she was smart or anything. She picked up on thing at a speed above average, but that was all.

Average girl with average complexes about her face, her big forehead that others mock like they could have mocked any other aspect of her. She’d made friend with Ino who was far from average, who was beautiful and strong and cool, and who lifted Sakura above her average status just by being friends with her.

And then she’d gotten an average crush.

Sasuke was pretty, far prettier than any of the other boys. He was also more mature, mainly because he stayed silent instead of making crude joked and inappropriate comments all day long. He was nice and polite to all, including her. One day she’d seen him at the market with his older brother, and she’d seen him smile like he never did with the other kids, happy and soft, unrestrained. Sasuke was soft. That’s what she liked about him.

She’d decided she’d be in love with him then. It made her feel warm and hopeful. It was a very nice feeling.

She had no idea what it would bring down on her.

She lost Ino’s friendship. At first she thought it was just a phase. They had fought before, had given each other the cold shoulder, but they always made up after a few days. Not this time though.
Ino was serious about that rivalry thing, and Sakura followed suit, and then discovered that all of her other friends were in fact Ino’s friends. She started the Academy alone and alone she remained.

It wasn’t so bad. She studied and daydreamed about Sasuke addressing her in class so that she wouldn’t be so alone anymore. It wasn’t so bad until it started.

She didn’t know people could be cruel for no reason.

There was a reason of course. Several, in fact, depending on the day. She was too arrogant with her good grades and good answers in class. Too arrogant to be after Sasuke with how ugly and average she was (because she could be both those things, apparently). She had a big forehead, she had too pink hair, she had no friend, she was okay with having no friend. There were reasons, and at the same time, there weren’t. It could have been anything. It’s not what mattered.

What mattered is that the girls in her class started to call her names. Then they stole her things, her lunch, her homework. Then they tripped her up in the corridor or beat her during training.

The teachers said nothing, looked away or told her that “adversity builds character”. The other kids said nothing because they didn’t care.

Ino said nothing, and that hurt the most maybe, even if she never participated, even if she was never the one to pull her hair and spill ink on her clothes. She said nothing and that hurt the most.

But it was okay. It would pass. School wouldn’t last forever. Maybe Sasuke would sweep in to save the day, to protect her. She was pretty good at ignoring all of this, at enduring until it went away. They were just mean and stupid, she wasn’t about to care, it wasn’t so bad. She wasn’t the only victim, no one had it easy at school. It didn’t matter. She built up huge fantasies in her head where she got strong and beat every single one of them, or became so good and successful they all fawned over her and begged for her forgiveness, and it was enough, because what did she care about them.

Until one day she discovered just how cruel, exactly, people could be.

It had been a good day. She had been left alone, mostly, and she’d been paired up with Sasuke for genjutsu practice. She could break out of most jutsu easily, and their teacher had praised her since she was running against an Uchiha and they were notoriously very good at genjutsu. Sasuke had even nodded to her at the end of the class, like to acknowledge her skill.

So it had been a very good day.

She was walking home after class, playing it back in her head, wondering what she could do to get that nod again, that look, to exist in his eyes. They were paired up more and more by skill level and affinities, so she rarely ended up with him. He was slightly better than her in ninjutsu and worlds better in taijutsu.

Maybe she needed to train more. She didn’t want to look all bulky and unfeminine, but rumor had it that Sasuke liked strong kunoichi… Besides, being strong could be nice, if only to get some peace.

“You’re getting way too confident, ugly.”

Sakura was yanked out of her own head to realize she was surrounded by several of her classmates in a small, empty side street.

Fear spiked instantly but she tried to reign it in. They weren’t going to hurt her, not really.

They weren’t.
“What do you want?” she asked, far more defiant than she actually felt. There was no way out of the street. There were two girls in front of her and three at her back. She was trapped.

“We saw you getting cozy with Sasuke today,” Kara said. She was the chief of the little band, and as such, her chief tormentor. She was taller and stronger than Sakura.

“We were just practicing,” she tried to defend, already knowing it was pointless. It wasn’t about that. “Let me go.”

“Don’t get cocky!”

She didn’t want to anger them further but she couldn’t not roll her eyes. How was she getting cocky? She just wanted to leave!

“You think you’re pretty enough to get his attention?” Sasaki asked, taking a step forward. Sakura took a step back, only to feel the other three closing in on her.

“No I don’t,” she answered without thinking. It was the truth. She knew she wasn’t pretty enough, wasn’t pretty at all. She dreamed, but she was aware it would never come to be. Sasuke would never notice her. Why would he? She was unremarkable.

Why wasn’t she unremarkable to them too? She just wanted to be left alone.

“That’s right, you’re not,” Sasaki said after a hesitation, caught off guard by Sakura’s blunt declaration.

“You’ve been growing your hair out for him right?”

Sakura didn’t answer. It had been told at some point that Sasuke preferred girls with long hair. Now that she thought about it, she was very skeptical about how the girl who had started that rumor could have possibly gotten that information, since every single one of them had yet to successfully hold a conversation with the boy.

She had followed it anyway. She liked her hair, despite everything, she liked its color and how it flowed in waves, brushing against her back, and she liked to take care of it. She liked her mother braiding them or running her hand through them too. Having someone else doing it would be nice, surely.

“Leave me alone,” she said weakly. Fear was rising inside of her, wild and uncontrollable. The girls were getting closer and the look in their eyes scared her. She was hyper-aware of how alone she was in that street, how there was no one around to see what was happening. No one to stop it.

“Shorter hair would suit you better, Sakura,” Kara said.

She pulled a kunai from her bag.

Time seemed to stop on its track. There was a short second suspended in time and space where nothing happened, nothing moved. The next few minutes played very fast in Sakura’s head, but she didn’t manage to make sense of them, to understand. It wasn’t possible. They wouldn’t hurt her.

People weren’t that cruel.

The others hesitated, but not for long. Kara ordered, “grab her”, and they did.

Sakura only started to struggle weakly when hands closed around her arms and neck, but there were
four of them and one of her. A kick at the back of her knees sent her to the ground. The kunai got closer to her head.

“What are you doing? What are you doing? Stop, stop, stop!”

Nothing happened. She tried to move but her body was paralyzed by fear and shock, her mind refusing to face what was playing before her eyes. There was nothing she could do, and no one would come.

Kara grabbed a handful of her hear and cut through the mass.

The tug of the blade, not sharp enough to slice in one motion, was what got her out of her trance. She started trashing in earnest, screaming, anything she could do to stop it, stop it all, to make them disappear. Kara cursed, the grips hardened. Sakura kept trying to get away, seized by panic, unable to “stay still” like they were asking her too. Kara’s grip on her hair didn’t relent though. She cut again, again, again.

Then, two things happen at the very same time.

Someone screamed “what the hell are you doing you psycho?”. And Sakura, tugging hard enough to feel hair get ripped out of her skull, sent her head straight toward the kunai still in Kara’s hand.

The next few moments were a blur, because she was in shock, and because there was blood running down her face and into her eyes, making the world a literal blur. Until finally, the fighting stopped and silence returned to the scene as her tormentors ran off in the distance promising retribution.

“You know where to find me,” the boy who had come to her aid said. Because yeah, it was a boy, and even a boy she knew.

“N-Naruto? Is that you?”

“You need medical care. Come on.”

He pulled her to her feet, an arm hooked around her elbow, both to stir her and to support her. Her legs were wobbly and for a moment she wasn’t confident she would be able to walk, but he pulled mercilessly and she stumbled behind him without much of a choice.

“It’s doesn’t seem too bad, it just bleeds a lot. But you’ll have a scar.”

A scar. She brought a hand to her head. Her cheek was bleeding and starting to hurt badly. Most of her hair was gone.

The tears came only then.

“Come on,” Naruto repeated, uncomfortable. She bawled her eyes out all the way to Konoha’s hospital, the salt of her tears stinging as they ran into the cut. Sakura could taste blood – she realized with mild horror that the blade had pierced the flesh all the way through her mouth. An adult addressed them at some point. The words parted the fog clouding her head a little.

“Oh my, what happened? Naruto, what did you do?”

Sakura blinked around the tears and blood crowding her eyes. She recognized the man as one of their teachers.
“She needs help,” was all Naruto said, before letting go of her arm. She almost reached out. She didn’t want him to go.

“Stay here Naruto! You have explanations to give!”

“It… it wasn’t him,” she said, finally founding her voice. “He helped me. It was…”

She might as well have been talking to a wall. Naruto didn’t listen and ran away. The chunin sighed, cursing after him, before he seemed to remember Sakura’s presence and stirred her toward the hospital.

She felt numb, completely out of it. The man talked to a nurse but she didn’t get a word of what they were saying. She heard Naruto’s name – she wanted to tell them again, wanted to say it was Kara and her crew and that Naruto had saved her, but her throat was hoarse and they didn’t seem interested in what she had to say. The nurse stitched the cut on her cheek with uncaring moves. She patched kids up all the time, teens and adults too, who hurt themselves in training, cut flesh and broke bones in mock fights.

It was all routine to her.

“For your ear I’m afraid there’s nothing we can do. Sorry, Sakura.”

The nurse tapped gauze to her face and told her her parents were on the way, before leaving her alone in the consultation room.

She couldn’t have said how much time passed, how long she stayed in that room with her thoughts and the pain radiating from the left side of her face. Eventually, her mother burst through the door with panic on her face and the beginning of tears in her eyes, her father following more stoically but no less worried. They wrapped her in a hug, murmuring reassurance. Sakura heard none of it.

She hated the pain. She hated it. She hated that there was nothing to do against it, that it was impossible to fight, that the painkillers killed nothing at all. Her skin itched and tugged and burnt, and she could do nothing but stay still and bear it.

She was excused from school for a whole week, which only added hurt to injury in her eyes. She could picture how the other kids were talking, gossiping, speculating. What they would say once she returned.

Her mother had cut the rest of her hair – better to get rid of it all that to leave the pitiful strands she had left. Her mother told her they would grow back in no time.

Sakura wasn’t sure she would let it.

The day before she was due back to school, she went back to the hospital to have the wound checked and stitches removed. She had avoided mirrors when her mother was changing the dressing. She didn’t want to see.

“The scar will resorb in time,” the nurse assured. She was talking to her mother, not to her, probably because of the look on her face as she stared at Sakura. She wasn’t making eye contact – she was looking at the side of her face.

A voice in Sakura’s head told her she better get used to it.
She went straight to her room when they got back home, refusing to talk to her parents. She heard her mother’s worried voice, her father’s angry tone. “Can’t they do anything?” She closed the door firmly.

She sat down in the middle of the room, facing her full-length mirror but looking at the side, trying to find the strength somewhere to look, to face herself. She had never felt so alone as she did at that moment. She had no friend to turn to, no one to tell her it would be all right, it wasn’t so bad, it didn’t matter. The little hole in her chest she associated with the place Ino used to fill ached more than it usually did. She missed her friend all the time, but never as much as she did now. She doubted the teachers had told the class about her ordeal, Ino had no idea what had happened, except if Naruto had gossiped.

She was sure he hadn’t. Naruto didn’t talk to anyone and no one talked to him. He was a savage, barely civilized, snarling and snapping like a wild animal at everyone approaching him, doing his damn best to never be close to anyone.

He had still come to her aid. He didn’t have to do that, there was no reason to put himself on the line like that. They had never interacted properly except when she mocked him with the others, a common practice everybody indulged into in their class.

She promised herself she would never do that again.

She still didn’t look in the mirror.

She didn’t understand why it had happened. What had she done, to deserve this, what was so wrong with her that others would wish her harm so badly. What had possibly gone through those girls’ heads to go through with it. This wasn’t pushing someone into a puddle or stomping their snack. This was…

Sakura made eye contact with her reflection.

With long hair, it would have been barely noticeable probably, especially face front. But she didn’t have long hair. She had no hair at all – her pink strand where now barely five centimeters long, so short that they didn’t even fall back and were sticking awkwardly at all angles. Leaving her face completely exposed – her massive forehead, her washed out eyes, and a swollen red line starting close to the corner of her mouth and climbing her face up to her ear. The shell of which was cut in the middle, a little triangle of light shining through where flesh should have been.

She had never been beautiful, but now, she was ugly for sure.

There was nothing to do to hide it, except start wearing a mask or a high collar like Shino. It almost felt worth the change of wardrobe – how could she go to school like this, how could she face the others? She was disfigured. And it wasn’t even a glorious scar, something she would have gotten in battle, something that proved her strength, the fit she had accomplished.

No, it only served as a reminder that she was too weak to protect herself.

“Are you alright, Sakura?” her mother asked from the other side of the door. Sakura closed her eyes tight to escape her reflection and to keep the tears in. She was sick of crying – it gave her a headache, it was exhausting and gross. It didn’t help in any way.

And it hurt, when salty water ran down her tender scar. This was her life now.

“Yes, I’m fine.”
Her mother didn’t call her up on the lie.

She had to look straight ahead. Not let her eyes wander. She couldn’t keep her eyes on the ground and risk bumping into something or someone, even if she really wanted to. She used to keep her eyes on the ground, and let her hair fall in front of her face and hide her from the world.

It would be useless now. The longest strand of hair she had left barely reached her eyebrows, the rest brushed the top of her forehead. There was no hiding.

She could feel the other students’ eyes on her like a physical weight, their whispers following her around, wrapping around her head like snakes. She kept walking toward the classroom, posture rigid and gaze unwavering, determined not to make eye contact with anyone.

She usually arrived earlier than this, but she had hoped coming in as late as possible would cut the amount of time people would talk among themselves or worse, walk up to her. But it also meant the classroom was almost full when she reached it.

Silence fell on her gathered classmates who stared at her openly, not bothering to be discreet in any way. She did all she could not to look at any of them, but when she tried to make it to her usual seat, she caught, out of the corner of her eyes, the girl that was sitting right behind her in class.

Kara.

Sakura didn’t think. She took an abrupt turn and sat down at the closest seat available, several rows away from the girl. She looked up subtly, to see who she had sat next to.

It was Naruto.

For a breathless moment she was terrified he was going to tell her off. He had been known to scare other kids away when he wasn’t in the mood to have anyone in his close proximity – it wasn’t rare that their classmates bumped elbows four at one table instead of three, because he was alone at his own.

They stared at each other for an eternity of a few seconds. His eyes traveled deliberately to the side of her face before going back to hers, a slight frown breaking the bored indifference of his expression. She couldn’t begin to imagine what he was thinking, what he was looking for. Eventually, he turned away without a word, settling his head on his crossed arms, ready to take a nap. Sakura let out a relieved breath.

She should have moved as soon as she could. The next period, or after the morning break, of for lunch. But she was terrified beyond measures of coming face to face with Kara and her goons, so she stayed right where she was.

Because, and it became clear immediately, they surely weren’t to approach her. Not as long as she stayed there. They weren’t going to approach him.

She wanted to thank him. For stepping in, for helping her. But it was hard to talk to him. He so rarely seemed to want it. Lunch break was coming to an end and she was building up the courage to open her mouth, but just when she was finally resolute, Mizuki-sensei entered the room.

“Naruto. Come with me.”

He looked friendly enough, he always did. Sakura couldn’t buy it though. The man creeped her out
despite how nice she was, she couldn’t bring herself to trust him. She couldn’t believe he wished any of them any good.

The kids whispered as Naruto sighed and got up to follow the teacher out of the room, while Daikoku-sensei entered for their theory lesson.

Sakura just had the time to catch a glimpse of her parents on the other side of the door.

She jumped to her feet, only to realize that the class was starting. The teacher cast her a puzzled look.

“Sakura, is there a problem?”

She almost gave up then. She almost sat back down and let it go. She could just ignore the empty seat at her side, forget about it, wash her hands off of Naruto's fate like everyone else did. But she couldn’t. She didn’t know why. She just couldn't.

“I need to go.”

“Do you feel bad?”

“I need to go.”

She bolted out of the classroom.

On a guess, she headed straight to the teacher’s lounge, and walked in on Mizuki screaming his lungs out at Naruto, while her parents watched from the side in uncomfortable silence.

It occurred to her, as she barged into the room and started yelling to leave him alone, that it wasn’t his fault, that it was the first time in her whole life she was standing up to an adult. Or to anyone really.

Naruto looked unconcerned by Mizuki’s temper, but the look on his face when he spotted her and understood what she was doing here was one of pure astonishment, and probably the most expressive thing she had ever seen on his face. Her parents tried to step in. She didn’t listen.

“There’s no need to cover for him, Sakura.”

“I’m not! I told you, it wasn’t him! It was Kara!”

“Now, now, that’s a bold accusation to make, Sakura…”

She was tensed all over, tears of frustration building up behind her eyes.

“What won’t you listen to me?” she screamed. She was at a complete loss as to what was happening here. She had seen who it was, it had happened to her. How could there possibly be any doubt? Why wouldn’t they believe her?

"Sakura, come on. Calm down. It's okay," her mother said, trying to be soothing. It only raised Sakura's hackles up. How could she say that? How could she stand idle and do nothing?

“It’s not!”

“Sakura.”

She turned a surprised look toward Naruto. She didn’t expect him to say anything at all. His voice
was firm, commanding. He looked angry, like he always did, but she didn’t feel it was directed at her, when his eyes bore into hers.

“Kara won’t be punished.”

She was vaguely aware that Mizuki answered something to that, something about Naruto not having to spew lies or to try to confuse her. She didn’t listen. His eyes were fixed on her and she didn’t look away. He was trying to tell her something, to make her understand.

She did.

Kara was an Uchiha. From a minor branch, but an Uchiha nonetheless, she never failed to remind it at every turn, to everyone. Same went for her friends, who were from various prestigious clans too. Not heirs or major branches, but still ranking higher than Sakura and her family by a wild margin. And than Naruto by even more.

Naruto just shrugged, as she was losing her mind. Was that it? Was that how it was going to be? Naruto was always blamed for everything, she knew, but this wasn’t a stupid prank, this wasn’t spilled ink or stolen goods. This was her face, changed forever, an attack five on one outside of school for no reason, this was serious.

Wasn’t it?

Naruto just shrugged, and she understood it wasn’t.

Her mother stirred her away as Mizuki resumed yelling. Sakura followed numbly, eyes fixed on the boy the entire time. He remained stoic, almost unconcerned, but his shoulders were tensed and his fists tightly closed.

And the look on his face. The hatred, the rage.

Her parents shut the door on the boy getting unjustly punished for their daughter getting knifed by someone else.

“It wasn’t him,” Sakura said again, despaired. “Why are you doing this? It wasn’t him.”

“Sakura… It’s okay. Forget about it.”

“Forget?”

Sakura felt like she was seeing her mother for the first time. She couldn’t believe what she was hearing, what was happening.

“They won’t be punished. They did this to me, and nothing will happen to them. Naruto saved me, and he’ll take the blame. And I should just…”

She choked on it, unable to say it. Her mother shook her head but didn’t say a thing. Her father didn’t either.

Sakura didn’t know people could be so cruel. She didn’t know they could be such cowards either.

Sakura had just learned a very bitter lesson.

The next day, it’s with determination that she walked into class and sat down next to Naruto. He
raised an eyebrow but said nothing, just looked at her, waiting.

“I didn’t get to thank you,” she said with a small voice, both because she didn’t want the others to hear and because he was terribly intimidating. “For saving me. And I’m sorry, I’m so sorry it went that way. If I’d just…”

“Forget about it. That’s just how things are. It’s doesn’t matter.”

“Yes it does!”

All eyes turned on them, surprised at the outburst. She hunched her shoulders, feeling blood rushing to her face.

“Yes, it does,” she repeated quietly. He studied her with an unreadable expression before shrugging.

“Whatever.”

She didn’t understand how he could stay so calm, so unbothered. But then again, maybe he wasn’t. That fury she had seen on his face the previous day, maybe it was just buried deep because there was nothing he could do about it. They were powerless in this world. There was nothing they could do.

“How can I repay you?”

He frowned at her, wary. She wondered if there was anyone in his life he trusted, anyone he could let his guard down around. She had never given much thoughts about him before but now it’s all she could think about. Had he had a parent to look after him, to at least soften the blow, to seek justice for him… But he was alone. No one cared about him, no one would fight for him.

And still, still, he had fought for her.

“I don’t need nothing from you,” he said, and there was a threat in his voice, a warning.

“There as to be something. Anything.”

Maybe that wasn’t a very clever thing to offer to the crazy guy who scared half the class, she thought distantly.

“Drop it Sakura.”

He had growled, and she found it wiser to let it go for now, but she would find a way to thank him, whatever it was and whether he disagreed or not.

Something quite fascinating happened then. His expression softened, lost some of its edges, and for the first time he looked like a regular boy, like just another kid. He scratched at the marks on his cheek. He was… embarrassed.

“You don’t need to repay me. It was enough, what you did yesterday. It was… I could be the one to thank you. For that.”

For a second she didn’t see what he was talking about, but then it hit her.

She had stood up to the adults, for him. It shouldn’t have been a big deal, it should have been completely mundane, for her to tell the truth and defend him because he had done nothing wrong. But it wasn’t.
No one had ever defended him before. No one had ever stepped him to lay blame where it should be laid. They were all too happy to have a designated scapegoat that meant they could get away with anything, and those who disagreed stayed silent anyway.

“...It was nothing,” she said lamely.

“It wasn’t.”

She didn’t argue. His gaze was still as intense, scrutinizing.

“Besides...” He lifted a hand and gently poked at her cheek, a hair away from her scar. His thumb came to rest at the curve of her jaw, and he tipped her head lightly to have a better look. His touch lingered, and she saw pain on his face that wasn’t his own, but hers, that he reflected like he was feeling it just as deeply.

“I could have gotten there sooner.”

She felt like crying. She fought it hard – she couldn’t cry in class.

“You could have gotten there later too. Or not at all. I’m grateful.”

And she was. Things had happened the way they had. They would never know what could have gone differently. She tried to focus on what amount of luck she had had into this, not to have lost an eye, not to be have been left abandoned in the street when the deed was done, to be found hours later by a passerby or to have to make her way back on her own, scared and ashamed.

He took his hand back, no longer looking at her. She made to stand up, to go back to her usual seat, even if the thought made it hard to swallow around the lump in her throat. But she would have to eventually. She would have to face them. To stand up alone.

Were they even sorry about what they had done? Kara, Sasaki and the others, did they regret it in any way? She had no idea. Why would they though? They would suffer no consequences, no one would know, or care. What would prevent them from doing it again?

Next time, she wouldn’t be so helpless, she vowed. Next time...

“You can stay here. If you want to.”

She froze. She was almost out of her seat already, awkwardly half standing, but the proposition caught her so off guard she couldn’t move. His cheek was resting in his palm, his eyes half-lidded, the picture of boredom and detachment, but it was there, the red on his cheek, the slight hesitation.

It was stupid of her to realize it now, but Naruto was, after all, just another kid.

“Okay.”

She sat back down. The teacher entered.

Things were like that, from then on.

“...You know what? There is something you can do for me.”

“Really? What?”
“Teach me chakra control.”

Chapter End Notes

You know what, it occurred to me, regarding what I have planned for this story, that it's actually some sort of a three-way reverse AU. Naruto is Sasuke, Sasuke is Sakura, and Sakura is Naruto. And since Sakura and Sasuke are supposed to end up together, it all works out hehe XD not but well, it's not that simple obviously, but it's still kinda like that? I think it's funny.

Yeah just to be clear there will be nothing romantic going on between Sakura and Naruto (or Sakura and Sasuke for that matter) except maybe crushed and stuff. But I'm a sucker for Naruto and Sakura's friendship, and the trio's friendship in general, so yeah.

Also about this chapter, at some point I was thinking "I'm pushing it, school and adults and kids don't suck THAT hard". And then I stopped to think and... yeah, they kind of do. Or at least they can, you know, sometimes. Bullying can go very far, impunity and indifference can too... So I decided to leave it as it was. Sorry about that.

Also, I drew them, they're here.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Say hello to Uchiha Izumi and Naruto's denial.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for your comments and support! On with the friendships and complicated feelings.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was just… so very hard. To fight this.

Rationally, there were plenty of reasons why he should have been. Fighting this. Naruto hadn’t spent the first ten years of his life completely on his own to start relying on other people now. It was dangerous, precarious. They could pull the rug from under his feet at any time. They (or their parents, families, teachers, mentors, Hokage) could decide one day that enough was enough, that hanging around Naruto was just no good, and not talk to him or approach him ever again.

It had happened before.

He hated himself a little for not fighting it anyway.

He’d fallen for it so many times. When he was younger he’d done countless pointless actions and challenges, agreed to the dumbest errands and the worst pranks, with the hope that it would finally get him accepted by someone. He’d swore to himself many times that he would stop falling for it, but the appeal was too strong.

Until that one time when trying to retrieve a trophy of battle in the forest had nearly gotten him killed by enemy shinobi, and the boys who had sent him to his death had laughed it out while some chunin told him off for being so reckless.

Naruto had stopped after that. Stopped trying to make friends, stopped trying to get any positive attention. He’d decided that he would just get strong and fight anyone who tried to hurt him. It had worked out well.

With Sasuke and Sakura it was more insidious. He needed someone to help him train, he wasn’t getting a mentor anytime soon so his dumb classmates had to do.

The problem was they were so damn nice about it.

He thought Sakura would quit upon realizing that his problem with ninjutsu ran far deeper than just some lack of practice, but it was the opposite. She was now passionate about figuring out what the hell was wrong with his chakra control. He could tell she needed something to focus on, other than herself. He was too desperate for her to actually find out why he couldn’t perform the most basic
techniques to call her out on it.

As for Sasuke… Naruto couldn’t believe it at first, but Sasuke was… was trying to become his friend.

Not at the Academy of course. Sakura was still the only one who approached him, and they didn’t even share a word or even a look. He didn’t mind acting as a protective shield to her – it made it easier to deal with it actually, assuming that she stayed by his side because she needed something out of him, and not because… something else.

So at the Academy Sasuke was as aloof as ever to the both of them. Naruto wasn’t sure he cared all that much about school hierarchy and social convenience. It’s more that Sasuke’s social interaction quota was very low. Hanging out with people without a specific purpose was too much for him.

Also, Sakura didn’t want to be seen anywhere near him so. There was that.

What was Naruto supposed to make of the fact that Sasuke kept inviting him to get a snack after their training then? That he bought sweets and drinks for the both of them – the three of them now, often enough – without question, without ever commenting on the fact that he had to because the shop owners refused to serve Naruto? Sasuke was a boy of very few words, maybe even fewer words than Naruto, but his actions meant a lot.

Meant too much.

Naruto should have been fighting this. But it was so hard.

Because it was so freaking nice.

Even if it was only for a few hours between the end of class and dinnertime, even if it was in a remote location with no one around because they had to sort of keep it a secret, even if no one else knew, even if they ignored each other the rest of the time… For those few hours, Naruto wasn’t on his own. He wasn’t getting insulted or mocked, he didn’t have to keep all his hackles up. He knew it was bad, that he couldn’t get used to it, that it was dangerous for him, but he was helpless to fight it.

He just wanted to enjoy it. Just for a little while. While it lasted. They would get tired of him eventually. They would make other friends, who were nicer and who they could actually invite to their home, could be seen with without getting dirty looks and unsubtle warnings.

A few days ago, Ino had entered the classroom and walked up to Kara. She had grabbed the girl’s bag and tapped an explosive tag to it before hurling the thing out the window. The scandalized scream of Kara had been covered the sound by the tag exploding, shredding her possessions to pieces. She’d made to take it out on Ino, but Ino was easily the scariest girl of their whole year. She’d look Kara dead in the eye – “careful”, she’d said, “I know what you did”. And then she had pointedly sat next to Sakura on their desk, glaring Kara and her friends to death the whole time, who hadn’t dare do or say anything.

Sakura looked less depressed and gloomy since then. It was good thing. The two girls still weren’t talking, but it was only a question of time. Everyday Naruto expected them to have move out of his table and rejoined the regular world. It hadn’t happened yet, but it would soon, once the ongoing war between the various groups died down and they remembered that they could always unite in their common dismissal of Naruto.

They didn’t need him. And he didn’t need them either. He didn’t need anyone.
At first, Sasuke didn’t like Sakura.

She wasn’t annoying or mean or anything, but she was… always there. He honestly thought she would drop out after three sessions, but he had underestimated her endurance and determination. She came, days after days, weeks after weeks, to get her ass handed to her for hours on end. Sometimes she broke down and got angry, started to yell or cry, but Naruto remained unfazed. He waited in silence until she calmed down, and she was ready to go again when she did.

She was even starting not to suck so hard.

So she was always there, and he couldn’t explain to himself what was so bad about it. It gave him someone to talk to that wouldn’t rudely ignore him, and that wouldn’t try to break his bones with every hit when they spared.

Puzzled, he had taken the issue to his mother.

Turned out he was jealous.

It was embarrassing, but she had a point. Sasuke liked the idea of being Naruto’s only friend, of being the only one with the privilege to approach him without getting his head bit off. He recognized though, that it was selfish and not very nice. His mother encouraged him to see it from the other boy’s perspective – he now had two friends, where he had zero a few months ago.

So how much as it annoyed him that Naruto’s attention was now split in two, Sasuke admitted that it wasn’t so bad.

It didn’t help though that Naruto knew about what had happened to Sakura, and he didn’t. He had gathered that the blond was even involved in some (good?) way, but Sakura remained stubbornly tight-lipped about it, and Naruto, it wasn’t even worth asking him anything. Whatever had happened, it had created a closeness between them that Sasuke felt excluded from.

But he wasn’t a kid anymore. He wasn’t about to get petty or upset by something so stupid. They could have their secrets if they wanted. He was happy Naruto had someone else who was nice to him, he was.

Even if they got to spend time with each other at school, while Sasuke was still kept at a distance. Surprisingly, it was Sakura who seemed the most wary of being seen in Sasuke’s vicinity, even if she hadn’t said it in so many words. Sasuke didn’t like to think about why that was. He was aware of that strange competition for his attention and feelings that went on between some of the girls of their class. It made him beyond uncomfortable but it’s not like he could do anything about it.

Sakura was among those who had a crush on him, or so he thought. It surely didn’t look like it now. She had been different, since her "accident".

He would really need to find out about what that was someday.

Since he had decided not to make an enemy out of her, she had become a little more open during their little training sessions. They had bonded over one thing in particular – the quest for finding a way to teach basic jutsu to Naruto.

They trained in all fields now that it was the three of them, and they couldn’t explain why Naruto had such a hard time with it. He knew the drill, wasn’t too bad at molding chakra, but his jutsu always failed mid-process for some reasons. It drove Sakura crazy and she had robbed Sasuke into
fixing this. She knew more than him about the theory – way more, it was absurd how much – but he was the only one who had actual shinobi experience around him. He had been tasked with the mission to hook someone he knew over the problem.

The thing was, he wasn’t sure who would be willing to help. His father was still sulking about Sasuke befriending Naruto, and he wouldn’t add fuel to the fire by asking his mother to get involved. As for Itachi… Sasuke wasn’t sure if he could handle Itachi helping Naruto train when he still refused to give Sasuke a hand.

Maybe he could ask Shisui? He wasn’t sure his cousin was so fond of Naruto though… the blond had a certain talent for getting under people’s skin. Now that he thought about it, Shisui did too. He wasn’t sure it was a common point that would make them friends though.

He was there in his reflection when he got back home from the Academy – no training today, Naruto needed to go grocery shopping since he had just received his monthly allowance. Another thing that Sasuke didn’t think about, because of how unreasonably angry it made him. Especially seeing that he wanted nothing more than to invite Naruto to his house, so that he would get to eat something else than instant meals, but his parents had forbidden it.

Well, not exactly.

“We can’t,” his mother had said. Like they had no say on the matter. Like it was out of their control.

What even.

He was distracted from working himself up by the echo of light laughter ringing through the house. It was weird in itself – the ambiance at home was still pretty chilly weeks after his parents’ argument over his friendship with Naruto. Sasuke was aware the issue ran much deeper than him hanging out with a youth offender to be, and he had promised himself to investigate it in time.

He followed the sound to the kitchen, where he had the pleasant surprise of finding his mother, Itachi, and most importantly…

“Izumi!”

“Hey, Sasuke! I was getting desperate of seeing your cute little face. It’s been a while!”

She got up to smother him in a hug despite his protest, laughing heartily at his weak escape attempts.

“It’s true we haven’t seen much of you lately…” he said, taking a seat around the table. His mother put a fresh cup of tea in front of him with a smile. She seemed happy, and Sasuke couldn’t only be grateful for Izumi’s presence.

“I know, I know, I’ve been busy since I made chunin! I go on a lot of missions with Anko.”

“Ah, yeah, I heard,” his mother said. “She’s treating you alright?”

“Well, she’s ruthless, that’s for sure. But she’s so cool! And strong. And she likes to have all-girl teams for her infiltration missions, it’s pretty nice. She’s requested me personally a couple of times!”

Izumi beamed with pride. She could – she had only been a chunin for a few months, and she had already caught the eyes of a jounin.
“An all-girl team… That must be nice.”

“Mom!”

“What? I’m surrounded by boys all day here, it sounds like a dream!”

Izumi laughed as Sasuke pouted. His mother smiled warmly and ruffled his hair even as he tried to dodge.

“I’m happy for you, Izumi,” she said after she was done ruining his hair. “And proud. I’m sure your father would be too.”

The girl ducked her head, a light blush redening her cheeks.

“Thank you, Mikoto.”

She seemed sad for a second, lost in painful memories, but she recovered quickly to focus on Sasuke.

“What about you, little brat? How is it going at the Academy?”

“I’m not a brat!”

“Oh, you sure are!”

He grumbled that she was always making fun of him, but he told her about his study nonetheless. He liked her a lot and he had missed her for real – compared to all their other relatives, she was the most open and friendly. She was very warm, much more than the other Uchiha, even more than his mother. When she asked about him, she always seemed interested for real, she asked for details and made helpful comments. She was one of the only people in the world that didn’t make him feel like he was Itachi’s brother, despite them being friends first.

“Ah, yes, I’ve heard about that Naruto. A little troublemaker, right?”

“He’s not that bad!” Sasuke exclaimed. Her eyes widened in surprise and he looked away, embarrassed by the outburst.

“I didn’t mean it in a bad way. Sorry,” she said easily. That was another thing he liked about her – she was patient and caring, and she rarely got angry. She had an understanding of people he couldn’t hope to get and had rarely seen in others too.

“I’m… Sorry too. It’s just… people say a lot of mean things about him, but they’re wrong. He’s not that bad. He’s just… lonely.”

It all came down to this in the end. It wasn’t that hard to get. Naruto didn’t know what to do with people. He was even worse at it than Sasuke, than Itachi even. He was always wary, always assuming the worst of the ones who approached him. Sadly, they often proved him right.

“Are you two friends then?”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure. I’d like to be but…”

“He doesn’t want to?”

“That’s not it. Maybe he does. But he’s…”
“He’s scared.”

He looked at his mother, before nodding. Yeah, that made sense. Every time he enjoyed himself a little, every time he relaxed a bit with Sasuke and Sakura, he always tensed up after a moment, worried like they were going to suddenly lash out.

“Say, Sakura... do you think Naruto is our friend?” he had asked the girl a few days before, as they watched him storm off right after congratulating her for a good hit.

“I think he’s our friend,” she’d said, “but we’re not his.” Her parents refused that she invited the boy to their house too. When she had announced it to them, confused and apologetic, he had shrugged, careless, with a “told ya” that had given Sasuke the urge to punch a tree.

"He doesn't want friends," Sasuke confirmed. "He says it all the time. But at the same time…”

Naruto got that look on his face sometimes when they were together. A little awed, a little disbelieving. Once Sasuke had taken his face into his hands to check for injuries because he’d hit him hard with his feet, and Naruto had looked... So lost. He’d frozen completely under his touch and Sasuke had seen fear in his eyes, for just a second. Fear of his hands, so close to his face, of that sudden proximity. Sasuke had honestly thought he was going to cry.

He’d discovered quickly that friendly touches always had the same effect. The same element of surprise, of novelty.

It sucked. It sucked massively.

“If he’s always been on his own, it’s normal that he tries to keep you at bay,” Izumi said. “Keep trying, okay? Don’t give up on him.”

She cast a furtive look at Itachi, who was following the conversation in silence. Sasuke nodded seriously.

“I won’t.”

She gave him a warm smile he couldn’t help but respond to. She always made him feel better about things in general.

“Oh! Say, Izumi, do you think you could help us some times?”

“With what?”

“Naruto’s having trouble with ninjutsu and we can’t figure out why. Maybe you could give us a hand? You’re good at ninjutsu. And you have the Sharingan. Maybe you’ll see something.”

Izumi exchanged a loaded gaze with his mother, and for a second he was convinced she was going to refuse for whatever flimsy reason she would come up with. But after a silent conversation conveyed through looks only, she nodded.

“Why not, if he’s on board. I shouldn’t be going on missions for a while so…”

“Really? Thank you!”

Sasuke saw Itachi tense up by his side, but he ignored him. It was his fault, if they didn’t hang out together anymore. Sasuke didn’t have to feel bad about it, or about asking someone else’s help.

“I’d better go now,” Izumi said after gulping the rest of her tea.
“Don’t you want to stay for dinner?”

“Thank you Mikoto, but my mother will surely cry if I try to dine out for the next three weeks, at least.”

“She just misses you,” his mother said, indulgent. “Another time? Both of you are welcome here.”

Izumi’s smile dimmed a little as she nodded. Sasuke knew that it wasn’t exactly true – Izumi’s mother had left the Uchiha clan to marry an outsider, and even if they both bore the Uchiha name and lived in the Uchiha district since the man’s death, they still endured a form of rejection from the rest of the clan, who had not forgiven the offense.

Sasuke thought it was super stupid.

“Sasuke, go wash up. Dinner will be ready soon.”

“Yeah, yeah. Bye Izumi! I’ll see you soon, right?”

“You bet, little brat! We’ll found a moment, promise. Goodbye!”

“Izumi, wait!”

She stopped on her track in the middle of the road and Itachi loosened a bit. He didn’t know why he had been afraid she would ignore him. Maybe because she kind of had, the whole time she was at their home, they had barely talked.

“What’s up, Itachi?”

“I was just… wondering how you were. It’s been a while,” he said lamely. He was only now realizing that she usually was the one to carry the conversation between them. He didn’t have to scramble for words like this.

“I know, I know, I’m sorry. I really was busy. I wanted to make a good impression so I took up a lot of missions. I train a lot with some of the girls too.”

Izumi was far more sociable than the rest of the clan, she had friends outside of the Uchiha, and trained with others too. Itachi knew part of it was due to the clan’s dismissal of her family, but she never seemed to hold a grudge over it. She had simply found support elsewhere.

The silence stretched between them, awkward and uncomfortable. Itachi felt off balance, unhinged. Izumi was supposed to be one of the very few people he could actually interact with, but it was all going wrong tonight.

“Are you… mad at me?” he tried, at a loss.

“Not… especially. I just… I figured out a lot of things, since I became a chunin,” she said.

“Can I… Can you tell me?” he tried, when she didn’t look like she was going to elaborate. She pursed her lips, gathering her thoughts.

“You remember that time we visited Shinko at the tea shop? She said she quit being a ninja because it was no use, seeing how strong you already were despite being younger.”

He grimaced but nodded. He had hoped it wasn’t about that. He had suggested she followed the
same example then, so that she would stay safe. She didn’t need to be a ninja, to risk her life. She had been so mad at him, and he knew things had changed between them ever since.

After that he had been caught up in the nightmare with Danzo, and they had never really mended that bridge.

“Well, she was wrong. And I couldn’t articulate it back then, but I can now. So…”

She inhaled deeply, like she was about to give a speech she had rehearsed a million time.

“Being a chunin, going on real missions, I realized that I simply didn’t need to be as strong as you. Not now, and not ever. It’s… it’s no use. I’m not the strongest, I’m not the weakest either. But I still get it done. I still complete my mission. We were sent to rescue the daughter of the chief of a tiny, poor village deep in fire country. She was six years old. They scraped up all the money they could to offer our services, so that we would take her back from the bandits that had kidnapped her, because the village could no longer pay some stupid taxes they had made up… So we went, and we saved her. We beat up those guys, made it clear that the village was under our protection and that they’d better not return. And Anko… she said we had taken too long, that the mission should have been wrapped up much sooner, so she cut the price by half. The guy at the Mission Assignment Desk was livid, but what could he do?”

She was animated and smiling as she told her story, like he hadn’t seen her in a long time.

“They were so happy, those people. They thanked us again and again, it was almost embarrassing. And that’s… that’s why I became a shinobi. That’s why I train. So I don’t have super jutsu and I didn’t graduate first of my class but… But it really doesn’t matter. I was still able to protect my teammates, to carry our mission and save that girl. And I know that it won’t always be like that. We have much less glorious jobs, and sometimes we don’t get there in time. But… But I’m happy with that. This is what I want to do, where I want to be. And since you can’t understand that…”

“I can.”

She cast him a dubious look, where he could still see the hurt he had caused her, that day at the teashop, by suggesting she gave up on her dream, since she was never going to be that good.

She was right though. Itachi was strong, a prodigy, the strongest of his generation… and he had still been powerless, faced with his clan’s rebellious tendencies, faced with forces and influences he couldn’t handle, faced with Danzo’s implacable power. It had been no use at all.

Izumi would have fared better than him. She would have been able to sway the others, or to alert someone, to do something.

“You’re right. Being the best, it’s… It’s useless.”

She frowned.

“Did something happen, Itachi?”

She didn’t know. No one did. Only Shisui, his parents, and some of the higher-ups, the Hokage and the other clan leaders. But the others didn’t know. They didn’t know how close they had come to a complete disaster, to a terrible end.

They didn’t know that Itachi was a traitor and a monster.

He said nothing. And still she took a step forward, still she wrapped her arms around his shoulders
to pull him into a hug, like she understood anyway. He stayed still, arms hanging limply, barely able to move his head so that he could rest his forehead on her shoulder.

“It’s true I was pretty mad at you,” she whispered in his ear, “but we are still friends, Itachi. I care about you. I’m not giving up on you.”

Just like she had told Sasuke. Itachi knew he was hard to deal with, hard to befriend, hard to love. He would have understood, if she did give up on him, it would have been fair. But he desperately, selfishly didn’t want her to.

“I’m sorry,” he said, hoping she would believe him, hoping she could tell he was sincere, and not just saying what he supposed the other wanted to hear, like he often did. It was easier than to try and understand people. But he had to be better, if he didn’t want her to turn her back on him.

“It’s okay, silly. Just remember… It’s a pretty freeing thought, you know. To realize that you don’t have to be the absolute best. You don’t have to win it all, you don’t have to… carry it all yourself. You’re not alone, Itachi. Ours isn’t a lonely life. We have friends and teammates, people who have our back. If there is something you can’t do, or don’t want to… You can rely on others. You’re… You can be free.”

Could he, really? When he was only realizing now how much he wasn’t? He had never felt like he was acting in spite of himself, like he was being forced to do things. It’s not that he didn’t want to be in Anbu, to train so hard. The thing was, he had no idea what he did, or did not want. He had always just… gone with the flow.

“You’re not in Anbu anymore, right?” she asked, releasing him so that they could face each other. He nodded. Another decision that had been out of his control, even if that one, he could say for sure he agreed with. It was just too ambiguous, after having played the double spy for months. And… well, Itachi was indeed skilled enough to be in Anbu. But for the first time he had questioned whether or not that meant he had to be.

For now he was in a bit of a standby situation. Shisui and him, there weren’t many people left who trusted them. They didn’t really trust themselves either.

The break wasn’t so bad.

“You should think about what you want to do, Itachi. What you really want, you.”

She knew he had no idea. He had hinted at it before, but it was shameful to admit. It should have been obvious, right? Everyone else seemed to know what they wanted out of life, where they were going. Everyone else seemed to know what he was supposed to want too.

“Whatever it is, you’ll always have my support.”

It was nice to hear, because whatever it was, Itachi had the very strong feeling that it wouldn’t please a lot of people. His father first and foremost.

“Thank you, Izumi. And… and congratulations, for your promotion. I don’t think I ever got to tell you.”

She beamed and hit him playfully on the shoulder, blushing lightly.

“Thank you, you dork.”

Itachi smiled. It felt good.
“Who’s that?” Naruto spat out, when Sasuke arrived at the training field with an unknown girl in tow. Another Uchiha, he bet, despite the brown hair, if only because Sasuke only hung out with his clan.

The boy glared at him.

“Hi, I’m Uchiha Izumi. I’m a friend of Sasuke, and he asked for my help with ninjutsu training. It’s nice to meet you.”

Thrown off balance, Naruto forgot to scold or snarl at her. She had a friendly smile and a casual, open demeanor, that didn’t look faked at all – or she was really, really good.

“You sure you’re an Uchiha, with a smile like that?” he asked, not with as much heat as he wanted. Sasuke glared harder. She only laughed.

“I’m half Uchiha, so I was spared the gloom. You must be Naruto! I heard you weren’t shy with words.”

“I bet that’s not all you heard,” he snapped, annoyed by her good mood and good humor.

“True. I also heard you were useless at ninjutsu, but that Sakura right here was pretty good. It’s Sakura, right?”

Naruto sputtered, indignant, but Izumi ignored him to smile at Sakura, who reddened under the praise.

“Sasuke! Why did you bring her here you sucker?”

“You’re the one who sucks! We need help, deal with it!”

“Sasuke!” Izumi called him out, both hand on her hips. “I told you you had to ask him about it first!”

Sasuke mumbled something unintelligible into his big collar, arms crossed in a defensive position. When he wanted, he could hide almost all his face in it, which was great to escape unwanted conversations. She hooked a finger into the fabric to bring it down, exposing him.

“Well?”

“He would’ve said no!”

“It was his right,” she sighed. “Well, sorry Naruto, that little brat doesn’t have any manners. Now that I’m here though, why don’t we try to figure out a better training program for you?”

Naruto was dumbstruck and at a loss as to how to react. Everything in her behavior screamed taming techniques, trying to be cool and pretending she was on his side. The thing was, he couldn’t say for certain that it was a strategy. She was ruffling Sasuke’s hair harshly as a punishment under his half-hearted protestations – it was obvious he had great affection for her. Sakura was won over already.

Naruto was not on board with that thing of adding more people to his circle. Not at all. Two was too much already.

“Don’t worry, I won’t bother you long,” Izumi said, as if to answer his deepest worries. “I’m in
between mission now, but I do have a life.”


“Don’t talk about your brother like that. He had it rough, and he is my friend.”

“Yeah, yeah…”

“I can still leave, Naruto. If you want.”

Right then, Naruto was convinced it was the truth. She would leave, if he asked. She wouldn’t even be mad about it. She was giving him the choice for real, not trying to guilt trip him or anything.

Unlike those two idiots, one making puppy, watery eyes, the other scowling angrily, daring him to send her away. They were the worst.

“Whatever,” he said with a dismissive wave. The girl let out a bright, easy laugh.

“Cool. Let’s get started then!”

It was humiliating enough to produce half-dead clone after botched transformation in front of Sasuke and Sakura, but under the scrutinizing gaze of a chunin from Sasuke’s family, it was ten times worse, and he actually managed to summon what had to be the worst clone of the history of the world. She didn’t laugh though, nor did she mock or sighed or shook her head. She observed carefully, with great concentration.

“Do it again?” she asked. He snarled at her, but complied.

This time the clone didn’t even reach physical form before blowing off in a puff of smoke. Naruto closed his fists tightly, face burning with shame. All of their classmates, and even younger kids, were able to produce at least one clone, that could stand on their own, even if on wobbly legs. Why couldn’t he do it? What was wrong with him?

“Do you mind if I use the Sharingan to watch you?” she asked. He shrugged, uncaring, but Sakura pitched in, bright-eyed.

“You can use the Sharingan?”

“She was the youngest person of the clan to ever activate it,” Sasuke answered, proud enough for two. The girl smiled, red dusting her cheeks as she confirmed.

“Even before super jounin?” Naruto asked.

“Is that how you call Itachi?” she laughed, amused. “Yes, before him too.”

Sasuke was nodding by her side, like her managing to one-up Itachi had something to do with him. He had probably been desperate to manage that same fit, but Naruto knew he couldn’t use his family’s dojutsu yet.

“Go ahead then, super chunin,” he said. She closed her eyes with an exasperated sigh that was also… kind of fond? Naruto couldn’t help but be curious.

Her eyelids opened on blood red irises, pierced with three dots triangulating her pupils, and Naruto howled.
In the next moment he was at the other side of the training field, heart beating rapidly, all his senses on high alert. Even then he could still see it though, the bleeding red fixated on him, and he wanted it gone. He wanted it to look away.

“Don’t look at me!” he screamed. He sounded more desperate than threatening but he was just… scared. He was scared beyond measure, and he had no idea why.

“Don’t look at me, don’t look at me!”

The red disappeared.

The three of them rushed toward him, Izumi staying at a safe distance as Sasuke pulled him to his feet. Naruto kept his eyes fixated on the ground, still shaking slightly.

He was battling an overwhelming desire to deck Izumi in the face.

It made no sense, but just thinking about the swirling spirals of those red eyes made him want to set everything on fire. It was a primal fear he couldn’t identify, couldn’t trace back to any rational source.

“We’ll keep the eyes out from now on, okay?” Izumi said, not unkindly, even if she looked worried. Naruto wanted to disappear. As if he wasn’t enough of a freak, what had possessed him to react like that?

“Are you alright?” Sakura asked, her big eyes even wider with concern, matching the expression of Sasuke’s face. Why couldn’t they just mock him like a normal person? Instead of… caring. For him.

He hated it.

So he did the only sensible thing to do. He shrugged off their hands from his shoulders, and he ran away.

Chapter End Notes

In which Sasuke is adjusted and well-supported haha. Also writing Itachi is probably the worse. I feel like he doesn't actually have much of a personality in canon? I did my best.

Also I don't want to rant about Izumi and her treatment here because this is a nice, positive place, so I did it on my on my tumblr here. We'll see more of her and the others and we'll even dive into politics at some point. I look forward to see Fugaku interact with the other clan heads haha. Also we'll jump fairly quickly to the kids' graduation and team formation, probably next chapter or the one after. That's all for me, I hope you enjoyed this, don't forget to let me know!
Okay, this chapter is longer than usual but it's mostly because I went on a tangent over chakra theory... Oops?
This keeps getting longer and longer in my head. I feel like I kinda tricked you with that Sasuke/Naruto tag cause it's not gonna happen for so long. SO LONG. You know like in those crime show where you know from day one boy and girl are gonna end up together but they only kiss once in season 6 finale before the show is canceled or something... I went on a tangent again. I'm not gonna do that to you but... yeah. Love is for later (although you could argue Sasuke is already hooked x))

Also I drew another comic (reminds me that Kakashi needs to feature in this at some point x))

“How did training with Izumi go?”

Mikoto had wanted to wait for Sasuke to broach the subject on his own, but whatever had happened, it had made him broody and sullen. Which wasn’t that worrying in itself – it was his reaction to most things, including the smallest inconvenience or things that weren’t even bad.

She felt a bit guilty about how eager she was to hear from Naruto through him, but it was all she had to get close to the other boy. She had learned to live with the rage and grief that caused her, but lately she had been thinking that maybe she shouldn’t have.

She should have fought this more. She should have banged her hand on the table, demand the boy’s guardianship and not let go until she had it. But things were so tense at that moment and she had put her family and her clan first. By the time she had realized no one else was going to step in, that everyone had turned their back on Kushina and Minato’s son, it was too late.

“It was fine,” her boy mumbled, picking at his rice without eating. She never imagined he would become so moody growing up, but she knew it was vastly due to abrupt changes in their life that he had had to endure without understanding them. He was young to detach himself from them like this. She didn’t want to admit to herself how maybe that was a good thing.

“Really? Was she able to help?”

“Hm. She says Naruto’s probably too stored up with chakra to use it properly. Like, he has a lot of it, way more than any of us, so the Academy training doesn’t work for him.”

She hid a smile – she had been the one to put Izumi on that line of thoughts. The girl had asked for advice before going out to help them. Mikoto had told her that regarding Naruto’s lineage and the reputation of his clan, it was the most likely explanation. Kushina had struggled with it all the same, unable to perform very low-level jutsu because she didn't have control refined enough to use so little chakra.

Izumi had asked if that would be the explanation, and not “Naruto’s condition”, as she had put it.
It angered Mikoto so much. Izumi wasn’t supposed to know, but it was probably the worst kept secret of the whole village, which was saying something, because badly kept secrets, they had plenty. Mikoto had comforted herself with the knowledge that Naruto wouldn’t suffer the consequences of the Kyuubi sealed inside him, but she had been terribly mistaken. It was an open secret that wasn’t secret at all. Only the youngest didn’t know, and still knew to stay clear of him, thanks to their parents. It was handled casually, without care, despite the prime reason for it being kept under the radar being Naruto’s safety.

But who cared about that? Half the village hated his guts and wanted him dead. The other half would look away if that happened.

“Are you okay mom?”

She snapped back into the present to address the concerned looks Itachi was throwing at her. He knew too, she was sure. With all the confidential information he had been privy to, it was an illusion to assume this wasn’t among the pile.

He had still encouraged Sasuke to stick to Naruto’s side if he wanted to. She was grateful for it. Itachi was old enough when the Kyuubi had attacked to remember some of it.

Now that she thought about it, Izumi was too. Her father had died protecting his family that night, she had awakened her Sharingan out of sheer fear and anguish. And yet, she had agreed to help Naruto.

Why were those unfinished kids better than all the adults around them? Mikoto was ashamed of her generation, of their close-mindedness and cruelty.

Damn, what would Kushina think of them. Think of her.

“I’m fine, sorry.”

Fugaku stayed silent, face hidden in his bowl. Her victory over the matter of Naruto and Sasuke’s friendship tasted bitter on her tongue because of how unwilling he was to forgive her about it. It was her own fault, really. She had never gone against him, never pitched in in any way. She thought she had to leave the politics to him, focused as she was on raising their kids.

But in a life like theirs, the two were irremediably linked. Proof enough, Itachi had…

She closed her eyes, inhaled deeply. Now wasn’t the time to think about that again.

“There’s… There is something,” Sasuke said, putting his bowl down. He cast a furtive glance at his father and oh, the animosity brewing their promised some spectacular fights once Sasuke was a teenager. She hadn’t pegged him for the one who would rebel against them, but now that she was seeing it building up, it seemed inevitable. Fugaku hadn’t drilled the clan’s values and interests into Sasuke like he had with Itachi. Something he surely regretting now.

“Something did happen. And it’s… I can’t explain. But it feels important. I don’t want you to get mad though. It’s not Naruto’s fault. He did nothing wrong.”

“What is it Sasuke?” Fugaku asked, impatient, opening his mouth for the first time this evening. Oh how he exasperated her these days with his all-powerful patriarch act. The sooner he realized his days of absolute control over their family were over, the better it would be for everyone. For her, but also for Sasuke, and his relationship with his father. Itachi was still too shaken to put up much of a fight, but Sasuke was gearing up to fight back his father at every turn, and he would do it just to be contradictory if Fugaku didn’t start to be more reasonable.
The bad part of her, the one that would have made Kushina laugh, couldn’t wait to see it.

“Naruto is… Naruto is afraid of the Sharingan.”

All thought about laughing deserted Mikoto’s head.

“Izumi tried to look and he… I don’t know. He freaked out. And it’s weird, because he’d never seen it before. He said it. And it’s not like he just thought it was creepy or anything, he really… He was really scared for real.”

People being uncomfortable when faced with dojutsu was nothing new. This was something else entirely.

She made eye contact with Fugaku, and for once they were on the same page. She could see the same gears turning in his brain, the same worry in his eyes.

The same fear.

“Did he… say why?” Fugaku asked, making a good effort to hide his turmoil and impatience.

“No. He ran away. But he asked her not to look at him.”

Sasuke seemed shaken by this too. Mikoto could understand – the Sharingan was the pride of their clan, the thing all their kids looked forward to as they grew up. That Naruto would be wary of it had to upset him greatly, especially if he didn’t know why.

“You did good by telling us, Sasuke,” she said gently. “He’s not in trouble and we’re not mad, don’t worry.”

“But why would that be? You didn’t see him mom. He was… He was so defensive. Like Izumi was going to hurt him.”

Itachi was silent and stoic by her side, but he was staring at his father with unblinking eyes, studying him carefully.

“I don’t know, Sasuke,” she said, and Itachi looked at her then.

And he knew it was a lie.

But how was it possible, that the boy could feel it? How close the fox had to be to the surface, that he could transmit the danger of the Sharingan to his host? And really, fear? Kushina had never manifested such a thing. Sure, the Uchiha were technically able to control any creature, including the tailed beasts, but apart from Madara, no one had ever actually done it.

Right?

“You’ll just have to be mindful of using it around him,” she said, trying to reassure him. Sasuke pouted.

“I don’t have anything to use anyway…” he mumbled, sulking. She smiled fondly. Acquiring the Sharingan was a competitive race for all the children of the clan. Sasuke wasn’t late by any mean, but he was already older than Itachi when he had awoken his, and that was enough to make him bitter.

She was a bit worried about that competition between them, especially since Fugaku, despite all her nagging, made no effort to temper it. He thought it was good for Sasuke to have Itachi as a goal
to reach, but it wasn’t like Itachi had gotten as far as he had just by hard work and strong will. He was gifted, more than anyone, and it was a blessing as much as a curse. There was no point in Sasuke comparing himself to his older brother.

And given what had happened, she wasn’t so keen on the idea of Sasuke following his footsteps either.

They finished dinner quickly, Sasuke bolting despite his father’s protestations. Instead of disappearing too, to his room or to the study as usual, Itachi lingered in the kitchen.

“Isn’t it strange? That he would manifest that fear?” he asked Fugaku bluntly. He was slowly, slowly growing more confident in his voice and his opinion, something her husband had a hard time handling.

“It is,” Fugaku admitted reluctantly, probably regretting not being able to avoid the subject entirely. Itachi wasn’t supposed to know about that either, but well. Was it such an open secret that he didn’t feel the need to pretend he wasn’t in on it? It was depressing.

“Maybe we should look into it,” Itachi pressed. She knew what he wanted his father to say.

“We will.”

Itachi stared at him, insistent, unblinking. She waited with impatience, to see if Fugaku was going to concede, to take that step toward him.

"We will… with the others' help," he finally conceded. It was like pulling a tooth, but Itachi seemed satisfied, as he disappeared from the room a moment later.

“Will you?” she asked, harsher than she intended.

“The next Clan Heads meeting is next week. We’ll talk about it then.”

She nodded. She would make sure of it. She would be there too.

Izumi was a genius. It had to be it, it had to be. The more Sakura looked into it, the more she was convinced the girl had been spot on about Naruto. It would explain everything really, why he seemed to have the handle on the theory but still failed all his ninjutsu, even why he could still perform Transformation. An excess of chakra wasn’t a problem for this one since the chakra looped around the body of the caster. With every other technique, the amount of chakra poured in was determinant to the result.

It had to be it, but she didn’t know how to confirm it.

They had to know how much was “a lot”, exactly. How much chakra could Naruto yield, how much more than them? There were devices that could measure up that kind of things, but nothing available to academy students.

She had discussed it with Sasuke, who was by far the most resourceful of them, but he didn’t seem confident in his ability to convince someone in his family to hand him sensitive equipment no question asked. And it that case, questions asked would probably make it worse, if he had to admit he needed it for Naruto of all people… But maybe Izumi could help? Izumi was amazing.

If they solved this, it would be a win. Having too much chakra could barely be considered an issue.
Sakura could teach Naruto to be more restrictive in his chakra use, and then…

Then he wouldn’t need her any longer.

She shook her head to get rid of that line of thought. She genuinely wanted to help him, and she would be happy she had, regardless of what came after.

Deep in thought, she had walked all the way to the Academy without even noticing. Most of the gut-wrenching anxiety that had made going to school a torture for the first few weeks after The Incident had receded, both because Naruto had been acting as an unofficial bodyguard and because recently… Ino had kind of assumed the role too.

Sakura didn’t know what to make of it. They still didn’t really talk? But Ino often sat next to Sakura, so that she was sandwiched between the two blondest and scariest students of their class.

It’s not that Ino was giving the cold shoulders to the other girls of the class, or even just ignoring them. She was downright hostile, picking up fights with Kara and her band on a regular basis, ever since the day she had blown up Kara’s bag like a psycho. It made little sense to Sakura, but Ino had always been prone to sudden whims and abrupt mood swings. Sakura was just glad they were sort of hanging out again.

It was early – the classroom was mostly empty. Sakura spotted Sasuke keeping to himself in his corner of the room, and she managed to reply to his slight nod but made no move to approach him. She could tell he wouldn’t have minded them talking to each other at school – even suspected he was kind of jealous she got to talk to Naruto, even if Naruto said a maximum of five words on his best days – but she couldn’t help being afraid of Sasuke.

Well, not of him, but of what them being seen interacting in the smallest way would bring down on her. Sakura was getting steadily stronger by virtue of Naruto beating the shit out of her on a regular basis, and keeping a consistent training which was the only way to go about getting better really, but she was nowhere near strong enough to defend herself yet. And there wouldn’t always be a blond to stand between herself and the meanest of their classmates.

Besides… who was to say which side Sasuke would take in the matter? Between Kara and her? Kara was an Uchiha and if Sasuke wasn’t as vocal as her about the pride that fact brought him, it was still an integrant part of his personality and values. If he knew what they’d done to Sakura, what would he say?

She didn’t want to find out.

She sat down next to Naruto, who was sleeping at his usual desk. She didn’t know when he went home and when he slept. He was always there when she arrived, always staying at the training ground after she left. Always bruised and battered, his clothes dirty, bag under his eyes, but eyes always sharp, alert.

He led a life she couldn't fathom or understand, and it made her sad, sometimes. There was nothing she could do about it though.

The day passed slowly, with Naruto barely lifting his head from his arms the whole time. She had been pestering him about studying more, to no avail – Naruto wanted to be stronger, but she was starting to wonder if he had any interest in being an actual ninja. A few months ago, she was kind of the same. She had entered the Academy mostly on Ino’s impulse. Her parents were chunin, but they weren’t especially keen on her following that path. They said they wanted her to do whatever she wanted – she thought they didn’t really care either way.
But she wanted to be a ninja. For real. She wanted to be someone people could rely on, she wanted to be able to protect herself and others, to be useful to the village and contribute to its safety. Those were new feelings, which had grown the more she learned about the shinobi way, the more she learned about the hardships of this world.

When she was a shinobi, she would make sure no kids were treated badly. Not like she had been, and not like Naruto was either. But Naruto was dead right on one point – you had to be strong to have any power.

With that in mind, she resolved to go train with the boys today too, even if she usually didn’t go three days in a row. Her stamina was improving though, and she had to manage somehow. They managed to train every day, and she wanted to too. She didn’t want to lag behind anymore.

Ino held her back though, when class ended and she made to leave for the training ground.

“Wait, Sakura. I need to talk to you about something.”

Puzzled, Sakura followed Ino out of the classroom and down a few corridors, until they found an area that was relatively empty. Sakura couldn’t help being nervous about finding herself alone with someone else like this. She touched a finger to her scar – it no longer itched or tugged, but she could feel it stretch when she smiled or ate, and she could never really forget about it. If only because people’s gaze around her were constantly drawn to it one moment or another.

“What do you want?” she said, somewhat defiant despite her wavering confidence.

“I have something for you,” Ino said. She rummaged in her bag until she found what she was looking for – a stack of paper held together by a thick red string tied around it like a bow around a gift. She handed it to a puzzled Sakura, who had to read the tag attached to the string to understand what it was.

Her eyes widened and she looked back at Ino fast enough for her neck to crack.

“What…”

“I heard you talking about it. With Naruto.”

This was insane. Sakura knew about Ino’s talented habit of eavesdropping on every and all conversations, but she was almost certain they had never actively discussed that subject at school. She frowned, not liking what that could mean, but Ino didn’t look phased.

“Just take it,” the blond girl said, impatient.

“How did you even get this?”

Ino frowned, debating whether or not she was going to answer, before sighing at Sakura’s stubborn expression.

“You know about Sai right? In our class.”

Sakura nodded, although she had never so much as spoken to the new boy. Granted, not much had – Ino was maybe the only one who had had any contact with him at all.

He had appeared in the middle of the previous year, from literally nowhere. He wasn’t from another village, he wasn’t from anywhere, they didn’t know who his family was. He was just there. Mizuki had said he was going to be a part of their class from then on, and his older brother,
Shin, was joining the next level. The boy was the most quiet Sakura had ever seen – and that included Naruto, Sasuke, and even Shino. He answered to any question by a soft smile that said nothing at all, and spent all his free time with his brother, who seemed more chatty, but just as wary about engaging with any other students.

They went to and back from school with Ino. Sakura didn’t know what that was about.

Sai was very mysterious, and looked like Sasuke a little, which had sparked a strong interest in him from the class’s girls. For a while. However, he was also slightly creepy and made others uncomfortable with his unblinking gaze and plastic smile. They had soon let it go.

“He’s… He can… get a lot of things.”

Sakura knew from Ino’s expression that she would say nothing more. It spelled trouble in big letters and Sakura wanted no part in it. Ino had a knack for getting involved with weird, shady things around the village. Sakura thought it was due to her father’s status – he was the head of the Konoha’s Intelligence, and Ino’s actions were a result both of his particular training, and of her obsessive desire to manage to go behind his back. This was a big deal for her, to know things he didn’t, and she could get very far to achieve that.

“Okay. Okay,” Sakura relented. She couldn’t refuse it – they needed it. There was something, though…

“But why?”

“Why what?”

“Why do that for me? For us?”

They hadn’t talked in ages, they weren’t friends anymore, and Ino and Naruto had a weird sort of hateful rivalry going on, probably because they were competing for the “most threatening kid of the class” spot. There was no lost love between them, that was for sure.

Instead of answering, Ino took a step forward and raised a hand. Sakura couldn’t help but flinch and Ino’s expression turned thunderous, but she didn’t interrupt her gesture. She rested gentler fingers on the side of Sakura’s face, right under her scar.

“It’s my way of thanking him. I know he was there, when I wasn’t.”

Sakura was frozen in place, completely thrown off balance by the rage and the regrets she could see on Ino’s face. Ino had blown up Kara’s bag. No one knew why, she had said nothing about it. Well, Shikamaru and Choji knew, probably, but it’s not like they were going to talk either.

Did that mean…

Was that… for her?

“You need to get stronger, Sakura,” Ino said with a hard tone, but it wasn’t nearly as biting or mocking as how she used to say it, back when they hung out and she would outdo Sakura in absolutely everything.

“I know. I will.”

She put the stack of papers in her bag, careful to hide it under the rest of her things, just in case. Ino took her hand away, turned around, and left.
“Come on, come on! You’re getting sloppy!”

Sasuke would have yelled back that it was Naruto who was being exceptionally vindictive today, but he didn’t have enough focus and lung capacity while they were sparing like this. He’d been backed into mostly defending because Naruto was more ruthless than ever, almost enraged. He had jumped Sasuke as soon as he’d set foot on the training ground and had been attacking relentlessly, apparently determined to pummel Sasuke into the ground.

Ever since their session with Izumi, Naruto was being harsh and vicious, more so than usual. He had refused for the subject to be broached in any way, apart from refusing to see the eyes again. Sasuke had a feeling that he didn’t want to explain why because he didn’t really know himself.

“Hey boys!”

Sasuke was distracted by Sakura’s loud call – Naruto wasn’t. His focus would have been admirable if it wasn’t downright creepy, because Sasuke was convinced someone could have been murdered in the goriest way ten meters away and the blond wouldn’t have noticed.

As it was, Sasuke was distracted and Naruto wasn’t, and Sasuke received Naruto’s foot square in the jaw.

He rolled in the dirt, face sore and pride wounded, and Sakura rushed to his side. Naruto surely didn’t.

“Dammit Naruto! I told you to calm down during sparing!”

That was also new. As she was recovering from the trauma of her ordeal – that Sasuke still had no idea about dammit – Sakura had been getting increasingly more confident, during those sessions at least. At school she was the same, so quiet and withdrawn she could as well have been a piece of furniture, but with them she was emboldened by the knowledge that she was probably the only one who could be of any help regarding the Naruto situation.

Sasuke blamed Izumi, while recognizing that it had started before the troublesome Chunin had crashed their practice. She had made it worse though, because she had praised Sakura for her excellent chakra control, and claimed that it was better than Sasuke’s, and maybe even hers.

Boy, what hadn’t she said.

Sakura was now officially better than both Naruto and Sasuke at something ninja-related, and that was enough to tip her definitely in the “we’re equals and therefore I can call yell at you all I want” pit.

“Pff. If he can’t take it, I might as well find myself a new rival.”

Sasuke tripped on his feet on his way to getting up and almost crashed into Sakura.

Naruto looked as bored and uninterested as ever, while Sasuke’s blood was boiling. There was no way. No way.

“You’d better not,” he growled, menacing. Naruto only shrugged.

“Don’t lag behind then,” he shot back. They glared at each other until Sakura stepped in between them with a heavy sigh that was getting more and more frequent too, and that looked like the one
his mother’s made when she said “I’m surrounded by idiots”.

“Stop it, both of you. We have more important things to discuss!”

They complied reluctantly and focused on what she was presenting them.

A stack of paper. Groundbreaking.

“Huh, Sakura…”

“Geez, you guys know nothing about anything,” she said dramatically. He could tell she was proud to be holding the cards for once, to know something they didn’t.

She ought to get used to it by now. There were lots she knew and they didn’t.

“It’s chakra paper!” she explained excitedly. “There are different types. Some are for determining your element. These are for getting a rough estimation of your reserves.”

They frowned at the blank, ordinary piece of papers. The tag attached read “Chakra Measuring Paper”, which was pretty self-explanatory.

"Where did you get that?" Sasuke asked with a frown. It had been his job to somehow get his hands on something like this. The girl looked sideways and said "I, huh, have my ways" in the least convincing manner possible.

“How does it work?” Naruto asked. He usually tried to hide how curious he naturally was, how eager he was to learn about all and everything. The rare times he paid attention in class, he looked enraptured, up until he got kicked out for one reason or another.

“I’m… not entirely sure. I think you’re supposed to…”

“Hey trouble kids! What are you up to?”

The three of them jumped out of their skin and bumped into each other under Shisui’s earthy laugh, while Izumi smiled sympathetically and Itachi didn’t react in any way.

“Nothing! What are you doing here?”

“Relax cousin. Can’t we just visit you and your friends?”

“No!”

Sasuke fought down the beginning of a blush. They were so embarrassing! Why couldn’t they leave them alone?

“Is that chakra paper?”

Sakura was frozen in place, looking like a wild animal watching kunai come to its face, as Itachi pointed to the stack she was holding hard enough to fold it. Itachi didn’t seem to notice the effect he was having on her, but Izumi did.

“Step back, Itachi! You’re scaring the girl with your gloomy face.”

It occurred to Sasuke that Sakura had never met his brother, nor his cousin, and that he would have very much liked to keep that from happening.
“Kids are wild these days. What are you doing with this?” Shisui asked, his usual lazy smile in place.

“Nothing! Please leave.”

“Oh, so you don’t need help with that?”

Sasuke opened his mouth, but they did, indeed, need help, didn’t they. He snapped his mouth shut and buried inside his collar, Shisui laughing yet again.

Peeking above the fabric, Sasuke cast a worried glance at Naruto, who hadn’t said a word since the intruders’ arrival. He was eyeing them warily, alternating between the three of them like he couldn’t decide which one he was supposed to worry about the most. Sasuke wished he didn’t worry at all.

“It’s pretty simple,” Izumi said, and with an engaging smile, she pried a paper out of Sakura’s hands. Sakura glanced at Sasuke’s briefly, looking for support, and he nodded slightly. It’s not like they were going to let it go anyway.

“You just hold it, and pour some chakra into it. Like this,” Izumi said. A second later, blue light shone briefly between her hands, and they peered curiously at the paper. The sheets were squared, about the size of a weapon pouch, but the one she was holding, instead of being blank, was now sporting an irregular circle the size of a plum in the middle.

“Here you go! There’s probably a chart or something to measure it properly, but mostly you do it by comparison. Come on, try it,” she told Sakura. The girl hesitantly took out another sheet and repeated the process.

The circle was much smaller this time, barely half the size of Izumi’s, but it was perfect. Sakura looked down, shoulders hunched, looking embarrassed, before Shisui took a look.

“Well, girl, your control is off the chart!”

Sakura looked up just enough to cross his gaze before nose-diving immediately. She was probably trying to hide behind her hair like she used to, but she didn’t have enough to do that. They were growing back, slowly. She often played with the short strands with a thoughtful expression on her face.

“Those papers tell about chakra reserve, but also the level of chakra control,” Izumi explained. “See, my circle is much more uneven, because my chakra is not so stable. That’s impressive, Sakura.”

Sakura’s blush spread all the way to her ears.

“Give, give! I want to try too!” Shisui exclaimed, ever childish. He made Sakura jump when he took three sheets out of her hand.

“Come on, Itachi, I want to see who has it best. You two Sasuke!”

Sasuke took the sheet reluctantly, both excited and anxious to find out what it would reveal. What if his reserves were terribly low, or his control super wobbly? He would have much rather do this with just his two friends, or even on his own. Not one to be outdone though, he imitated his elders and gave a small burst of chakra to the sheet.

His circle was smaller than Izumi’s, but not that much. It was pretty uneven though, almost wavy
like a very badly drawn flower.

“Ouch, Sasuke, you’ll catch up to me soon if I’m not careful…” Izumi said with a smile. Sasuke couldn’t help but blush too, and that made Sakura relax a little somehow. He pouted.

He didn’t want to look at Itachi’s paper, but… he wanted to.

Shisui’s was the biggest and barely more even than Sasuke’s own. It was the size of a big apple, and Itachi’s… a smaller apple, but precise and neat. More than twice as big as Sasuke’s.

“I have more reserve and you have more control. No surprise here,” Shisui said. Itachi nodded, already disregarding the paper.

“Does it change a lot of things?” Sasuke couldn’t help but ask. That was two distinct areas to work on, he thought.

“It matters, yes. Itachi and I, I guess we’re roughly the same in term of stamina, because I have more chakra, but since I don’t use it so well, I spend more than he would for the same jutsu. Chakra control amount to the chakra you lose when you perform ninjutsu. Between you and Sakura, she would need much less than you to make a clone, for example, so she could make more with less. Since she doesn’t have much, it makes a huge difference.”

Sasuke frowned, thoughtful. That made sense, and matched what he remembered from class. Sakura was nodding eagerly, probably familiar with all that already. That nerd.

Sasuke caught Naruto’s gaze then. He looked supremely uncomfortable, but also very curious, as he eyed the stack in Sakura’s hands, smaller now than it was a few minutes ago. He didn’t want to talk though, probably didn’t want to bring the attention on himself. He was standing by Sakura’s side, as far as possible from the Uchihas of the party, all four of them.

Sasuke couldn’t have that. Naruto could be wary of his dumb relatives all he wanted, but he had no reason nor right to be wary of him.

So he crossed the group as casually as he could and took another sheet without making eye contact with Sakura. He handed it to Naruto without a word.

Naruto glanced at the others, but they were either oblivious or smart enough to pretend like they weren’t paying attention. He finally took the paper, repeating the exercise they had all partaken into.

Nothing happened.

His frowned deepen – it was crazy how it was always possible, just when Sasuke thought it couldn’t possibly get worse – and blue chakra danced at his fingertips, but still the paper remained blank. Sasuke cast a distressed look back at Izumi – Naruto was getting frustrated, and Sasuke didn’t want him to be disappointed or angry.

Naruto was bad at chakra control, but he couldn’t be that bad, that he couldn’t activate a device they used on toddlers. Izumi took a few steps toward them, but stopped when Naruto snarled at her, daring her to approach. The sheet was crinkling in his too hard grip.

“Huh, I think…”

The full force of Naruto’s glare killed Sakura’s words in her throat, so she just pointed at a corner of the sheet.
There was a single line, cutting the corner in a minuscule triangle.

“What the…”

“Just a minute,” Itachi said, cutting off Naruto’s profanity. He reached into his weapon pouch and took out a brush and an ink stone, before hanging a hand toward Sakura.

“Can I?” he asked as an afterthought after she flinched slightly. She gave a small nod, and he took four sheets that he laid on the dirt, as to form a bigger square. He drew four small ink signs between each sheet – when he picked them up again, they were sticking into a big one like he had just glued them together.

“Try again,” he said to Naruto. The boy eyed him for a long, uncomfortable moment, before taking the sheet with two fingers. Chakra sparked.

If Sasuke’s circle was wobbly, this one was so jaded and irregular “circle” was too generous of a term for it.

But most importantly, it was now obvious why it hadn’t shown on the single sheet.

It was too big to fit on there.

They stared at the shape the size of a dinner plate in complete astonishment. Naruto’s eyes were wide and his lips pinched, brows furrowed in confusion.

There was nothing to be confused about though.

“Well,” Izumi said after a while, dragging the “e”. “I guess it’s a definite yes for the “more chakra than the norm” theory, Naruto.”

“It’s crazy,” Izumi said for maybe the tenth time since they had left the kids to their own device at their training ground. The Naruto boy was shaken and Sasuke had glared at them hard enough Shisui thought he was going to pop out a Sharingan right there and then. The girl Sakura had seemed on fire, vibrating out of her skin with excitement, now that she knew how to tackle her friend’s chakra problem. What a nerd.

“Not but really… It’s crazy!”

“We know it is, Izumi,” Itachi said blankly, and it was hard to know if he was mocking her or agreeing earnestly. It was always hard to tell with him. Depending on your take on the matter, he had either never made fun of anyone in his life ever, or was the worst asshole known to man. Shisui was still reserving his judgment.

“Do you think it has to do with… You know.”

She trailed off, casting them uncertain glances as they walked back to the Uchiha district. She was testing to see if they knew what she was talking about, probably. Since none of them were supposed to know.

“I don’t think so. I think it’s on him,” Shisui answered. Naruto wasn’t supposed to be able to tap into the demon’s chakra so easily, and honestly, a tailed beast would have drawn a circle the size of the freaking village, no?
“I’ll ask my parents,” Itachi said. Izumi raised an eyebrow in Shisui’s direction, in a classic “what the hell” expression. It’s true that the last time Izumi had properly interacted with Itachi before their fight, his cousin was barely in speaking term with his father. Shisui wondered what Itachi had told the girl, but he also knew that she wouldn’t pry, and could still offer comfort.

She was a beacon of warmth and sanity in the gloomy Uchiha clan.

“They’re cute though,” she said, completely changing the subject.

“What?”

“The three of them. It’s nice to see Sasuke with kids his age.”

The declaration was subtle, but unmistakable. The kids had her support – Naruto and his relationship with Sasuke included. She looked at her friends sideways, waiting for their reaction.

“It is nice,” Itachi confirmed. Izumi rolled her eyes at his complete lack of enthusiasm, but she was smiling too. Shisui nodded at her, and wasn’t it cool, for once, that they were all on the same page.

“Okay, Naruto. Imagine… Like, the jutsu we perform at school. Let’s take the clone technique. Imagine that exercise is actually filling a glass of water.”

Sakura had been thinking hard on her analogies and she wasn’t about to let them go to waste. The two boys were listening to her intently, matching frown of confused concentration on their face. She held back a sigh. This was going to be long.

“So, the exercise is filling a glass of water – water being chakra. All of us, we have like… a gourd of water, and we have to fill the glass. Some are more clumsy than other so they spill more or less water on the side, but generally speaking we can all do it.”

This was a great analogy, cause it also explained why very young kids, lacking the strength and coordination, couldn’t do it. She was the best.

“Okay, I get it, I guess,” Naruto grumbled, probably vexed by the “all can do it” part. She was coming to it though.

“Well in that example, it’s like we all had a gourd and you had… I don’t know. Like, a barrel.”

Their frowned deepened. She chuckled.

“You have a barrel of water to fill a glass. And you’ve been taught to fill it like with a gourd – by tipping it over and targeting the glass. Except it’s like, impossible, with a barrel. Either you can’t even tip it at all, or you tip it and there’s water everywhere but in the glass.”

She paused a little for dramatics.

“And that’s why you can’t perform ninjutsu. You can’t fill the glass.”

It took a few seconds, and then matching expressions of sudden illumination lit up the boys’ face.

“I get it!” Naruto explained. “Sakura, you’re smart.”

Sasuke nodded silently, reluctantly impressed. Sakura blushed a little.
“Huh, so, next question. How do you fill a glass of water with a barrel?”

They thought about it long and hard before Sasuke answered, “you just scoop water with the glass.”

“Yes! And that’s actually… Okay there’s probably some technical term or something, but that’s actually a method of chakra molding. Instead of pouring you chakra into you jutsu, it’s the jutsu that taps into your reserve. And we’d have to do research and stuff but it’s… like, legit. It’s a thing!”

They were probably a bit weirded out by her excitement, but she couldn’t control it. They had figured it out! They could do something about that issue! It wasn’t an issue anymore!

She could help Naruto!

“You could also pierce the barrel.”

“Huh?”

“You could pierce the barrel,” Naruto repeated, mumbling like when he wasn’t sure about being right. “You know, you make a hole at the bottom and the water just flow out. Then you’d need a cork I guess but…”

She was glad to see the analogy had worked so well. She thought about it. That would amount to accessing a continuous flow of chakra, steady and strong until it ran out. On a gourd, it would be absurd, since it would be empty in seconds, but with a barrel…

There was something she was sure, that required that kind of techniques. Vast amounts of chakra and a steady feed…

“Ha!” she exclaimed. “That’s Fuinjutsu!”

“Sealing?” Sasuke asked. Naruto looked lost. She nodded.

“We don’t study it at the Academy cause it’s so chakra consuming. I don’t think much people use it at all… But you’d be great at it Naruto!”

He raised his eyebrows, looking both skeptic and enthusiastic, and like he didn't want to showcase either. Sakura was getting good at reading his moods though.

“You think?”

“Yes! Control doesn’t have to be that precise for sealing, since it’s mostly a question of pouring enough chakra into it. What matters the most are the signs and the drawings.”

And chakra control could be improved on, of course, but so could dexterity. More easily, even.

“That’s… good,” he said, not looking especially impressed. It was fine though. He was slow to get worked up, but once there, he would stay on. Sakura just had to actually show him, they just had to have him accomplish it just once, and he would be on board.

For now, she was excited enough for the both of them.

“I want you to train me.”
Both Shisui and Itachi raised their heads from the mission reports they were reviewing. They weren’t sent on active missions lately, but that didn’t mean they were on vacation.

Itachi sighed, uncomfortable.

“Sasuke, I told you…”

“No. I don’t care about… whatever it is that you won’t tell me, whatever it is that you feel bad about. I’m not asking as your little brother. You are the most powerful member of the Uchiha clan and I need, I need to get stronger.”

There was a fire in Sasuke’s eyes that was rarely seen on his grumpy little brother. Itachi stared at him in silence for a while, surprised by this sudden rage.

“Why?” he asked eventually

Sasuke pinched his lips. He was tensed all over, ready for a fight, ready to insist and argue until Itachi caved. When had his brother become so forceful? He used to be just as passive and obedient as Itachi himself.

As much a pain as it was, Itachi couldn’t see it as a bad change.

“I can’t let Naruto beat me.”

It could have been misplaced pride, except it wasn’t, was it? “Why?” Itachi asked again, wondering if Sasuke actually knew, if he would be able to put it into words.

“He’s… he’ll get stronger every day, and if he gets stronger than me, he’ll… We’re not friends enough yet. He’ll leave me behind, and I won’t let that happen.”

Naruto was probably the first person of which Sasuke had the full attention, barely split with their girl friend. But Sasuke wasn’t in competition with Sakura, so he could tolerate it.

Itachi had often wished he wasn’t born as he was. Gifted, as they said, a rare genius. Among the many torments it had brought him, the inferiority complex and resentment it had cultivated in Sasuke was one of the worsts, especially seeing how Itachi had no idea how to fight them. There had to be a lot of siblings that got along just fine despite one being better than the other.

“And if I want to be Hokage, I have to anyway,” Sasuke added as an afterthought, but one he had carefully pondered. Sasuke didn’t mention it that often, but often enough. Their father was convinced it was a childish whim – Itachi wasn’t so sure.

Itachi looked at Shisui. For a moment they stared at each other and Itachi was comforted by the fact that his cousin knew exactly what he was thinking about. He wasn’t sure he had made himself very clear, when he had tried to explain to him why he was so reluctant to spend time with Sasuke these days, but Shisui understood Itachi probably better than even Itachi did.

Mostly, Itachi was afraid of the influence he could have on Sasuke. Sasuke wished to be like him, and Itachi couldn’t think of a worse thing.

“How about this, Sasuke,” Shisui stepped in, a savior as always. “You’ll split your training between Itachi and I. Two teachers are better than one, right?”

Sasuke frowned, deep in thought, looking on all account like he was about to perform open-heart surgery. Finally, he sighed dramatically.
“Fine,” he said, crossing his arms on his torso to appear firm probably. “But Shisui, you have to hold Itachi to it. I count on you!”

“I’ll kick his ass if I have to cousin, I promise.”

That seemed to finally satisfy Sasuke, who exited the living room looking as pleased as could be.

“Your brother is fucking adorable,” Shisui commented with a laugh. His face soften into an indulgent smile when he caught Itachi’s sullen expression.

“It’s going to be fine, Itachi. I think it’s a good thing.”

“What if…”

“Nothing will happen to him. You won’t transmit him some sort of angst disease of whatever it is you’re worried about.”

“But…”

“Itachi.”

Shisui’s tone had hardened and Itachi willed himself to stay silent, despite the protestation bubbling on his lips.

“We can’t stay back forever. We have to move on now.”

It seemed so easy for him. Itachi was starting to feel he had been cheated, this entire time.

Everyone around seemed to be actually stronger than him.

The only thing Itachi could do for now was follow their lead. Shisui, Izumi… even Sasuke.

“Alright.”

Shisui smiled, at least. That was always nice.

Chapter End Notes

I never intended for those three Uchihas to feature so much? Why don't they have a life. Anyway I like them, I can't help it, and I'm hanging on to my quest of making Itachi a likable person for me. I'm not quite there yet, he's annoying x) but he's gonna suffer a bit more and then we'll get somewhere.

Also I have to admit Sasuke the bratty brat is breathing life into me. What a lovable idiot.

Also I made up all that stuff with chakra and had fun. And Naruto mastering Fuinjutsu is my weakness so...

Next chapter will have more Naruto-Sasuke drama, clan politics, and even more brats (I'm glad I brought Sai into this. It wasn't planned cause none of this is, but I'm glad). Tell me what you think and stay tuned, bye!
Fugaku remembered it all too clearly. It kept looping in his head, over and over. It kept him up at night.

A chunin had burst into his office to hand him a quick report explaining that a teacher from the Academy had been killed by Danzo’s men after bringing sensitive information to the Hokage, and by sensitive he meant decades of illegal missions, child snatching and warmongering.

The very next moment, Itachi had walked into his office, and he was in tears.

Itachi, in tears. Fugaku hadn’t seen his oldest son cry since he was five years old probably. Shisui was following close behind, white as a sheet, eyes dry but shining.

“Dad…” Itachi had said. Third shock. That had also been gone for years.

And then Itachi had told him about Danzo, about Anbu, about being a spy and about how their plot for overthrowing the Hokage was well known up above. About what was intended to be done about it.

The next moment, it was Hyuuga Hiashi who marched up into the room.

“What the hell, Fugaku?”

This time he could count in decades the last occurrence of the man being so familiar with him. And Fugaku, world crashing down around him, had blurted out, “the Uchiha have been planning a coup, and Danzo has been plotting to wipe us all out.”

The only thing Hiashi had to say to that was “I should have known walking in here that things could get even worse than they already were.”
Fugaku had been so sure, *so sure* that the other clan heads would side with the Hokage. None of them had lifted a finger when the Uchiha had been humiliated and ostracized publicly, Fugaku had assumed they were all too happy to see his clan fall, to see them put in their place like they had always wanted. It had never even occurred to him to seek their support, to make his case to them before deciding no one would be on their side.

Hiashi, and the others too, had things to say to that. They had been mad at Fugaku, of course, for wanting to bring war back to their doorstep instead of taking his grievance to them, for assuming they would be deaf to his pleas. But it was nothing compared to the wrath they held against Danzo, and, as time passed and the stories unfurled, against the Sandaime. Nothing compared to their sense of betrayal when they discovered that Danzo’s — and the Hokage’s to some extent they still didn’t fully know — solution to a dissident clan trying to stir trouble was to have them all murdered. Potentially by one of their own children.

At that point most of them were already on the warpath. Inoichi and Shibi, notably, after rescuing Yamanaka Fu and Aburame Torune from Danzo’s Roots, children of their own they had reluctantly let go, only to find out their supposed special training was getting brainwashed in the bottom of a cave. There were dozen more children, some thought dead for years, a lot of them snatched during the chaos brought by the Kyuubi’s attack.

That’s what Danzo had been up to then.

There was no way the Hokage didn’t know. No way he didn’t at least suspect. He had either been absurdly blind or purposefully obtuse – both were crimes that couldn’t just be swept under the rug.

Two years now they had been having these meetings regularly, diving back into issues they had left unattended for decades, no longer able to trust their leaders, be it the Hokage or his old councilors. There was no one to take the old Sandaime’s place for now, and they couldn’t afford to appear leaderless in front of the other villages, so they had to maintain the status quo. The Sandaime remained in place, his image intact to the general population. There were no other options, for now.

The various ninja clans of Konoha had never had such good relationships. As terrible as all the events leading to this had been, this part was… surprisingly nice.

Where had it gone, all these years? They used to be friends, all of them. They had gone to the Academy together, had been teammates, had fought side by side. They had sworn, once upon a time, as only young and foolish teens could, that they wouldn’t fall into the same trap their parents had. That they wouldn’t cross out their friendship, wouldn’t put their clan before everything else, wouldn’t ever end up pitching against each other.

Every day they were rediscovering the magnitude with which they had failed this.

But here they were now.

Holding those meetings at the Hokage tower seemed wrong somehow, even if it was the administration center, so they did it in the Nara district, for the sole reason that they were the only one to have a table big enough for them all. Especially since their number had slowly grown.

Mikoto, first. “I’m coming with you,” she had said the very first time, and it wasn’t always, but sometimes at least Fugaku knew not to argue with his wife. It bothered him, but he had figured she would keep to herself and see that there was no need for her there, and not come back.

Ha. Right.
As soon as she had stepped in the room Shikaku had made some comments about what she was doing here. “If you don’t like it, you can fuck right off, Shikaku. And I’m inviting Yoshino, next time.”

Shikaku had shut his damn mouth, and both their wives were around the table the next time. Shibi’s wife came when he couldn’t – although Fugaku wasn’t sure that was actually his wife. The Aburame weren’t big on marriage, or on monogamy for that matter. But she was his son’s mother and his second in command, and held the same power he did. Tsume had been bringing her daughter Hana for a few months now, as she would take the lead of the clan in a few years, and Tsume wanted to start preparing her as soon as possible.

If not for their subject of conversation, this would have felt very domestic indeed.

They had discussed Hokage succession, again, and came up short on solutions, again. Fugaku had almost, almost gave up on bringing up the Naruto case.

One scalding look from Mikoto, and he was explaining to his fellow clan leaders Naruto’s seemingly troubled relationship with the Uchiha’s dojutsu.

“Why do you find it so concerning?” Shikaku asked when he was done. Fugaku took his time to answer. Maybe he shouldn’t have. Maybe they were worrying over nothing. But he couldn’t let it go – it was a mix of a gut feeling, Mikoto’s own worries, and the still burning shame of such issues he had overlooked before, that had nearly lead all he knew and loved to ruins.

“You know how the Uchiha clan was accused of having brought the Beast down onto the village,” Fugaku started. He saw them frown in annoyance, unwilling to argue about this again.

“No one ever took it seriously,” Tsume said. She hadn’t, probably, and most hadn’t either, but it would be a lie to say no one had bought into the theory.

“We did,” Mikoto intervened, cutting through their murmurs.

“We took it very seriously,” Fugaku went on. “We actually accounted for the whereabouts of all the active Sharingan users at the time. It wasn’t… that unreasonable a claim. The Clan had nothing to do with it, but not everyone follows the wishes of their clan.”

They all nodded somberly, having all dealt with their fair share of internal struggles.

“I supposed you found nothing,” Inoichi said to pick up the thread.

“No. At the time we concluded none of us committed that terrible betrayal. However…”

He was bearing the full weight of their attention now. Everyone had more or less accepted the fact that the Beast had fallen upon them by the whim of fate, and nothing more. They had come to term with the random cruelty of that day, with the Kyuubi breaking free despite the precaution taken for Kushina to give birth to her son. The beast freed, it had attacked, and that was the end of it.

“We’ve come to believe that there might be… someone, out of the village, in possession of the Sharingan.”

The admission was humiliating to say the least. The Uchiha had always prided themselves of the perfect grasp they had over their dojutsu. Never stolen or fallen into enemies' hands, like the Byakugan. The only bump in their track record was the eye of Hatake Kakashi, but it still remained in the confine of the village.
“A rogue Uchiha?” Hiashi asked.

“Or a thief,” Fugaku retorted, even if he wasn’t sure which one would be worse. A thief was more likely, because they hadn’t had any deserters in decades, but who knew?

“What put you on that track then?” Shikaku asked, never one to lose focus. Fugaku exchanged a look with Mikoto who nodded slightly, determined.

"Itachi was approached by a man. In regard to… Well. You know.”

He couldn’t say it. He could barely fathom in on his best days, there was no way he could just acknowledge it out loud. That it had only remained in the realm of distant possibility didn’t change a thing. Danzo had asked it of his son. He had actually asked him.

It was a good thing the man was far away from them now.

They nodded, sporting matching expression of horror and resentment on their face for just a second. They were all thinking the same thing – it could have been my clan, my family, my child. Granted, none of them had a history quite as shaky as the Uchiha’s with the village, but it was delusional to think Danzo would have stopped there. He hadn’t hesitated to snatch clan kids, to have important people from other villages murdered, to plan the extermination of an entire clan. Where would he have stopped?

“The man offered… help. He didn’t reveal his name or identity but… The Sharingan doesn’t need to be activated to be detected.”

And Itachi was paranoid enough by then that he had looked for it with his own, just in case.

“Itachi could only say for sure the man had a powerful dojutsu.”

“And his interest in him is enough to make a leap as to what dojutsu exactly,” Inoichi concluded.

“Kushina never displayed any fear of the Sharingan,” Mikoto said. “But we can imagine Naruto would if… the fox’s experience of it is more recent. With a Sharingan out there…”

“It becomes plausible.”

Plausible, alarming, and life-changing. It would mean it wasn’t fate, it wasn’t bad luck, it wasn’t the wrath of a god.

It was deliberate.

“Why bring that up now, Fugaku? If you’ve suspected it for so long,” Chouza asked, with a surprising lack of reproach in his voice. Fugaku considered getting out of this one, spinning a quick excuse. It was a reflex at this point, he was used to lying by default, to never be outright and honest about anything.

He muzzled the urge as he felt Mikoto’s eyes bore a hole into his skull from his side.

“I wouldn’t have,” he said bluntly. “We’ve been investigating the matter for a long time and are no closer to solving it, but I would rather keep it an Uchiha’s business still, even if additional resources would be welcomed. It was… our failure,” he said through gritted teeth, “whether as Uchiha, or as the Konoha police force, if there was someone indeed who infiltrated the village to subdue the Kyuubi, we failed to prevent it, and we should be the ones to right that wrong. But…”
He wasn’t a fan of that honesty policy. It complicated interactions that a quick lie would have easily smoothed over, and it made him look bad more often than not. He felt vulnerable, exposed, and like he was giving ammunition to the people listening.

But Fugaku remembered it all too clearly. It kept looping in his head, over and over. It kept him up at night.

Itachi’s crying face, the horror of a fate that had been narrowly avoided, out of sheer dumb luck.

“But Itachi asked me to,” he admitted.

It should have been a bad thing to admit. Something that could be used against him, that made him appear weak. He didn’t keep the truth close to his chest, never to be shared, out of vindication or pleasure – he honestly thought it was the best thing to do. To protect himself and his own.

Except the other clan heads around the table didn’t show mockery or disdain, nor calculation or threat. If anything, they looked pleasantly surprised, that of all he could have said, this was what he was going for.

He wondered if they believed him or just appreciated he would choose such an excuse, wasn’t sure which one would please them the most – and which he would find less offensive. But Fugaku was forced to admit something he had refused to see for so long.

The people around that table weren’t his enemies.

“We will look into it then,” Yoshino summarized, unfazed. “And keep a close eye on the boy. But I believe your son is ahead of us on the matter, isn’t he?”

Fugaku didn’t have to turn around to picture his wife snickering and trying badly to hide it. She shouldn’t have been so careless on the matter. Just because their friends had made no comment over Sasuke and Naruto’s friendship didn’t make it any better an idea than it was. The ground was too shifty under their feet still, and they had just openly confessed that an Uchiha behind the Kyuubi’s attack was a possibility. Naruto was a danger even without factoring in the power he could yield.

Now wasn’t the time to pick up that particular fight though.

“He is. And Itachi’s watching them.”

“How is Itachi anyway?” Inoichi asked. He often did. He had insisted for a long time that Itachi saw one of the therapists specializing in shinobi and their trauma at the Konoha hospital, but Itachi had always refused. Fugaku had been of a mind to make him go anyway, and it had resulted in a few frustrating sessions where Itachi had stayed silent as a tombstone despite the therapist’s best efforts. Inoichi had reasoned that the boy would go on his own term when he felt the need. Shisui had agreed without a fuss, at least. There was no telling what good it did him though – despite his easy demeanor, Shisui was guarded, opening up only to Itachi, or so Fugaku assumed.

He had to restrain himself from just requesting answers from them, or ordering them to deal with what had happened. He had a feeling they wouldn’t obey anyway. Not anymore.

Besides, Mikoto would probably behead him.

“We’re not sure,” she answered in his place, traces of concern in her otherwise steady voice. “He seems to hold it together, but it’s not like he’s sharing much with us.”
That was another thing that had surprised Fugaku greatly – the overwhelming sympathy Itachi had received from those in the known, seeing that, at the bottom of it, he had come very close to becoming a traitor to the village, and to weaken it greatly. But if none of them were particularly good at recognizing children for what they were – children – they were still all better than him.

Itachi was thirteen years old then. **Thirteen.**

“What about the kids, Inoichi?” Mikoto asked, as much out of genuine concern as to change the subject, Fugaku presumed. Inoichi sighed and exchanged a heavy glance with Shibi.

“Torune and Fu are doing fine, all things considered, along with most of those who were returned to their family. Kids are resilient. As for those others…”

“The orphans, right? The ones you took in,” Hiashi asked. Fugaku couldn’t decide if there was reprobation in his voice. He had never been able to tell if he just naturally looked and sounded judgmental – that’s why he was so infuriating.

“Shin and Sai, although those names were only assigned to them once for mission purposes. We couldn’t find anything in Danzo’s files that would give an inkling to their background and family. They’re not causing any troubles. I would say the issue is quite the opposite.”

In front of the others’ questioning expression, Inoichi sighed again.

“For all intent and purposes, they are fully formed Anbu soldiers despite their age. A lifetime of conditioning isn’t that easily shaken.”

Fugaku was among the dispatched jounin who had raided the Root headquarter the first time after Danzo’s arrest. The resistance they had found there had been incomprehensible – the older members were enraged, pushed into a fanatical frenzy by the downfall of their leader, despite it being legitimate. Most had had to be incapacitated – a few had been killed.

And then there were the children.

Sitting on bunk beds in a common dormitory, waiting for their fate calmly. The boy that would later call himself Shin was standing in the middle of the room, protecting the one that would call himself Sai. He had looked at Fugaku with quiet resolve as he asked “are you going to kill us, sir?”

He seemed fully expectant to hear an affirmative.

They didn’t look scared. They didn’t look anything, blank faces and still postures. Fugaku was sure they would have fought to the death though, had they been pushed to.

“To be honest, I don’t really know what’s going on with them. It’s… Well. Ino has been having much more success than me at breaking through them. It’s better than nothing, so I’m leaving it to her right now.”

The way he was saying it, he didn’t have much of a choice. Fugaku was unfamiliar with the offspring of the various clans, but even he had heard about Yamanaka Ino’s notorious reputation for mischief of the highest level, far from the harmless shenanigans regular kids got up to.

Had he felt like he could have any say in this, Fugaku would have probably advised Sasuke to stay away from her. But seeing how the boy had been acting up lately, it would only encourage him to befriend her.

Kids were exhausting.
“It doesn’t help that we can’t seem to convince them that Danzo isn’t coming back. They just can’t fully believe it. Frankly, I don’t blame them.”

It was by far the heaviest weight on the clans’ relationship with the Hokage right now. After everything that had happened, everything that Danzo had been accused of… The Sandaime had refused to have him executed.

So many had been killed for far less. Treason was the worst possible crime in the shinobi world, and that Danzo fancied himself the most loyal of them all, acting solely for the village’s interest, did nothing to alleviate the weight of his crimes.

The Hokage was protecting him, even now, and none could forgive him for it.

Danzo had been sent to an isolated location deep into the fire country, effectively imprisoned, but still alive and well, and still able to talk. To reach out. Would it have been so hard to at least cut off his tongue? The symbolism would have been great too, after the lengths they had had to go to have him remove the seals that bound his subordinates’ voice.

None of them felt safe from his influence and meddling. How could the Sandaime not see that? Danzo was still a threat. He would be as long as he was alive.

“Well, on that cheery note, I think we can call off that meeting for the day,” Shikaku exclaimed with his usual gruffness. If Hiashi always sounded pedantic, Shikaku always sounded annoyed, and it was impossible to tell at what. Fugaku would have appreciated a little formality for once, but he knew not to expect anything resembling protocol from his fellow clan leaders.

They all packed their notes, chattering amicably. Fugaku made plans to meet with Inoichi at the Intelligence division to talk at length about the rogue Uchiha case. Inuzuka Hana approached him just as Mikoto and him were taking their leave.

“Are you going back to the headquarter, Uchiha-san?” she asked pleasantly, always polite. He exchanged a brief look with Mikoto, who nodded.

“I am. You can walk with me.”

The girl smiled and fell into step with him. Mikoto took the direction of the training ground to meet with her genin team, and Fugaku and Hana started to make their way to the Konoha Police Headquarter.

It was so strange, how they got used to everything, even changed they were convinced would never truly set in. When it had been suggested that a step toward the reintegration of the Uchiha clan in the village could be to end their exclusive hold on the police force, most of them had protested, although they had complained about it being a mean of confining the clan to the village before. But they had made the most of that assignment and they took great pride in being the force that protected Konoha within its walls. The Anbu for outside threats, the Konoha police for inside ones, and the rest of the ninja force to carry on missions for the reputation and prosperity of the village.

Except it meant everyone was wary of them and their power to meddle and snoop around people’s business. And the fact that they could cover up whatever they wanted, including a traitor in their rank. Those who didn’t think the clan as a whole was responsible for the Kyuubi thought it had at least hidden the traitor, because how come the police of police had let that slip? Fugaku didn’t know either. It was their greatest failure.

Well, that, and the entire operating of Root. Years, years of Danzo’s shinobi carrying unauthorized
missions, taking out those he thought were threats to the village or himself, kidnapping children. And they had never suspected a thing. Those kids’ life ruined, it was on Fugaku and his fellow clansmen. They should have put a stop to it, but they were busy enough trying to battle off the villagers growing mistrust.

Mistrust due partly to their inability to find those children.

Sage, what a mess. Fugaku had been forced to admit fresh blood within their ranks was a necessity, but had asked that in turn that his clan would no longer be restrained either.

So, no more Uchiha excluded from the administration, and no more non-Uchiha excluded from the police force.

It had caused outrage, at first, but no one batted an eye now, as Hana entered the building on his heels. Refusing changes wasn’t an option. They had to move forward now.

But seriously, why couldn’t they cut off Danzo’s head.

“…”

“Ino!”

Sakura felt her face redden immediately and she cursed herself for getting overwhelmed by something so simple as calling out a sort of friend in the middle of the corridor. It’s just, these days it felt like she wasn’t ever using her voice a school. She wasn’t even answering the teachers’ questions anymore – every time she wanted to raise her hand, she thought of all the comments she had received about how she was an arrogant bookworm who thought she was smarter than everyone else because she always knew the answers to everything, and she kept her hand down. Mizuki had called her out on it one day after class, saying that it was weird they weren’t hearing her during lessons anymore, and Sakura had felt a wave of rage and bitterness rise inside of her, a strong feeling impossible to stifle down that was showing more and more often lately. He knew what had happened, he knew what the others thought of her. He had to know why she was scared to display her good academics. And yet he had phrased it like it was too bad, a disappointment really, and why was it that way?

She hated his guts.

Anyway, she was quiet at school, and when she talked she felt like her voice carried all across the room, all across the entire building, that everyone could hear her, and nobody liked it.

In practice, only Ino stopped in her track and turned, instead of following Shikamaru and Choji outside for recess. Sakura waited for the corridor to empty out. Soon enough, they were alone.

“Do you want something?” Ino asked, not unkindly despite her rough tone. Now that Sakura handled Naruto on a regular basis, even Ino’s grumpy demeanor appeared nice and refreshing in comparison.

“I wanted to thank you for the paper. And… huh, you mentioned you could acquire… other things. If need be.”

For some reason, this seemed to please Ino, who relaxed and took a step to get closer to Sakura, a conspiratorial smile on her face.

“Need you some more illegal material, Sakura?” she said mischievously. Sakura blushed.
“It’s not… illegal. Just, huh…”

“Relax. Just tell me what you need.”

“I need some sort of resource on sealing. Scrolls, books… to learn the basics, something like that.”

Ino stared at her with enough intensity that Sakura squirmed a little, feeling exposed.

“I’ll ask Sai,” Ino finally agreed. “But you need to give him something in return.”

“What, like… he asks for payment?”

“He doesn’t ask,” Ino said. Her expression had darkened, her mouth set in an upset fold. “Whatever is asked of him, he will do it.”

She seemed greatly distressed by the fact.

“We’re trying to break him out of it though, hence the reward. Anything you want, but you’ll have to trade it with him in person.”

It had been a while since Sakura hadn’t been caught in Ino’s weird schemes, she had forgotten the utter oddity of her ways. Their classmates who feared her had no idea they should have actually feared her more.

“…Okay.”

“Cool.”

Ino walked off with a light strut and without a care in the world, as if they hadn’t just discussed a shady deal like some petty criminals in a back alley.

Sakura chuckled helplessly. What was even her life.

“Alright. This should be… simple.”

Naruto raised a skeptical eyebrow at Sakura, who had been studying the scroll for a good twenty minutes and seemed no closer to deciphering it. She had refused once again to say where she had gotten it, but Naruto had anticipated this time – he had been stalking her for a few days, and was now reasonably certain that that Sai weirdo from their class dealt shinobi material against baked goods. A terrible deal really, since Naruto had tasted Sakura’s cookies before, but the results were the same – here they were with a scroll on Base Sealing.

According to Sakura, anyway.

Naruto couldn’t decipher any of the scroll. He could only recognize what was written instruction and what was actual seals to reproduce, and that was about it.

“What is it supposed to do?” Sasuke asked, brows furrowed, and Naruto took great comfort in the fact that Sasuke could read, and still looked about as lost as Naruto felt.

“It’s a simple charging seal. To store up chakra. It’s entry level, so it’s only for one jutsu. You put chakra in, so you can use it later, when you’re all run out I guess. Huh. This is just the storing part though, there’s nothing on how you’re supposed to release it…”
“What the point then…” Sasuke mumbled. He had made no secret of what he thought, personally, on sealing. He wanted to spar, not waste time on an art he would make no use of, or something. He was less available lately, seen a lot with his two annoying relatives – not that Naruto cared. Naruto knew how to rile him up anyway – a simple comment about how he was just afraid he couldn’t do it, and Sasuke was on board to try it with them.

“Quit whining! Okay, take the scroll and try to… draw that.”

Naruto had never been particularly good at drawing or calligraphy – he could barely write his own name. But copying the seal wasn’t that hard. In fact, it was pretty easy – there was a symmetry there, a pattern, that made the design obvious once he’d studied it long enough. Even the kanjis scattered around the circles and at the end of the various branches made more sense to him than they ever had. They had a reason to be there. Their meaning was obvious. The ink smeared a little, but it was simple enough to work it into the symbols, and it was barely visible once he was done.

He looked at the final product and found… something didn’t add up. He couldn’t have said why, but he didn’t like it. He checked on the scroll again, but he has made no mistake. Still, something felt off.

Without thinking, he added just a few extra lines under some of the branches that formed a sort of sun around the blank space in the middle where he supposed the sealing would take place. Now, that was better. Not perfect yet, but better.

He looked up to glance at the other’s scroll. Sasuke’s was the worst by far, all wobbly and uneven. Sasuke had extraordinary steady and sure hands for throwing weapons, but it looked like it didn’t extend to handling a brush. Sakura’s was better, but Naruto didn’t like it for some reasons. He almost said something, but refrained – what did he know about this anyway? Hers was probably better, he just couldn’t see it.

“Alright, and then…”

They glanced together at the hand signs drawn hastily at the bottom of the scroll.

“There’s not much of an instruction, you just… Send chakra at it? And that final sign is to complete the sealing.”

Sasuke was the best at mudras, able to do them faster than everyone in their class, but this wasn’t a combat situation or even a combat techniques. There was no rush. Naruto formed the signs carefully, satisfied that the combination felt natural, flowing. There had been something on mudra theory the other day in class, about how certain pattern would feel easier to handle than others depending on chakra affinity, but Naruto wasn’t paying much attention then. Since he had no idea how much chakra he was supposed to use, he just called up whatever came to him, but contrary to Sakura and Sasuke who slapped their hands on the paper as soon as their sings were done, he paused, hands joined in the tiger sign.

Let it come up. Let it be.

Just as his two companions flopped back with defeated sighs, Naruto pressed his hands on the paper. There was an indication on the scroll about where they were supposed to go, but he hadn’t looked, so he just put them where he thought would work best. The signs would guide the chakra anyway, that’s what they were there for. He felt it rush out – he didn’t have to control it. He just had to stop the flow, whenever he wanted.

When he felt like it was enough, he cut the flow and lifted his hands, only to clap them together
immediately. It felt final that way. The jutsu fell away – in the circle that was once blank now stood the “chakra” kanjis written in a lighter color than the ink spread around it.

Naruto turns to the others, only to see theirs were still blank, and that they were looking at his scrolls with no little envy.


Sasuke remembered clearly the first time he had tried the Katon jutsu. He had been disappointed then because his father had, but at the time, he remembered how easy it had been to just make the signs and call up the fire. Despite his father’s feeble explanations, he had managed it on the first time, albeit on a ridiculously small scale. Ninjutsu had always come easily to him, but this was different. This felt natural.

He had been reminded, a bit, when Naruto had tried to explain to them how he had managed to make that seal work. Despite their best effort, neither Sasuke nor Sakura had been able to. It wasn’t that bad – Sasuke had no interest in seals, a chakra consuming and complicated art, and having Naruto manage it on the very first try while his two friends couldn’t figure it out could have been frustrating but it was… nice, instead. He had been happy, even he’d tried to hide it. Sasuke was content with that.

However, Naruto wasn’t the prime example Sasuke had of innate talent. That award, of course, went to Itachi, who had never struggled at anything in his life, to whom everything came effortlessly.

Sasuke remembered his first Katon now, in the middle of training with his brother and cousin, because shortly after, as he complained to his mother about none of the other kids at school being any good at ninjutsu which was easy, right?, she had explained to him how things that came easy for him wouldn’t come so easy to others. That being able to understand that, and to reach through to the ones who couldn’t figure things out as fast as he did, it was what would make him truly great at his skill. He had understood, vaguely, that she was talking about the talent of teaching others. It was hard indeed, as proven by his attempt to teach ninjutsu to Naruto, and by… well. What was happening right now.

His mother had said that genius often made for terrible teachers, and she was right.

It’s not that Itachi was mean about it, or too severe or anything like this. But he was utterly incapable of explaining anything clearly.

Sasuke supposed that it made sense – he didn’t have to think about it. He had barely needed to learn those things himself, they had been minimally explained to him before he could reproduce them on the spot.

Which led to his current level of frustration.

“No, not like that.”

“How then?”

“…Not like that.”

Sasuke threw his arms up. This was pointless. Itachi couldn’t impart any of his wisdom, it was beyond him. Sasuke would have been tempted to think he was doing it on purpose, if not for the
confused and slightly distressed look growing on Itachi’s face as he failed to explain himself to his brother. Sasuke cast a helpless look at Shisui, looking greatly amused by what he was watching.

“You’re rushing Sasuke. Being able to form signs quickly is a good skill, but only if they’re still flawless. This is a much more advanced jutsu than the simple fireball. You can’t be sloppy in any way.”

Itachi was sporting a puzzled expression that belonged on Sasuke’s face, not his. Itachi was supposed to know these things. Supposed to know what he was doing.

But maybe he just… wasn’t.

“Thanks, Shisui,” Itachi said. Shisui grinned.

“What would you do without me, I wonder.”

Sasuke had always assumed that Itachi treated Shisui differently than… well, than the rest of the entire world, because he saw something in him, something that had made them friends beyond their blood connection, something that set Shisui apart. He was starting to understand it was the other way around.

It’s Shisui who treated Itachi differently. Not from how he treated the others, but from how the others treated Itachi. His talent was well-advertised in the village – everyone was always a little awed over the Uchiha prodigy. Even his classmates, people his age, even people he had never met before. They were respectful and full of praise, but also a little distant, like they didn’t feel like they could actually approach him. There were those who tried to gain his attention and his favors. There were those who openly despised him.

And then there was Shisui, of whom the first distinct memory Sasuke had was him tugging Itachi’s ponytail lose to bind to kunais together in a failed attempt to invent a new kind of weapon that had resulted in a broken window and a very long lecture.

Shisui had always treated him like a friend. He wasn’t envious or jealous, even when there were some to whisper behind their back that he must have been bitter, for Itachi was younger but better than him already. But Shisui had no care for any of this.

“It’s… It’s normal not to make it on the first try,” Itachi tried lamely. Sasuke shrugged.

“Tss, thanks, I know that.”

Shisui clicked his tongue with a frown, to Sasuke’s puzzlement. Itachi looked upset.

“No but, really, I… I know that. I wasn’t expecting to. I just need to keep practicing,” he added for good measure. He was annoyed at the way they relaxed – did they really think he was such a brat? He wasn’t an idiot. He knew learning jutsu took time, for the vast majority of people. Itachi was the exception, not the rule.

Sasuke truly didn’t care about that, no more than Shisui did. It wasn’t Itachi being the best at everything that bothered him. His brother was like he was – it was a good thing. He was strong, he could protect himself and protect others, he was respected. Those were good things.

The anger Sasuke had over this wasn’t toward Itachi. He was plenty angry at Itachi, but not about that. It’s the others that enraged him. If Sasuke wanted to beat Itachi, it wasn’t so that he would get to be stronger than him. It was just so that he too would be seen, finally. Would be recognized.
“What?” he asked angrily at their open surprise.

“We would have thought you’d be more upset about this,” Shisui said calmly, honest as ever. Sasuke focused back on repeating the mudras to avoid their gaze.

“What does it matter,” he mumbled. “I’ll get it eventually. When you use a jutsu in battle, no one’s gonna point a finger and say “yeah but it took him two years to learn it!”. They’ll say “aaaah” and “it burns” and then they’ll die.”

Sasuke was broken out of his concentration by a sound. A weird, ridiculous sound, the kind people made when a laugh was startled out of them and they didn’t have time to stifle it entirely, a dirty mix between a groan and sneeze.

Itachi was snickering into his collar.

Sasuke wasn’t sure why it gave him a pause. Maybe because it was hard to conjure up the image of Itachi laughing. Maybe because here they were, the three of them in that clearing, training together and now laughing too.

Truth be told, Sasuke had never cared that much about training with Itachi. But it was the only way that maybe Itachi would agree to hang out, since he was always so busy. Sasuke just wanted them to spend time together.

Well, now, he really needed to train. But this was nice all the same.

“We underestimated you, Sasuke. Sorry,” Shisui said, and his tone was mocking but gentle too, very fond. Itachi’s smile faded away, as it often did. Sasuke wondered was dark thoughts plagued him to the point that he couldn’t be content for more than a few moments.

Maybe he’d ask, one day.

“So, like that?” Sasuke asked again, intent on making the most of that session.

“Huh, no, not like that.”

“How then?”

“…Not like that.”

Shisui’s laugh rung clearly through the woods.

.

“Yo.”

Sai raised his head from his notebook to see who was suddenly blocking the sun. It was a boy. Blond. From his class. Sai searched his memory for a second.

Uzumaki Naruto. Person of interest, but the reason why was classified. Terrible student, known not to be very friendly.

Addressing him, apparently.

“Hello.”

Shin and Ino, sitting on each side of him on the bench, tensed visibly as they interrupted their
“I need you to teach me,” Naruto said. Sai was going to ask what, but saw that Naruto was pointing at his notebook, where he had been drawing absentmindedly, small animals running around the pages as he waited for recess to be over and class to resume. They had so much leisure time now, it was exhausting. He didn’t get how people came up constantly with ways to fill their time, with how much they had.

“Why?”

“Learning seals. Need to be better with a brush,” Naruto said curtly, seemingly fed up with the conversation already. Low tolerance for social interactions? At least with strangers. Spent enough time with Uchiha Sasuke and Haruno Sakura, could be labeled as friends. Never seen talking all that much though. Sai could relate.

“I see.”

Sai was going to agree, since he had no reason not to, but Ino cleared her throat loudly by his side, and he cast her a long, puzzled look, trying to decipher what she was trying to tell him. After a while she just sighed, exasperated.

“And what will he get in return?” she asked Naruto. Ah, that was that. He was supposed to ask, but he always forgot, because he didn’t care. He didn’t need nor want anything. What was the point?

“I’m not paying you,” Naruto replied immediately, like the mere suggestion offended him.

“Thank you,” Sai answered. Money was yet another issue he could go without for now. It confused him to the highest level. Just owning things made his head hurt.

Naruto frowned.

“You could teach me something,” Sai offered, struck with inspiration. That would placate Ino, wouldn’t it? Sai was interested in learning things. It seemed to be all he was doing beside drawing, ever since they had been placed in the Yamanaka’s care, and he was okay with continuing on that path for now.

“Well. I guess I could.”

“Could you? Is there anything you can do?” Ino asked. She was more aggressive than necessary – Sai took it to mean they had history together. Ex-partners maybe? Ino talked a lot about love and boys, even if she wasn’t seen often in the company of one or the other, present company notwithstanding.

Naruto glared at her, either vexed or hurt, it was hard to tell.

“I can teach you to pickpocket,” Naruto said after a moment of reflection.

“What? That’s out of the question!”

Sai turned toward Shin this time – it was annoying this habit him and Ino had to bracket him, it meant he couldn’t look at both at the same time.

“Why not?” Sai asked.

“It’s a good skill to have,” Ino admitted. “Are you any good though?”
“Was I ever arrested? That’s your answer.”

“It’s really not.”

“It’s not the question!” Shin said again, louder this time, flustered at the way he was being ignored. “Sai is not learning to pickpocket!”

Sai shrugged. He didn’t care either way but if Shin was against it, then he wouldn’t.

“Anything else?” he asked politely. The teacher would be calling them one moment or another, and he wanted that conversation to be over. Naruto managed to look even sourer, if possible, before sighing in defeat over whatever debate he was having in his head.

“What about how to cook?”

Ino scoffed.

“You can cook?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“I’ve seen your bento.”

“I’ve been taking care of myself for ten years out of ten so yes, I know how to cook.”

For some reasons, Sai expected an insult at the end of that sentence. Aware that he had the power to stop all this noise, he nodded.

“I agree.”

Ino seemed ready to protest, but Shin most likely did something to stop her – Sai still couldn’t look at both at the same time – because she let it go, her mouth clicking shut on a mean grimace.

“Great,” Naruto said without looking like he found any of this particularly great. “See you after class.”

And without waiting for an answer, he was gone.

“Cool,” Sai said as he believed kids were supposed to, to no one in particular. Ino still disagreed.

Chapter End Notes

Urg, this chapter was all over the place. That first part with the adults was terrible to write, I wanted to cram a lot of things in, it ends up being a little confusing maybe? Sorry about that. I fixed it as much as I could but I'm fed up with it now haha. But those points were important to work into the story, BESIDES, after trying to make myself like Itachi it looks like I'm getting onto Fugaku as well x) he has a lot of work to do, but he'll actually get better. Also am I bringing you sort of Uchiha Fugaku & Inuzuka Hana friendship at some point? Dunno where THAT came from, but I'm on board x)

Also, it's my personal take that the other clan heads wouldn't get behind Danzo and the
Uchiha massacre in any way. I guess we could argue that some would have maybe, but I don't want to have that because I like them and I have hope in my heart for them building something of a coherent government out of that general mess. And I like those characters so, yeah. I don't mean to bash the sandaime also? It's not my fault he's Like That. (Just to be clear Danzo won't actually make a comeback. We'll deal with him and, yeah, he won't. It's kind of a spoiler but I don't want to hover that threat upon your head - even if I do for the characters :p)

I ranted and was ranted at back hard on that post, if you want to read long ass meta on the politic surrounding the Uchiha massacre, among other things. Please let me know what you think, bye!
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Sasuke wants to know what happened to Sakura.

Chapter Notes

Another 8k chapter... Next one should be shorter except maybe not cause I have to write a fight and who knows what that would take... I don't wanna x)

The more I write about this the more I make my own shit up and the more I start to feel kind of insecure about the whole deal? Posting chaptered WIP sure is stressful... I don't want to disappoint you. Aaaand I'll stop now sorry about that, thank you all for your comments, I hope you'll enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Is Shibi married to Kiyoko?”

Mikoto couldn’t help the light laugh that shook her shoulders – she glanced away from the vegetables she was cutting on the counter to look at her husband, staring off in the distance, mission reports open but forgotten on the table in front of him.

“What’s so funny?”

“I could tell something was bothering you, but really, that was it?”

He frowned, never one to appreciate being teased. He used to be more fun. Or did he? Maybe she just used to be less so.

“It may have occurred to me that I know very little of the current… personal affairs of our various… associates.”

The word “friends” would make his mouth melt, probably. She sighed, both exasperated and fond. It was always funny and mildly unsettling to see that Fugaku, for all his responsibilities and status, could be as immature and petty as a teenager.

“No, he’s not. The Aburame raise their children collectively, and they’re light on their attachment to lineage. Shibi and Kiyoko’s son Shino – he’s in Sasuke’s class by the way – is next in line for the succession for now, but it’s more a question of age and timing than legacy. Maybe it will go to someone else.”

“Huh.”

Fugaku took a sip of his tea, thoughtful, and Mikoto knew to expect more questions. What would he do without her, she wondered.
“What about Inoichi?”

“He never married either, although he and Ino’s mother lived together for a while. They were close friends and he wanted a child, but she wasn’t interested in the sedentary lifestyle. She’s a traveling spy – she's not often seen in the village.”

“He stopped at Ino,” Fugaku said, more as a personal reflection than a question. Mikoto answered anyway.

“Historically, the Yamanaka have had more female leaders than male ones. Their women can pass down the family name as well as the men, and be trained in their techniques. So yeah, he stopped at Ino.”

It was an issue they had avoided, and she was both glad and guilty about it. She would have loved a daughter equally to her sons, but what about him? The Uchiha were debatably the worst on that particular subject.

Fugaku didn’t catch the bite in her tone and not for the first time, she regretted bitterly the years she had spent keeping herself quiet, unwilling to make any noise, to stir any trouble. If he was deaf to her voice today, she had only herself to blame.

And could only count on herself to fix it.

“Is he single then?”

“Not exactly. He has this… thing, going on. With Shikaku and Yoshino.”

It was always satisfying to hear bewildered silence where an answer should have been. She set her knife down and turned around, not resisting the need to see the expression on his face.

“Wh-What?”

“It’s been a few years. Why do you think he’s always there when we dine at the Nara’s?”

“I just assumed they were close friends.”

“Well, they are.”

She couldn’t say she understood it either, except maybe she did, a little. They had all been quick to marry and have children, because it’s what was expected of them and there was an urgency then that only war could bring, to get on with those things before it was too late. They were older now though, relatively at peace and free from their elders’ grasp, for the most part. Willing to live their life as they wanted, at least a little. Ready to fight for it too.

She had reconnected with her friends from outside the clan, and it was a bitter comfort to see that they were all struggling with their family life, one way or another. Yoshino had been unhappy for a long time, and for a while her marriage had been on shaky ground. Shikaku was far from a stellar husband, but it’s not like he had changed over the years. He had always been this way – she had wrongly assumed he would evolve in her sense. That new arrangement seemed to suit them though.

Mikoto too had made similar mistakes, to convince herself that the things that upset her in her relationship would ease with time, that she would be content, eventually. How foolish young women could be.

“You never mentioned any of it to me,” he accused. She rolled her eyes. As if she was responsible
for keeping him updated on their circle’s love lives.

“Who’s the chief of police here? Besides, they don’t advertise it, but they’re not exactly subtle either. And you can be a bit… traditional, on those matters. There was no reason for me to bring it up.”

He grimaced, and he knew that wasn’t the word she wanted to use. It was a skill she had mastered over years of navigating political conflicts – the art of being somewhat insulting without saying anything outright offensive. He could tell she meant a far less neutral term than “traditional”, so even her not saying it didn’t soothe the sting. He loved when she used it on other people – they used to go through boring get-togethers this way, by faking politeness and subtly riling up everyone around them without them being able to pinpoint what made them so infuriating.

He didn’t like when it was turned against him though.

“Why are you being like this? Ever since… You’ve changed,” he said. The accusation in his tone would have rushed her into an apology, once upon a time, but a lot had happened since then, and he didn’t hold that much authority over her anymore. She did feel bad for him, a bit. In the wave of brutal changes that had crashed over them, it distressed him that he couldn’t even hold on to what they were.

“You’re wrong. I changed before, when I married you and I just… chose to let it go. I put so much effort into being more proper, into swallowing down my every word. I thought it was the right thing to do. That I had to focus on being a good mother and a good wife, and leave all the fighting to you, be it on the battlefield or in a council room. And look where it led us.”

“Nothing of what happened was your fault.”

“Of course it was, Fugaku. It was my fault, and yours,” she accused plainly. It was a long time coming, really. They had had to put up a united front, for the sake of the clan and their children, during the abrupt transition brought by Danzo’s downfall, but things were settling down now and he needed to understand they were not going back to how they used to be. “All the times I failed to stand up to you, all the times you didn’t listen to me… We should have seen something, Fugaku. We should have noticed. We were so caught up in that little roleplay, the clan head and his devoted wife and their two perfect children… None of it was any truth. And we are not going back to the way it was. I’m not going to stop. You need to accept that.”

Despite everything, she still wanted for them to overcome this together, as a team, as a family. They were freer and bolder once when they were young, and she refused to believe it had just gone away.

He didn’t answer anything, but for him, it was a good sign. It meant he was using his brain, meant he was considering. It was rare that they managed to conclude a conversation in one-go – Fugaku was terminally incapable of making a decision on the spot.

The front door opened and two pairs of footsteps shuffled into the house – the other reason why their talks were often interrupted before they could meet their end. Itachi and Sasuke tumbled into the kitchen, in good enough spirit it seemed. Itachi caught on the heavy air around his parents immediately, while Sasuke remained oblivious, his only concern being how fast dinner would be ready.

“I’ll help,” Itachi offered, already washing his hands and reaching for the remaining vegetables.

“I’ll leave you to it,” Fugaku said in turn, rising from his seat. Mikoto caught Sasuke sneaking
unsubtle glances at his father, and tried to draw Fugaku’s attention on it, to no avail. Her husband could be so dense, it was unbelievable.

Finally, he seemed to catch on, because he turned toward his youngest.

“Do you… want to show me what you’ve learned, Sasuke?”

Sasuke, who had been growing angry at himself lately for still chasing after his father’s approval, did his best to accept in what he probably believed was a nonchalant way. It worked on Fugaku, so it was all fine. It would most likely end in yet another argument between the two, since Sasuke didn’t hesitate now to call his father out on his harshness and lack of interest. Mikoto left them to it though – they had to work things out on their own.

She found herself alone with Itachi, which wasn’t bad either, even if she feared she would yet again fail to reach through to him.

“Did your training go well?” she asked, hoping to at least ease him into small talk. She was desperate for any information he would give her about how he was feeling, how he was doing.

“Yes. Sasuke is a good student.”

“Was Shisui with you?”

She felt it immediately. A subtle but unmistakable change in the atmosphere of the room, in Itachi’s posture. He put down the knife he was handling and set both of his hands on the counter.

“Yes. Don’t worry, I don’t train Sasuke on my own.”

Her eyes widened and she let go of her own bowl.

“That’s not what I…”

“Why aren’t you mad at me?”

He was facing away from her. His shoulders and back were contracted in a painful looking line.

“About what?” she asked, although she knew where this was going.

“You should be mad. You should…”

“You did what you thought was right, Itachi. It’s your right to be at odds with the wills of the clan. Even if it means going behind our back.”

“That’s not it.”

She had a feeling it wasn’t. Fugaku and Itachi had talked at length, if not about their feelings, at least about their vision, their diverging opinion on right and wrong, on priorities and sacrifices. She wasn’t sure they understood each other, but at least Fugaku and her knew what had gone through Itachi’s mind, knew the reasoning behind him spying on the clan, reporting their every action. "I don't want a war!" Itachi had yelled, the first night they had had that conversation. Mikoto had never heard him yell before. “I don’t want a war,” he’d said again quietly, and really, that’s all there was to it. Itachi was scared of war and would have done anything to prevent it.

And in that case, “anything”, she believed, was an awful lot.

“I would have done it,” he whispered, as much a confession as a realization. “I would have done it,
Definitely giving up on dinner making, she marched to him and put gentle hands on his shoulders, making him turn around so that they could face each other. He avoided her gaze – his eyes were shining.

“He said… he said we’d all be slaughtered anyway, and that others would die in the fights too. He said that if I… that Sasuke would be spared. That way, it would be just me. I would be the one to… No one else would… I was going to do it.”

He was shaking. She stayed silent, lest she startled him out of his confession.

He had never shared those details with them.

“He really had me believe it was the only way.”

Itachi didn’t say Danzo’s name aloud.

“I believed him. I didn’t think about anything else.”

“It wasn’t your role to find a solution to this, Itachi. You should never have had to be involved in the first place.”

“But I was. And I… Mom, why aren’t you mad? I was going to. I was.”

“You can’t know that.”

“I do. I’m sure. I’m… I’m…”

“No.”

The sudden firmness of her tone startled him into silence. He looked young suddenly, far younger than he was, younger than they tended to see him. He looked at her like a kid could look at his mother, when he hoped she could answer his doubts, soothe his worry.

“You’re not. You didn’t do it, Itachi. Be it thanks to luck, fate, anything, you didn’t do it. We will never know what could have happened. Maybe you would have, yes. Maybe we would have had to stop you.”

The thought made her sick. She went on.

“Maybe the others would have changed their mind, maybe someone would have discovered everything, maybe you wouldn’t have been able to go through with it. We can never know, so it doesn’t matter. You didn’t do it, Itachi. We don’t blame people for crimes they could have committed.”

“Don’t we?”

Naruto’s sullen face flashed through her mind. She inhaled deeply, trying to steady herself.

“I’m not mad at you. Because I don’t want to. It does scare me to know the extremes you could have been pushed to, it does anger and sadden me how close we came to that tragedy. We can only be grateful it didn’t come to pass.”

“But it’s in who I am now. I can never… I’m that kind of person. I can’t escape it.”
She couldn’t deny it. Maybe he was. It didn’t help that the following event had proved him and Danzo’s wrong – they had managed to solve that conflict another way, if only because the shock of what was going on behind the scene had made the Uchiha realize that they weren’t the only ones being wronged in the current situation.

Itachi has the proof that his choice wasn’t the right one. And that he had been spared from actually making it didn’t erase the weight of it from his mind.

“You’ll just have to make amend then. Do better. Make sure nothing of the sort ever happens again. It didn’t happen, Itachi. This world doesn’t exist. You’re here now, with us. We’re all here.”

Her hands were cradling his face. His fingers closed around her wrists, his only concession to their physical distance.

“I hate myself,” he confessed in a breath. It pierced straight through her heart but she remained steady, unshaken.

“I know.”

Unable to stand it anymore, she closed the distance between them and wrapped him in her arm. He was almost taller than her – he folded on himself to hide into her embrace, shoulders shaking with dry sobs.

“I’m sorry mom. I’m sorry.”

He repeated it again and again, as she answered time and time again, “it’s alright, it’s alright”. It wasn’t really, but what was she supposed to say?

Of course, because Fugaku always had awful timing, it was the moment he chose to come back to the kitchen, Sasuke in tow. It was a testament to how bad Itachi was feeling that he didn’t move from her embrace. Fugaku stood shell-shocked, struggling as he usually was with processing any emotions, his or others. Fortunately for all of them, Sasuke seemed to have developed some sensitivity from who knew where. She certainly didn’t credit any of his family members for it.

“What’s happening? Is Itachi alright?” he asked, face and voice heavy with concern, as he jumped around them to try and spot his brother’s face. Itachi straightened up slowly, rubbing a furtive hand on his eyes.

“I’m okay, Sasuke, don’t worry.”

“You know, if you don’t want to tell me, you can just… tell me that. There’s no need to lie.”

Itachi’s expression was comical, and Mikoto couldn’t stifle her laugh, especially after the loaded conversation they had just finished.

“I’m… not so fine. But I will be,” Itachi amended. Sasuke nodded, satisfied.

“Although, maybe I… need some help,” Itachi added after a pause, with a meaningful look at his mother.

“We’ll take it up to Inoichi,” she answered easily, knowing he would be more comfortable going through the man instead of knocking at the psychology department’s door on his own. Itachi liked him, and trusted him marginally more than others of similar rank and position. Fugaku looked like he wanted to ask something, but he didn’t, which was commendable – every time he understood he was in over his head and had best to stand back and keep silent was a win in her book.
“Can we eat now though?” Sasuke asked. She scolded him lightly for his impatience, but he looked pleased with himself, as Itachi had relaxed a little, promising it would be ready soon. Mikoto pondered that her youngest was smarter than they gave him credit for.

“Ino. Can you come out? I want to talk to you.”

Sasuke tried to play it cool but the sudden silence of the classroom made him nervous. Why were those idiots looking at him like this? It wasn’t *that* extraordinary that he would need to speak with a fellow classmate.

Several girls giggled and whispered to themselves, but Ino silenced them with a scalding look. Sasuke was a little jealous – his still needed some work. She got up from her desk gracefully, looking supremely unconcerned and like she was doing him a huge favor by accepting.

“Lead the way,” she said haughtily. Sasuke fought to keep an eye roll in check. He needed her cooperation.

They had just a few minutes between classes so most of the students had stayed put – the corridor was empty. They walked a few steps away from the door, if only to escape wandering eyes and ears.

Now that he was facing with her, Sasuke grew nervous again. He didn’t like to expose himself like that, didn’t want to know what conclusion she would draw about him. It was worse because it was Ino, who he always felt had mind-reading abilities or something, and who was also the worst gossip, and not in a harmless “everyone must know what I know” way. More in a “I weaponized knowledge and won’t hesitate to blackmail you” way.

But surely, she would know, so…

“Alright,” she said in a bored tone just as he was opening his mouth. “I’ll go out with you.”

He abruptly closed it. What the hell was she talking about? He fought off an embarrassed flush and, panicking, he blurted out the first thing that situation inspired him.

“No thanks.”

Her expression of careful disinterest slipping into incredulous surprise clued him into thinking that wasn’t the right thing to say.

“I mean, that’s not what I meant to ask.”

“Oh.”

She quickly composed back her haughty posture, and the flash of hurt he thought he saw on her face immediately morphed into anger.

“Are you serious? Why would you call me outside like that then?”

“To ask you something else! What’s your problem really?”

“What’s my… Forget about it. Sage, boys are so *stupid…”*

She raised a commanding hand to prevent him from answering to that. He hid a grimace into his collar – she was so damn rude.
“What do you want then?”

Sasuke hesitated. The conversation was off to a rocky start, it didn’t bode well for his chances to get an answer. But now that they had gone through that terribly embarrassing endeavor, he wasn’t going to back out without getting what he actually wanted.

“It’s about Sakura.”

She grimaced.

“If you want me to ask her out for you…”

“Will you stop it? I’m not asking anybody out dammit!”

The outburst startled her and she lost a bit of her reserve. She crossed her arms on her chest, going almost businesslike in her expression, and gestured with her chin for him to go on.

“I figured maybe you knew. About what happened to her.”

He made a vague gesture toward his right cheek. Her posture changed entirely once she understood what he was talking about, and she hunched a little, defensive.

“I do.”

He hoped his annoyance didn’t show on his face. Was he the only one who had no clue?

“Would you tell me?”

“No way.”

In insight, he should have seen this coming.

“Why?”

“If you don’t know, it’s because she doesn’t want you to, and I’m not going to step over that. If you really want to know, just ask her.”

“I have!”

“Have you?”

Had he? Maybe not is so many words. She was skittish around the subject and he couldn’t just… ask. Could he?

He didn’t know why he couldn’t let it go. He had been thinking more and more about it lately – maybe because he had too much alone time on his hand. It was getting difficult to get a hold on both Naruto and Sakura these days. Sakura, because she was mending things with Ino – Sasuke supposed so anyway, because Ino’s particular brand of friendship eluded him if he was honest. And Naruto because he stayed at the Academy after school to train his calligraphy with that Sai guy. Sasuke had spied on them once, and it had been the most boring thing ever. They had barely exchanged a word, focused on their brush dancing on the scrolls, with Sai occasionally nodding and Naruto looking up to copy him. They were probably enjoying themselves, stupidly enough.

During training itself, now that Naruto was slowly but surely getting the hang of the Academy standard ninjutsu, he spent a lot of time buried in his fuinjutsu scrolls. Sakura had called it right – not only was he a natural, most importantly, he actually enjoyed it. Maybe more than taijutsu.
Sasuke was making his own legwork diving into the signature jutsu of his clans, and he had to admit he also missed their shared training sessions more and more. But Itachi was in the mood lately and Sasuke wanted to make the most of it before he became distant again for whatever reason.

He could call it what it was – he missed their little get-togethers, and he couldn’t help but feel like, if there was ever a choice to make, Sakura and Naruto would keep hanging out together, and leave him behind. After all, he was the only one who didn’t know…

“Good talk,” Ino said, biting, cutting through his wandering thoughts. Sasuke followed her back in the classroom, where she yet again cut all gossip with a searing glare. Sasuke was reluctantly impressed.

Ino had warned her that he would probably ask. Sakura was still unprepared.

“Why… Why do you want to know?”

They were on cleanup duty for the day, so Sasuke had seized the opportunity. She kept her eyes firmly trained on the chalkboard she was wiping up, tracking his movements by sound as he moved around the classroom to collect the trash.

“The others do,” he said petulantly.

“I didn’t tell them. Naruto was there and Ino… knows things.”

She had no better way to put it. Maybe she had overheard Kara or an adult talk about it. Maybe she had just happened to be snooping around at that moment, be it in the street or at the hospital. Sakura hoped it wasn’t that – hoped Ino hadn’t seen, and done nothing.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” she said weakly. It was a half lie. The main issue here was that she didn’t want to talk about it with him.

“I just want to know.”

“But why? Why does it matter? It’s… it’s done now. I’m over it.”

Another lie, and a transparent one at that. She didn’t have to turn around to feel his skeptical look on her. She resisted the urge to touch her scar.

Her hair wasn’t growing back. She had gone to Ino’s house the previous weekend and asked her to cut them into something resembling an intentional cut. She couldn’t see herself asking her mother, to cut it or to take her to the hairdresser. She didn’t think she would understand, her who had been telling her daughter for months now that they would grow back in no time.

She didn’t want them to. They would stay gone.

Naruto had said she looked like Uchiha Shisui. It’s true they had the same haircut, sort of. Well, there was worse lookalike to have. Everyone was attractive in the Uchiha clan.

“It’s stupid,” Sasuke mumbled.

“What?” she asked, defensive. What is so surprising that she wanted to keep it to herself? But he
didn’t get the harshness of her tone, because he wasn’t talking about her.

“...It’s stupid but I want to know who it was. So that I don’t become friend with them.”

Sakura stopped wiping the board.

She made great efforts to turn around and look at the boy. He was still tossing pieces of paper and candy wrapping into the bin, carefully avoiding to have her in his line of sight.

This was one of the sweetest things anyone had ever said to her.

She never felt like he particularly cared about her presence. He wasn’t as hostile as he had been at first, but it’s not like they had grown close or anything. Well, it wasn’t, wasn’t it? Except she would have been hard-pressed to say what it looked like when he did care about someone, save from the few interactions she had seen him have with his family. He wasn’t very demonstrative, and he didn’t have that many friends.

Naruto and her, namely. They were friends.

If they were friends, maybe she could tell him and he wouldn’t be mad at her. She had the sudden urge to find out what he would say, to put it to the test. She felt the echo of the warm feeling that used to fill her when she looked at him and talked to him. She knew him better now than she ever did back then, and he had done nothing that justified she should love him less.

“All right. All right.”

She had never retold the event in so many words before. It was unpleasant, but it was also cathartic. It was long enough ago that she felt a little detached from it – mainly because she was confident it wouldn’t happen again now. On their last taijutsu lesson she had requested to be paired up with Kara, and she had nailed her to the ground in less than a minute. Kara had tried and tried, but she had barely landed any punches – and the ones that landed were weak, they couldn’t hurt her. Kara had nothing on Naruto, or even Sasuke.

And now Kara had nothing on her either.

She spoke and she watched Sasuke’s face change, going from curious to confused to a blank expression she couldn’t decipher. She was playing idly with the sponge to occupy her hand – he was completely still, standing a few feet away between the tables, the setting sun playing ominous shadows on his face and body, on the room around them.

When she was done, she felt tired and spent, but content too. It was out there now. From then on, it wouldn’t be so hard to talk about this.

He stayed silent for a terribly long, unnerving moment, enough that she considered running out of the classroom, confident that he wouldn’t react fast enough to catch her. He spoke just when she was starting to stretch her legs.

“That’s terrible.”

She could have laughed at his tone, awkward and emotionless, had he been trying to empathize with anyone else. As it was, she didn’t really feel like laughing.

“That’s just… yeah.” She couldn’t find anything more to say.

In the end, they didn’t say anything at all. They wrapped up and left the Academy without adding a
single word, not even a goodbye, and the good feeling she had had about this vanished as she raced home to go cry in her pillow.

“Dad! DAD!”

“What is it Sasuke, what’s happening? Are you hurt, what’s going on?”

“We need to talk right now.”

Was it not for her mother’s tone of voice, Sakura would have probably ignored her call to "come downstairs immediately". She wasn’t nearly done sulking for the night, as she kept coming up with scenarios more terrible than the other as to what Sasuke was up to right now. Maybe he was never going to talk to her again. Maybe he was going to tell everyone so that they could mock her. Maybe he was going to have her arrested for dragging the Uchiha name in the dirt.

She knew she wasn’t making a lot of sense, but she had no control over her senseless fear. Why hadn’t he say something? Why hadn’t she asked?

The panic she could hear in her mother’s scream – that strangely echoed her own – pushed her to get out of her bed and drag herself downstairs where the front door was open. She had just heard the bell ring – maybe it was a visitor for her?

The police, here to take her out?

She climbed down the stairs and for a split second her heart stopped, because it was the police. Specifically, it was Sasuke’s father. Sasuke was there too, along with another couple of Uchiha she didn’t recognize.

And Kara.

It was too late to turn back. She was tempted to anyway.

“Huh, Hi. Hello! Hello, I’m… hi.”

Uchiha Fugaku was a stern looking man who had reverse dimple under his mouth, caused by non-smiling she imagined. He wasn’t in his uniform but in a traditional kimono, as were the two other adults that Sakura could only assume were Kara’s parents.

What was happening.

Her mother seemed at least as freaked out as she was, while the Uchiha party was perfectly composed, serious expression on their serious face. Sasuke didn’t look at her, emulating his father’s solemnity. She wished he would clue her in as to what was going on.

“Hello, Sakura. I’m Sasuke’s father, but I’m here as the head of the Uchiha clan,” the man said, nodding at Sakura before quickly going back to addressing her mother, who was not so subtly gripping the doorframe for support. “It has come to my attention that your daughter has suffered a great offense from one of our children.”

He gestured at Kara without looking at her. Sakura had never seen her looking so down and self-conscious, head hanging low and shoulders hunched. She barely raised her head to cast a panicked
look around her before staring back at her shoes.

“It’s… yes?” Sakura’s mother said weakly. Her father wasn’t home to provide moral support, and Sakura wasn’t going to be much help either.

“I don’t know how that event was handled exactly,” the man continued, unaware of the trouble he was causing or choosing to ignore it, “but from what Kara told us, the fault lies entirely on her and her friends. We don’t condone that kind of behavior in any way, and they will be severely punished. In the meantime, we hope you will accept our much sincere apologies, even if we’re aware of how late they are, and how little they weigh in light of what happened.”

Sakura was still in the process of putting that sentence back into the right order when all five of the Uchiha standing at her doorstep—bowed, in synch and all.

Her mother blushed furiously, losing what little composure she had left, as she tried to get them to stand back up. When it looked like it wasn’t happening though, she turned toward Sakura, as if her daughter was going to be any help.

Her gaze though, as it often did, fell onto her right cheek.

She took a few deep breaths and stood a little straighter, facing the party with renewed dignity. She gave a small bow of her own.

“We’re… grateful for you coming here today.” Another furtive look at Sakura. She gave the smallest nod. “We accept your apology.”

That thankfully made them straighten up.

“Please believe that we take this kind of matter very seriously. Don’t hesitate to reach out to us in the future. Thank you for your time.”

And with that, they were finally gone.

 Barely a minute later, as Sakura and her mother were still standing dumbfounded in the entryway, Sakura’s father came rushing through the door.

“Was that Uchiha Fugaku I just saw exit our house?”

Her mother burst into hysterical laughter.

Fugaku stared at the red spiral tapped to the door for an absurdly long time.

Naruto had worked it into his clothes too. Fugaku had no idea what the boy thought his connection was to the design, and he didn’t know why he was so hung up on that insignificant detail.

But here it was, that red spiral, coincidently marking the territory of the last remaining member of the Uzumaki clan. It was the first time Fugaku came near it, although he had known where the jinchuuriki lived from the start, of course.

In a building exclusively inhabited with shinobis. In a flat on his own. He had knowledge of this, but he had never given it a single thought until now. He had never even addressed the boy.

Why did it matter all of the sudden?
He knocked on the door.

There was some shuffling on the other side and the sound of the lock turning, but the door opened just a smidge, blue eyes peering through the crack, widening when they saw him.

They had never met, but the boy obviously knew who he was.

“What do you want?” he said, aggression failing to cover his wariness.

“I just need to talk to you. You’re not in trouble,” Fugaku added as an afterthought. There was a long pause, before the boy finally decided to open the door enough that Fugaku could see him in full – just enough though, that his body filled the open space, blocking the entry.

It was somewhat hard to remember that Naruto was the same age as Sasuke, even a little younger. His face was set in a hard scowl, eyes full of mistrust and simmering rage. He was tensed as a bowstring, ready to lash out. Fugaku had planned to put in a little formality, but he found it wiser to just cut through the heart of the matter, lest he wanted to see the door being closed in his face.

“You were wrongly accused of harming Haruno Sakura,” he said bluntly, and got the small satisfaction of seeing surprise open a crack in the boy’s guarded up demeanor. He recovered quickly though.

“And what of it?”

It was Fugaku’s turned to be caught off guard. What of it indeed? Sasuke had insisted that his friend got excuses too. Fugaku had been more concerned with the fact that all parties involved in that incident had been convinced that the Uchiha would side with the guilty no question asked because she was one of their own. It was exactly the reputation they were trying to shake off.

But he cared very little about what the jinchuuriki thought of his clan.

Sasuke didn’t though. Fugaku was surprised at the boy’s strong sense of justice. His outrage had been real, and would have been just as strong, Fugaku was sure, had the people involved not been his friends. Naruto hadn’t been punished, since the teacher that had handled the affair was seemingly well aware that he wasn’t actually responsible – something else they would have to look into. That Mizuki had very little going for him, according to Sasuke’s report. But as it was, Naruto being wronged in the matter had little to do with them, and of little consequences. Sasuke had still insisted that Fugaku apologized to him also.

Fugaku couldn’t deny he was curious about the boy, curious enough that he had agreed.

“You shouldn’t have been. On behalf of my clan, I'm sorry you took the fall for Uchiha Kara.”

The boy shrugged, indifferent. Fugaku felt his temper rise.

“You could have said something,” he added, determined to engage with him somehow.

“To who?” Naruto shot back immediately.

“To us, for a start.”

“Yeah, right,” the boy scoffed. Fugaku had about zero experience with badly raised children, and had to make great effort to keep his temper in check. He raised a hand to rack it through his hair, a tic betraying his thinning patience that he had never managed to get rid of.
He froze mid-gesture though when the boy tensed suddenly, taking a slight step back to fall into a defensive position.

It crossed his face only for a second – Fugaku still saw it clearly.

The boy was afraid of him.

The boy was afraid of him, there was no going around it. Fugaku wondered in what respect. Because he was an Uchiha? The chief of police? A stranger? An adult? Was he afraid he would get mad, yell, hit him? Whichever it was, the fact remained. The jinchuuriki of the nine-tailed fox, the host of one of the most dangerous beasts of their world, that tiny receptacle of evil and chaos, was afraid of him.

The boy fought against himself to appear more relaxed, likely upset at having revealed himself like this.

“Will that be all, sir?” he asked, failing to sound as detached as he was aiming for, eager for this conversation to be over. To escape Fugaku and his gaze, to retreat to the safety of his apartment.

“He’s a boy,” Mikoto kept repeating when they were arguing about this. “He’s just a boy.”

Staring at him, Fugaku, for the first time, understood what she was saying. He had been thinking that Sasuke and the other kids didn’t see Naruto in that light simply because they didn’t know the truth. But Itachi, Shisui, even Izumi, they did know, and they still talked about him as a bratty, insufferable kid.

As just a boy.

“Why do you treat him like this?” Sasuke had asked angrily when Fugaku had dared to suggest there was no need to make things right by him. “He’s done nothing wrong.”

Did Naruto perceive his animosity, even though they had never met? Did he just live on the assumption that the people he met wished him no good?

Because despite it being their first meeting, just as Naruto was afraid of Fugaku, Fugaku was afraid of Naruto.

Afraid of the power he could unleash, the destruction he could cause, afraid of what getting close to him in any way could bring upon his family and clan.

But his first instinct upon seeing the boy flinched away from him had been to think “why are you afraid, you have no reason to.”

Didn’t he, though? Fugaku had heard, in passing, that the boy had been treated unfairly before. He’d dismissed it for more pressing concern, assuming that those claims were likely exaggerated.

The Haruno family had been wary too. They’d seen Fugaku as a threat, they’d been scared of what he was going to do. It was an unpleasant feeling, to be feared when he shouldn’t have been.

A feeling Naruto had to be very familiar with. Did he also think when people flinched away from him, “why are you afraid? You have no reason to.”

“He’s done nothing wrong.”

He really hadn’t. And yet, and yet.
“Yes, that is all. The ones at fault will receive punishment.”

“Great. Thanks or… whatever. Goodbye.”

As the door swung shut, Fugaku was seized by the absurd need to stop it, to reach out to the boy and make him understand that he was being sincere, that what had happened was wrong, that he shouldn’t have been put through this.

He didn’t though. He turned away and left.

Why be so concerned about this all of the sudden? Maybe because of Itachi. Of the leniency his boy had received from other, leniency he wasn’t able to grand to himself. Him and the countless kids victim of Danzo’s schemes, no one was thinking about blaming them for their crimes.

They were “just kids”.

It would be a simple matter, he pondered on his way home, to task the shinobis of the police force patrolling the streets with the additional mission of keeping an eye out for the boy, to ensure that he wasn’t treated unfairly. It should have been a given, probably, but stating it plainly wouldn’t hurt.

They were meant to protect all in the village. No exceptions.

“Sakura? Can I come in?”

Sakura grunted an assessment and her mother opened her bedroom door with cautious care. At least now she actually waited for her to say yes before barging in. Sakura stood up from where she lied spread up on her bed, staring at the ceiling as she thought back on the very weird day she had just had.

“How are you feeling?”

Her mother still had that same air of concern about her, that she had had just after Sakura had been hurt. She wished she would have snapped out of it by now, because Sakura was fine, or trying to be, and this wasn’t helping.

“I’m okay.”

Her mother narrowed her eyes, trying to spot the lie. There wasn’t any though, not this time. She was okay, for real. Not so much because she had gotten an apology – although it was nice. Not even to have discovered that the Uchiha clan wasn’t as selfish as they were portrayed to be – not all of them anyway.

But Sasuke… She had told him her story, and the first thing he had done was to seek justice for her.

She couldn’t say she was all too happy about the way he had gone about it. It’s not like she had asked him to keep to himself, it was only implied. She could only hope he wasn’t the one who had suggested that ambush at her house. That part of the Uchiha’s reputation wasn’t a lie it seemed, they did have a flair for the dramatic and a love of formalities.

She had been worrying about nothing. She actually felt a little guilty about it – she had pictured him in the worst possible light, and he had gone the exact opposite way.
He had rushed home and spilled to the head of his clan himself. Granted, it was his own father, but still. He had not hesitated for a second.

“Did you… want something?” Sakura asked after the silence had stretched enough to feel stilted and awkward.

“I… guess I wanted to apologize too.”

She sat down on the bed so that they were eye to eye, but she didn’t look at Sakura directly.

“Your father and I… We’re sorry. About how we went about this.”

“Mom…”

“You were right to be angry at us. And I realize it’s… kind of hypocritical, to say that only now that we know for sure we could have said something sooner. But still… we did the wrong choice. And we’re sorry.”

They had, hadn’t they? And yes, now they knew for sure, that there was no use to make nice with her bullies just because they were Uchihas, that they should have spoken up from the start. It was satisfying, in a way. But not as much as she thought it would be.

“Oh,” she said, for lack of better words. Her mother left it at it.

The next day, Sakura marched to Sasuke right there in the middle of the classroom, under all their classmates’ eyes. “That was embarrassing for everyone involved,” she said. “But… Thank you. I mean it.”

“You’re welcome,” he answered, relaxing a little, and she smiled at the thought that he might have been a bit worried about her reaction.

She meant to retell the events to Naruto, but he didn’t show up at all.

“SASUKE!”

That was all the warning Sasuke got before being tackled to the ground by an enraged Naruto.

He got back on his feet quickly, only to block in extremis several kicks and punches in quick succession.

“What the hell Naruto?”

“I’m gonna have your head you bastard!”

Naruto wasn’t at school the whole day and Sasuke had come to the training ground fully expecting to train on his own. It looked like Naruto had other ideas. He kept attacking, with more force and intent than he’d ever had. Sasuke barely registered Sakura arriving at the training ground and shouting in alarm, immediately picking up that something was wrong.

“Don’t you ever,” Naruto growled, his fist flying toward Sasuke’s face who blocked it with both hands, “ever send adults to my door again!”

“That’s what this is about?” Sasuke exclaimed, trying for a kick. Naruto freed his fist from his grip
to jump backward, his feet barely touching the ground before he jumped again to avoid Sasuke’s sweeping foot. Naruto fell back right on top of him – Sasuke blocked and pushed him back, but Naruto was already charging again.

“What the hell were you thinking? Why did you do that?”

Naruto’s fury, far from distracting him, fueled his aggressiveness and fighting prowess. Sasuke was losing ground, unable – unwilling – to get as serious as Naruto was.

“I just wanted to… I wanted to help! It shouldn’t have happened this way. You shouldn’t have…”

“I don’t need your help. I don’t want it!”

He’d known there was a possibility that Naruto wouldn’t like it, but it didn’t matter. Sasuke hadn’t reported back what Sakura had told him to his father just out of vindication or righteous anger. No one could escape consequences and judgment, and injustice had to be corrected, the truth had to be out. Sakura had implied, even if she had been unwilling to get into the details, that they had said nothing and left the story as it was because they didn’t believe anyone would care, or worse, that it would ultimately turn against them. And that was wrong.

His father was always saying they had to honor the Uchiha name, and that was the way to do it.

“I did what I had to do! What’s your problem anyway? What happened that was so terrible?”

Had his father done, said something? He’d insisted on going alone, and Sasuke knew his father wasn’t exactly fond of Naruto.

The other boy didn’t answer. He was still just as aggressive while Sasuke was getting tired of this meaningless fight. Couldn’t they just talk like normal people? Besides, he really didn’t appreciate Naruto slowly taking the upper hand.

Putting several steps between them, Sasuke’s hands went through familiar mudras as he collected chakra in his chest. Naruto would know to keep away from it, but the fire would hopefully snap him out of his fury.

“Katon! Fireball Jutsu!”

He blew through his looped fingers as hard as he could. His training was paying off – his range and firepower had improved greatly. So much, in fact, that he worried for a second that Naruto wouldn’t be able to get out of the way fast enough after all.

Except something very different happened.

The fireball shrunk suddenly, like it was being inhaled. Sasuke watched with utter disbelief as it kept getting smaller and smaller, until it was gone entirely.

On the other side stood Naruto, scroll opened in front of him. Sasuke recognized the chakra storing seal drawn on the paper. In the center of the circle appeared the Fire kanji in blood red ink.

Silence fell onto the training ground.

Naruto looked at the scroll, at least as surprised as Sasuke about this turn of event. Then, slowly, a smug grin spread over his face, and it’s with confidence and disdain that he looked up at Sasuke, still frozen a few meters away.
“Keep your family away from me,” he spat out. The next moment, he was gone.

Sakura and Sasuke were left alone at the training ground, staring after him.

What use is storing chakra if you can’t use it again, he’d asked Naruto like an idiot, annoyed at seeing him drawing that stupid seal again and again and being unable to divert his attention from it. Naruto hadn’t answered, but of course he’d find something. Crafty didn’t begin to describe how resourceful Naruto could be. Another reason why sealing, an art requiring improvisation and creation, suited him so well.

“He’s… gotten better,” Sakura stated uselessly. Sasuke didn’t bother answering. He was busy trying to rein in on his raging emotions, split between wanting to run after Naruto, to punch something, to lie down on the floor and not get back up, and to scream to the top of his lung.

He did nothing.

Izumi had joined Sasuke’s last training sessions with his brother and cousin, and she’d asked, “why does it matter so much to you?”

He’d tried to explain it to her, to them, but he wasn’t even sure about it himself. Why did it matter so much that Naruto stayed focus on him, that Sasuke remained within his reach? There were other kids his age that could have been his rival, that he could have wanted to fight and beat, but Sasuke didn’t care about the others.

Naruto was special. Naruto had chosen him without any care about his family name, his brother or his reputation, just moved by the desire to beat him specifically. Naruto was the first, and Sasuke didn’t need another one.

Besides, there was a fear, spread out through his mind and hovering over their every interaction, that if Sasuke let go, just the slightest, Naruto would slip through his fingers and vanish into thin air.

He wouldn’t let that happen.

“He’ll be back,” he said, showing more confidence than he really felt. “Let’s train, Sakura.”

She nodded, solemn, and maybe she understood, Sasuke thought. Maybe she felt too that they had to get stronger, if they wanted to hold on to him.

Chapter End Notes

I guess we definitely dived into OOC Itachi? I'm split between believing he can't be written IC and he can't be written OOC, 'cause I don't understand him at all, from a character point of view haha. But I really wanted to wonder what his mother thought about this... I can't help writing her with more of a backbone and will of her own that what we got to see in canon cause like... yeah. (I'm also ignoring the fact that Fugaku and Mikoto more or less let Itachi kill them? What kind of BS. One, show some more convictions into your own choices. Two, the clan's lives are your responsibility wtf don't just let them die. Three, you have another son what do you think is gonna happen to him)
Sasuke's coming for all of Konoha I'm warning you. Starting small but yeah he's gonna make everyone's life harder at some point x) Fugaku's trying but he's years late and also a dick and he won't know what hit him. My boy Naruto won't catch much of a break from now on though u.u

I want to say more should I put those long ass note on my tumblr like I do for my bnha fic and ramble about the chapter to my heart's content there... Maybe. I hope you enjoyed, please pretty please let me know if you did, and be honest, am I like, writing total nonsense x) do you have faith in this story I need to know. May you all survive the end of the year chaos, see you!
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

There is something in Sasuke's eyes.

Chapter Notes

Another chapter that ended up way longer than planned and shifted my plan AGAIN. I just have a lot to say x) Very Uchiha focused this time, had some fun with traditions and lore. Sasuke is adorable as ever... I can't with that boy.

Sasuke barged into his house and stomped his way straight to his bedroom. It was in that kind of moments he regretted they lived in a traditional house – having to unroll the futon before face planting into it took a lot out of the dramatic effect. He buried his face in his pillow and held his breath for a moment, trying to calm himself down.

Sparring with Sakura had done very little to rid himself of his pent-up frustration, even if she really was getting good at this. They’d lingered longer than usual, but Naruto hadn’t come back.

He was just so… Maddening. Sasuke didn’t get him at all. It didn’t help that it was impossible to have a straightforward conversation with him. He was so damn infuriating.

That was it. Next time they saw each other, Sasuke would corner him and wouldn’t let him go until he knew exactly what was going on with him.

It was easier said than done though, because Naruto became very hard to catch in the following days. He barely showed up to class and didn’t come to the training ground – Sakura had no more luck than Sasuke at getting a hold on him. Sasuke was getting restless and increasingly annoyed, unable to focus on anything else than that idiot and his crazy avoidance techniques.

Naruto couldn’t stay mad forever, right? He couldn’t just… stop being there. He wasn’t stronger than Sasuke yet. He couldn’t just walk away.

Stuck on those thoughts looping in his brain, when Sasuke spotted Naruto in the Academy courtyard, ready to disappear as he always did, all his focus turned toward not letting that happen at any cost.

Shisui had been teaching him the basics of the body flicker. Sasuke’s range was laughable and he wasn’t nearly fast enough yet to trick anyone in combat. He was, however, fast enough to land in Naruto’s face before he got a chance to make a run for it.

His surprise was worth the wave of nausea that hit Sasuke full-force – today wasn’t the day he would be able to use that technique more than once. There were a number of things Sasuke wanted to say to the other boy, but as usual, once he was there, they all deserted him. He could only
remember one.

“Fight me.”

Naruto’s face scrunched up into an angry scowl, but Sasuke knew he wouldn’t back out from the challenge. He surely wanted to, but he wouldn’t. Naruto knew how to rile him up alright, but Sasuke could give just as good as he got.

“Fight me loser.”

“I’m gonna kick your ass,” Naruto bit back.

They would see about that.

They made their way to their training ground casting dirty looks at each other. Sasuke had trouble remembering what they were supposed to fight about and why he was so angry. He found it didn’t matter now. If they fought, he would win, and then he would feel better.

The memory of the sealing scroll was fresh in his mind and he tried to subtly assess the other boy. There were a number of places he could hide scrolls on his body – his weapon pouch, the large pocket of his short-sleeved hoodie, under said hoodie too, front or back, in his shorts… In theory, he could cancel dozens of ninjutsu that way.

Had he not been a victim of that technique, Sasuke would have been excited about it.

He would just have to be clever about it. He was faster than Naruto, even if Naruto had better instinct and spatial awareness. They would see which one could surprise the other.

It didn’t matter either way, because Sasuke couldn’t lose. He didn’t know why he was overcome by the confused certitude that if he lost today, he would lose Naruto for good. Naruto was always looking for an excuse to back out of their friendship, to put his distance between them.

Sasuke wasn’t about to let that happen.

The training ground was deserted as always. Lost as it was in the woods, far away from the village’s noise and agitation, it was easy to believe they were alone in the world, that it was only the two of them. Sasuke fell into position – Naruto did the same. His face was set in grim determination and intense focus.

This was real. A real fight with real stakes. Sasuke couldn’t help but feel excited.

They jumped at the same time.

Kunais clashed between them. Sasuke ducked, throwing Naruto off balance and trying to kick his legs from under him. Naruto used his momentum to keep going forward though and he jumped over Sasuke, landing with a roll. They were immediately back at each other’s throats, and it occurred to Sasuke, very briefly, that they could get hurt for real this time. The thought was fleeting, chases away by the next ones – dodge, block, stop a blade with his own.

He blocked a kick with both arms crossed in front of his chest but couldn’t keep the force of it from sending him several steps back. He jumped up, landing on a sturdy branch in one of the trees lining the training field. Naruto was closing in already. Sasuke threw a handful of shuriken that were sure to distract them – his visions accuracy wasn’t that great, or he was just bad at interceptions. Either way, it gave Sasuke enough time to go through his mudra.
“Katon! Fireball Jutsu!”

Surprised, Naruto didn’t have time to put out a scroll and had to jump back to avoid the roaring fire. Sasuke took the opportunity to go back to the ground and, rounding the fireball Naruto was still focused on, he managed to catch him from his side before he got noticed.

Naruto flew back from the kick to his side, crashing painfully on the ground. Sasuke kept moving forward, to press his advantage and get a few punches in. He drew his arm back, aiming for Naruto’s face, still kneeling on the ground.

Naruto moved, but not to block – to unroll the scroll he had in hand. He caught Sasuke’s fist with it. Sasuke didn’t have time to see what was on it, but it became clear enough when he felt some of his chakra being pulled out of him, vanishing in the paper.


He swung his other fist. Naruto blocked it easily, but it made him let go of the scroll, freeing Sasuke who jumped back, assessing. He wasn’t that depleted because the seal wasn’t that big yet, but the change was still noticeable in him.

What a terrible technique, he thought, watching Naruto carefully store the scroll in his pouch. How many more did he have?

Sasuke kept his distance for a while, focusing on throwing blades and ninjutsu. He had the advantage from a distance since Naruto was good at neither of those. He managed to catch a couple of fireball in his scrolls but one caught him off guard, carving a nasty burn on the exposed skin of his arm. He didn’t cry out though, barely reacted. Somehow he was getting faster and sharper, and Sasuke felt the weight of his intense focus on it, heavy and unpleasant.

Sick of getting attacked from afar, Naruto took it upon himself to close the distance Sasuke was trying to maintain between them. He was reckless and Sasuke hesitated more than once, feeling that Naruto had no intention to dodge or back off. A kunai embedded itself into his shoulder – he didn’t stop running toward Sasuke, bent in half and baring his teeth, and slammed into him full force.

He ended up straddling Sasuke. He bypassed kunais for his bare fist. He wasn’t holding back at all. Blood flooded Sasuke’s mouth and he wondered then, for the first time, if Naruto really wanted to hurt him. He thought he saw a flicker of red in the blue of his friend’s eyes.

As a last resort, he waited for Naruto to draw his arm back again and heaved himself up, slamming their forehead together. The aim was off – he had probably hurt himself just as much as Naruto, but at least it made the other boy loosen a bit and Sasuke could get out of his grip and disappear behind a tree.

He used the short respite to catch his breath and shake off his dizziness. Naruto didn’t come after him – he wasn’t moving, standing in the middle of the training field, looking like he, too, was gathering his thoughts. Sasuke got out of his hiding spot and marched back toward him. Naruto didn’t attack. He was staring and Sasuke couldn’t for the life of him decipher his expression, figure out what was going on inside his head.

Sasuke fell back into position. Naruto did the same.

It wasn’t over yet.

Sasuke was getting tired though, physically, but also tired of the fight in general. It wasn’t doing
them any good. Instead of calming down, Naruto was getting increasingly worked up and aggressive, and Sasuke didn’t appreciate the fight in the slightest, now that he felt Naruto was trying to hurt him, just like he was trying to hurt Naruto.

It wasn’t what he wanted, it wasn’t supposed to be about that. He wanted to stop the fight.

Easier said than done though, with Naruto.

“Getting tired, Sas’?” Naruto taunted. Sasuke had no illusion that between the two of them Naruto would never be the one to tire out first. He had ripped out the kunai from his shoulder (to throw it back in Sasuke’s face) and it was barely hindering his movement.

Sasuke was split between being impressed and horrified.

They had reverted back to mostly taijutsu. Well, Sasuke had, and Naruto didn’t have much more in term of offensive move.

Sasuke couldn’t just call out the fight. He had to win if he wanted it to stop, but how?

_I don’t want to lose. I don’t want to lose him. I need to be stronger._

Another hit dodged, another blocked, another landing in his stomach. He used the momentum to back down, Naruto chasing after him, relentless, merciless.

_Stronger. Stronger. I need more power. I need to win._

He wasn’t fast enough to see them all coming. Naruto wasn’t either, but Naruto had a far higher pain tolerance and resistance to injury. Sasuke had seen him walk off hits that would have laid most people down.

He didn’t want to lose. He didn’t want Naruto to have an excuse to leave him behind.

_I need to win. I need to win. I need to win._

His thoughts didn’t have time to fully form before they were chased away by the next, as he fought back more on instinct than anything. He was past the pain in his muscles and limbs, past strategizing, past thinking altogether.

Kick, punch, duck, dodge, block, hit. Find the opening, find the crack, push back. His mind was going into overdrive.

_I need to win. I need to win. I need to win. I need to win. I need to…_ 

Suddenly, Naruto slowed down.

His movements became slightly more sluggish, less random. Predictable. Sasuke blocked the next hit easily, and the next one too, seeing with perfect clarity where it was aiming for. He saw an opening in Naruto’s guard, he saw that the way he was gearing up for his next move would left it wide open.

He kicked him in the chest, hard.

Naruto hit the ground and rolled back a few meters. He sat down before Sasuke could even worry about him, but he didn’t get back up. Sasuke was distracted by the sharpness of his movements, the colors of his clothes and face and of the ground below him and the leaves behind him, all the things he could see.
There was something in his eyes. Apart from a building ache just behind his eyeballs, there was something…

It hit him like a tone of brick.

His eyes.

Naruto was still sitting on the ground, looking bitter. There was nothing friendly in his smile or voice when he talked next.

“I guess that makes you a real Uchiha then, Sas’.”

Sasuke had just awakened his Sharingan.

He went home in a daze. Naruto had run away, again, but Sasuke had a hard time focusing on that for now, busy as he was looking at his hands like he had never seen them before. In a way, he hadn’t.

His Sharingan was still active. It was a little silly, but he didn’t want to switch it off, in case he couldn’t call it back once he was home. He wanted to make sure he could show it to his family. He walked with his head down, not really wanting to draw attention on him before he was back to the Uchiha district. Just his hands were more than enough wonderment anyway.

It was liked he had imagined it, except it wasn’t at all. It had been described to him often – Sasuke didn’t count the number of times he had asked a long-suffering Itachi to walk him through it, to tell him again what it was like, to see the world through the Sharingan.

At first, it could almost feel like nothing was different. The world was the same but it was also… more. It was sharper and brighter, more in focus, wider and clearer, more vivid. He wriggled his fingers and he could see the muscles at play, the skin stretching and folding, and around them he could see the air move, disturbed, see himself move through it, interact with the world around him.

It was awesome.

A little scary too, if he was being honest, which was the reason why he was hurrying home, eager to be safe behind closed door to explore his newfound ability in peace. The slightest movement kept catching his eyes – the rustling of leaves, a curtain waving around in the evening air. The people passing him by on the streets seemed both absurdly agitated and weirdly sluggish, almost twitching. He had to fight the urge to stare after them.

His pain and injuries were forgotten already. He would ache all over the next day and need to meditate some to build back his chakra reserve, but those thoughts were so distant they could as well have been out of his brain.

What about pain, what about damages? He had the Sharingan.

After what felt like a small eternity, he finally passed the door to his house. His mother was fresh back from the day’s training with her team, taking off her flak jacket and headband in the entryway. She greeted him absentmindedly, without looking. He felt silly, waiting like an idiot on the doorstep for her to look at him.

“Huh, mom…”
“What is it? Do you… Oh!”

It was easy to spot when she finally noticed.

“Oh my… Sasuke! You… Sasuke!”

He had about zero time to brace himself before she was burying him into a hug.

“Congratulations honey! What happened, tell me! Wait, no, don’t, save it for when your father and brother… Fugaku? FUGAKU!”

Sasuke could only stare in confusion and mild awe at his mother waving around wildly, both because the world still had that strange halting quality to it, and because he couldn’t remember ever seeing her so expressive in her joy and excitement.

Footsteps thundered around the house and his father appeared at the end of the corridor, having mistaken said excitement for fear, judging by his panicked expression.

“What is it? What’s going on?”

His mother turning up her hands in Sasuke’s direction was all the answer he got. Sasuke fought not to look down – it would defeat the purpose entirely. He endured his father’s stare for an unnervingly long time before the man finally noticed what he was supposed to.

If seeing his mother fret over him was jarring enough, the startled smile that took over his father’s face was downright scary.

“This is… congratulations Sasuke. This is great news.”

Sasuke lost the battle against his rising blush, feeling it overtake his whole face, and against the urge to look down at his feet. As it was, he didn’t notice his father had come closer, until his own feet entered his field of vision.

“Look at me, Sasuke.”

He obeyed, and his newly awakened Sharingan plunged into the much older and trained one of his father. Strong hands came to cup his face, the touch assessing but gentle too, as it tilted his head upward.

Sasuke had seen the Sharingan before, of course, but it was nothing like what he was seeing now. It was deep, going on and on the further Sasuke looked, an entire universe laying there between their eyes, like two mirrors set in front of each other. Just as he was getting dizzy from vertigo, his father blinked, and the red was gone.

He was smiling.

“I’m proud of you, Sasuke.”

Sasuke looked sideways this time, blinking furiously. The front door opened in his back, a good enough distraction. His head was starting to hurt quite badly but he didn’t want it to stop yet. His eyes fell on Itachi’s tired face.

They stared at each other as surprise cracked Itachi’s solemn expression. Before he could say a word though, Shisui and Izumi appeared in his back with similar squeals of glee.

“Baby cousin! You’re finally all grown up!”
At least those reactions were easier to deal with. Sasuke bore with a lot of grumbling Shisui ruffling his hair roughly and Izumi hugging him hard, smacking a kiss on his cheek that had him redden even more.

He couldn’t help turning back to Itachi though, as they started talking excitedly with his mother. His movement was aborted by Itachi poking his forehead. Before he could protest though, Itachi’s hand landed gently on his head.

“Congratulations, Sasuke.”

He had never seen such a soft expression on Itachi’s face. His eyes were stinging again, probably because of the strain the dojutsu were putting them under.

“You should let it go for now,” Fugaku warned in his back. “No need to drain your chakra in vain.”

He obeyed reluctantly, if only because he was getting tired indeed. The world seemed very dull compared to what he had just experienced, and he was already looking forward to seeing it through the Sharingan again.

Later though.

“Tell us then, what happened? What triggered it?” Izumi asked.

Sasuke blushed again. The Sharingan could be awakened by a strong emotion of any kind, and the stories varied widely from one person to another. He didn’t know why he was embarrassed by his, and why he wasn’t so keen on sharing it.

“Were you fighting?” his mother inquired, noticing his poor state now that she wasn’t focused on his eyes.

“I was fighting Naruto and… I just didn’t want to lose. If I lost, he would have stopped training with me though… I just really wanted to win.”

He could still feel the sensation expanding in his chest, this urgency filling his whole being. He had formulated a wish. And it had been granted.

“I see,” his father said, tone and face indecipherable. Sasuke frowned. He wasn’t interested in their opinion of it. Personally, he thought it was not too bad a story.

“How did he react?” his mother asked with no small amount of concern. Sasuke shrugged. He didn’t know for sure, and he was a bit scared to find out. It was the only thing putting a damper on his enthusiasm.

He didn’t want Naruto to fear him.

Izumi clapped her hand together, breaking the soured mood and bringing the focus back to her.

“When should we celebrate then?” Izumi she asked. She was as excited as if she was the one who had activated her Sharingan for the first time.

Oh. Oh, he had forgotten about that.

It was a bit of a tradition to have some sort of celebration to mark the awakening of a Sharingan among the youth, and it was a universally hated affair by said youth. It was embarrassing and
boring, and Sasuke would have tried to talk his family out of it, if he thought he had any chance of succeeding.

He peered at his father, the only one he could hope would temper all the excitement, but was utterly betrayed when all he said was “I can take a day off at the end of the week.”

A day off. His father.

“Perfect!” his mother said, cheers back. “I’ll make the announcement. Sasuke, you can invite some friends to the district if you want.”

He stared at her, the softness of her face when she smiled like this, the creases at the corner of his eyes that he had never noticed before. It was a big deal she was offering, because even if the Uchiha district had never been officially closed off to outsiders, and even if they had been more open these past few months than ever before in Sasuke’s life, it was still unheard of for non-Uchiha to just wander in the district, except to conduct official business. Those who could be seen in their streets were longtime friends and teammates, people who had been invited at some point.

It was a big deal and he should have been glad. He had to ask though.

“Can I invite Naruto?”

It was pointless maybe, because there was a chance Naruto wouldn’t ever want to have anything to do with him anymore. The thought hurt and he resolved not to think about it before he could ask the boy face to face.

They all exchanged uncomfortable looks that gave him a weird sense of vindictive satisfaction. He wasn’t about to let them forget about him – whether they remained friends or not.

“It… would be unwise, Sasuke,” his father eventually answered, as predicted.

“Then no.”

He could have invited Sakura, but it didn’t feel right if Naruto couldn’t be there. She would understand. He would have invited anyone really, their entire class even, if it meant Naruto could come too.

They kept making plans without needing much of his input. He let his mind wander, drink it all in. He had the freaking Sharingan.

.

Naruto had run away, again. He was doing that a lot lately, and he couldn’t say that he liked it.

Even worse, he was hiding now. He would have denied it if confronted, would have said he was just busy or something, but he tried to be honest with himself at least, so to himself he could admit he was plain hiding.

He had been skipping the Academy for three days now, as well as their little training sessions. It was good for his finances at least – he was getting really good at that pickpocket thing. He had ditched Sai with the lamest excuse possible, but it’s not like the boy cared one way or another. Nothing ever fazed him – it was very boring.

He kept far away from the Academy and tried to tell himself he didn’t miss the others.
It wasn’t working.

He wasn’t mad anymore, maybe hadn’t really been in the first place. Well, he was pissed at Sasuke for sending freaking Head of the police force Uchiha Fugaku, his only sort-of-friend’s father who didn’t like that they were friends at his door, but he was probably even more pissed that… Sasuke had done it on his behalf. His and Sakura’s. Why? Why did he care? Naruto had been wrongly punished countless times before. It wasn’t supposed to matter.

But Sasuke cared, and now his father did too. Naruto really didn’t need that kind of complications in his life.

He didn’t need Sasuke. Didn’t need his care and his friendship and his help, he didn’t need him at all.

He had told himself that if he beat the other boy, he would move on. He would find someone else to train with him, someone who wouldn’t want to befriend him, hopefully. So he should have been mad, that Sasuke had chosen just that moment to up the ante and pop his clan dojutsu, to jump ahead all of the sudden, leaving Naruto far behind.

He should have been mad. Instead, he had been…

Relieved?

Maybe he simply didn’t want to give up on this.

Was it so wrong of him? He hated how that made him feel to be away now, to be on his own. He used to be good at this. He didn’t care, before.

He had thought seeing the Sharingan on Sasuke’s face would maybe be enough of a deterrent, would be the final push that made him walk away. But even if he still shivered just thinking about the red eyes…

It was Sasuke. It’s not like he was a threat.

He didn’t mind, if it was Sasuke looking at him.

Naruto was wandering the streets – not skipping this time, they didn’t have class today. He had fought and lost against the urge to go outside and walk, slowly but surely, toward the Uchiha district. It was all those gossips’ fault, really. He had heard it mentioned in passing – the Uchiha were celebrating a new Sharingan user in their ranks.

It’s true that it had to be joyous news for them. Sasuke was probably elated, or as elated as that broody head could be. Naruto was curious about it. Curious at the boy with his family, at the inner working of his clan. Those were all things completely unknown to him. His parents had to be proud. They had to be happy, all of them.

Naruto wondered at Sasuke’s happy face.

He stopped in his track though, as soon as the arch marking the entry of their district came into view.

He observed, safely hidden behind a tree, the comings and goings of their clan members, and others too. From here it was hard to confirm there was something noteworthy going on inside – partly because he had never been around that area before and had no idea what it looked like on a regular day.
It’s not like he could find out, anyway.

It’s not like he was allowed in there.

“I can bring Sasuke out here, if you want.”

Naruto jumped and hit his head hard against the trunk of the tree. Raising his head while rubbing at the upcoming bruise, he saw Uchiha Itachi looking down at him from a high branch, sitting there all casual like it was a common thing to do.

“I’m just passing by,” Naruto retorted, cringing at his lack of conviction. Who would believe such a blatant lie?

“Still,” Itachi said, going with it anyway. He stood up on his branch, ready to do just that.

“Don’t.”

“I think I’ll do it.”

“I’ll be gone by the time you come back.”

Naruto always had to wrestle himself into holding that man’s gaze. His eyes, he didn’t like to have them on him at all. Itachi stared for a long moment before shrugging.

“Still.”

In a flurry of leaves, he was gone, leaving Naruto to curse after him.

He wasn’t there to see Sasuke. He didn’t care either way.

He stepped out of the tree’s shadow, eager to get back home and lock himself in his room for the rest of the year.

Sasuke knew that his clan had a reputation for being quite uptight and not much fun. He couldn’t deny it without being obtuse, and he couldn’t defend it either, because frankly, he was grateful for it. Especially now.

He wouldn’t have survived a proper party like he knew some other clans organized for their celebrations. This was mortifying and exhausting enough as it was.

It couldn’t be called a party by any sense of the term anyway, but it was always done more or less this way. They had taken up residence in their temple's courtyard with food and drinks, and people wandered in and out to offer their congratulations and praise before going about their day or hanging around to catch up with each other. The ones that stayed the longest were kids and teenagers, on the promise of free food. Sasuke didn’t have much to do except stand there and bear the attention.

The younger kids were watching him with awed and envious expression, and he remembered standing exactly in their place and wondering why the star of the show looked so sullen, when they had just received what they were all wishing for.

He knew, now. Who would be happy to stand around all day while half the clan visited them to pinch their cheek and pat their head? The elders were fawning, the adults, bragging. The kids his age oscillated between creepy admiration and open jealousy, and Sasuke just really wanted it to be
At the end of the day, his father would take him to the temple and put his name in the register of the Sharingan users. He would have a small lecture about the inner working of the dojutsu – he was excited to maybe be entrusted with some secrets only red eyes got to hear. He would also get a few lessons in the upcoming days so that he could learn to call up his Sharingan at will.

His mother looked happy, at least. It had been a long time since he had seen her this social, chatting away with other women of the clan. Things were still tensed at home – never for the same reason it seemed, but there was always something. Between his mother and father arguing or Itachi feeling bad, it seemed like they couldn’t catch a break.

His father was discussing probably important things in a corner of the courtyard with some of the clan’s higher-ups, but every now and then he looked in Sasuke’s direction and his face lost a bit of his harshness.

All in all, it wasn’t that bad.

He popped a dumpling into his mouth, satisfied that the number of visitors was slowly trickling down. Izumi bid him farewell with another hug – she was leaving on a mission that very night. She passed Itachi on her way out and slammed him hard on the back with a grin and some quip he couldn’t hear from there. He was always amazed at the ease she could display around his somber brother, whom even adults had a hard time addressing.

He had been confused as to why she was so excited for today’s ordeal, way more than him, until his mother had reminded him that Izumi’s own Sharingan had awakened on the day of the Kyuubi attack, after she had watched her father died. There had been no celebration for her.

Itachi marched over to him with the ghost of a smile on his face. Izumi truly was a genius.

“Thought you’d want to know that Naruto is lurking at the district doors,” he said casually once Sasuke was within hearing range.

“What? Really?”

“Hm.”

The news chased away any lethargy this day had grown into Sasuke’s mind. Why was Naruto here? Was it a coincidence? What did he want?

Sasuke looked alternatively at his mother and father, biting his lips. He wasn’t supposed to leave just yet but…

“I’ll cover for you,” Itachi said around a dango stick.

He wasn’t looking at Sasuke, and now wasn’t the day Sasuke would understand what went through his brother’s head – he had already bolted toward the exit.

He only stopped running when he came into view of the gate, and crossed the last meters on a more measured, nonchalant stroll, hoping Naruto wouldn’t notice he was out of breath and starting to sweat.

He looked around casually, trying not to seem too eager. For a moment he saw nothing, and thought that maybe Naruto had left, maybe they had missed each other.
“Hi Sas’!”

Sasuke squealed.

“What the… You did it on purpose!” he accused. Naruto had come up behind him, and had probably been hiding behind a pillar just for the sake of startling him.

“And what if I did?” he asked all smug, pleased with himself.

Sasuke pouted and was about to snap back. Only then did he remembered they were still supposed to be fighting.

Naruto seemed to recall too, because his face grew more sullen.

“I was just passing by,” he said to his shoes more than to Sasuke. “Thought I’d say hello. I… didn’t congratulate you. For the eyes.”

“…Thanks,” Sasuke answered, even if he still hadn’t. Naruto was digging in the dusty floor with his shoe, hands deep in his short pockets, uncomfortable but still here. Sasuke had to say something. He opened his mouth even he still didn’t know what, but Naruto beat him to it.

“Show me.”

He was looking straight at Sasuke now, with an intensity that managed to urge him to look away and pine his gaze at the same time.

“Show me your eyes.”

Seeing how the last times had gone, Sasuke wasn’t really on board. There was no denying Naruto anything though. Sasuke closed his eyes on black. They opened on red.

Naruto’s face scrunched up and he squinted, but he didn’t close his eyes or look away. He even took a step forward, scrutinizing. There was a quality to him Sasuke had seen with no other – the Sharingan couldn’t distinguish chakra precisely like the Byakugan did, but it could still see it, in a way, a tinted veil over a person, just a whisper of something hidden. Naruto’s wasn’t subtle in any way – he looked brighter like this, like a beacon, anchoring Sasuke’s gaze who couldn’t have looked away if he wanted to.

And then he couldn’t, period, because Naruto had brought his hands up to his face.

He rested his fingers under Sasuke’s eyes, barely putting pressure but nailing him right there with no hope to escape. Sasuke could barely breathe. He had no idea what Naruto was looking for in his eyes, what is it he wanted to see. He hoped he would find it though, find it and like it and not push him away.

His blue eyes were deeper like this too, something stirring at the bottom of his gaze, hidden, imprisoned but still there, still within reach.

Sasuke felt like he could have tumble right through it.

Naruto stepped back though, taking his hands back with him, and the moment was gone. Sasuke let the Sharingan fall away, and waited, somewhat anxious, for Naruto’s verdict.

Naruto put his hands back in his pocket, recovered his careless demeanor. It was with professional disinterest that he spoke next.
“I guess they’re pretty cool.”

And Sasuke, who couldn’t just go with it, couldn’t deal with anything that had happened and anything he was feeling right now, answered with a smirk, “I think you mean they’re awesome.”

Somehow it was the right thing to say though. Naruto’s face broke into a wide grin and he finally relaxed a smidge, found some of his confidence back. Sasuke preferred it this way. This was familiar enough.

Of course this was the moment someone chose to interrupt them and raise all his hackles up again.

“So this is where you’ve been, Sasuke.”

Thinking about it though, it was better for his mother to arrive now rather than just a few moments ago. Now that would have been awkward.

“I was just saying hello,” he muttered. She couldn’t blame him. They had been the ones to refuse Naruto entry.

“It’s fine,” she dismissed. “Naruto, right? I’m Uchiha Mikoto, Sasuke’s mother. It’s nice to meet you.”

Caught off guard by being addressed like this – adults usually ignored him – Naruto forgot to be his typical rude self.

“Nice to meet you,” he grumbled.

“We’ve heard a lot about you,” she said. Naruto tensed up, waiting for a scold, but Sasuke knew what she was going to say, and it was much worse.

“Sasuke talks about you all the time.”

He hid his face behind his hand, mortified. Did she have to say that, really? It’s not like he could deny it, not without lying anyway, but still.

“Mom…”

“What? I’m glad you two are friends, that’s all.”

Sasuke looked away from Naruto, convinced that would be the sentence to snap him out of his daze and brought his mean streak back up.

Because surely, he wouldn’t stand for anyone calling them “friends”.

Instead of denying it though, he let out a small, very small, “are you?” that had Sasuke looking back at him. He was staring at his mother, defiant, challenging her to stand by her words.

“Yes. I am.”

He assessed her for a long time, trying to decide whether he would believe her or not. Sasuke found himself holding his breath.

“Alright.”

That was all she got before he lost interest in her entirely and turned toward Sasuke who couldn’t decide if he ought to be offended or not, on her behalf or even his.
“I’ll go now. See you at training.”

Sasuke was unsettled enough that he didn’t catch up immediately. Naruto had already turned away when Sasuke called back, “I’ll be there! And I’ll kick your ass!”

His mother’s scolding was worth Naruto’s laugh echoing away.

It had been a very long time since Naruto had wanted to run away.

He used to think about it a lot. He had even made a couple of half-hearted attempts. He would pack a bag thinking he would go camping in the forest for a few days, with the underlying possibility that maybe he would just keep walking and walking, and eventually the village would be far behind him, and he would be free.

He’d never been far enough to get the edge of the village in his sight though. There was always a shinobi or another very conveniently getting in his way, asking him what he was doing this far into the woods and that really, he should turn around, for whatever reason.

He didn’t know if they would really have stopped him. He had never tried to make a real break for it, because he was afraid to find out.

He fantasized about it a lot though. He imagined he would walk and walk, until everything was unfamiliar, until no one around could recognize him. Surely there had to be somewhere in this world where he was unknown, where people didn’t already have an opinion of him even though he had never met them before.

Maybe there would even be people who wouldn’t mind befriending him.

He tried to picture what those places could look like. Fishing villages by the shore, facing the sea, the long expanse of the desert, a city lost in the jungle, a city covered in snow. He had seen a lot of maps but he still had trouble wrapping his mind around just how big the world was.

Surely, surely, there had to be a point on those maps that was better than here.

But Naruto hadn’t thought about those little points in a long, long time.

The realization was both unnerving and soothing, in a way. Konoha had never had any appeal to him before. There wasn’t a single thing he liked about the place, a single good memory he could place in its streets. No friendly faces, no beloved places.

Nothing to tie him here – if not actual ties. Nothing to keep him from leaving.

And then, he’d asked Sasuke to be his rival.

It was strange and confusing how he couldn’t make up his mind, about whether he regretted it or not. He didn’t like that Sasuke, and Sakura, had made him forget about why he wanted to get stronger. His goal was to be free. But free from what? Free from this place and those people, but he was trapped now by their friendship too, by how nice it was to stand next to them.

Did he want to be free of this?

He wanted to be free, but being loved didn’t sound so bad either.

Was it possible then? For him to find a place here, to be content with his fate? He didn’t need to be
liked by everyone, he didn’t care to have all the friends. One person would be enough. If he could be sure that they wouldn’t leave him alone, then it would be worth it, wouldn’t it? To give up on freedom.

He didn’t have the answer. For now, he could only resolve to enjoy this, maybe even try to work for it a little harder. He had pushed and pushed and still Sasuke had remained stubbornly determined to stay there right in front of him, never out of sight, impossible to ignore. He still had marks on his face from their fights days after, that made Naruto feel guilty and bad even if Sasuke hadn’t blamed him in any way. Naruto always forgot that strangely, people seemed to take much longer than him to heal up from their injuries. He was already as good as knew the next day, nothing left but a dull ached in his shoulder where the kunai had struck.

Sasuke’s lip was still split and his hand bandaged, and still he chased after Naruto, demanded his time and attention.

Maybe that meant that he was here to stay.

It sure was nice, to exist in someone else’s world. He was almost starting to have some hope.

(He should have known better. He should have known better. Known that it wouldn’t last. Known that this wasn’t for him.

Should have known, that there was a reason why he had no right to love.)

.

The paper burnt in his hand as soon as he’d finished reading it. Mizuki hissed, annoyed, as he failed to let it go on time. He blew on his fingers as he watched the ashes scatter on the ground.

He needed to make his move soon. Lord Orochimaru was getting impatient, and himself was feeling the tide turning on him. Parents starting to ask around, to question their children. He wouldn’t be able to hold his position for long.

It was for the best, really. He was sick of this place, sick of these brats, sick of playing the nice teacher.

One stolen scroll and he would be back in Lord Orochimaru’s good grace, allowed to go back to his side.

And Mizuki knew just what monster boy to get help from.

Chapter End Notes

/: yeah we're launching the next plot point and it's not gonna be very nice for anyone involved, but mostly for Naruto. I'm committed on making him suffer. I was talking about that AU with a friend the other day and I said "and Naruto's life sucks" and she was like "what?? but it already sucks!". So I had to admit I was trying my hardest to make it suck even more x) she wasn't very happy...

Also Sasuke my boy that was kinda gay x) he's already a lost cause. See you on
tumblr, thank you for reading
School had been kind of hellish lately.

It wasn’t that unusual, except Naruto couldn’t figure out what had brought this up. It sucked because other aspects of his life were going pretty well. Sakura had gotten over her hesitations toward Sasuke and was now open to interacting with him at school. By extension, so was Naruto. It had shifted subtly but significantly the dynamic of their class’s microcosm – Naruto was left in peace, now that he was in the good grace of both Ino and Sasuke in the eyes of the others.

He had even started to pay more attention in class thanks to Sakura’s nagging. She liked to explain things, blabbering on and on about a subject or another, and it should have been annoying but it was the only way Naruto had to actually follow what they were being taught. She babbled about the reading material and he discreetly drank her every word. She was pretty like this, since she forgot to care about people watching. It was nice.

Things were fine with Sasuke too – they had even resumed training. That moron had tried to tell him that he would forego the use of his Sharingan, if it made Naruto uncomfortable. What an idiot. Naruto had no interest in beating him with a disadvantage. It was true it still made him feel kind of queasy, but he just had to remind himself that it was Sasuke, and to avoid eye contact while it was on – which was for the best anyway, since he wasn’t keen on falling into one of the Uchiha’s fame ninjutsu. They had had a brief but heated argument over whether or not genjutsu was a coward move. They had settled on agreeing that there was no such thing, there were only winning or losing moves, but that it was still a bastard move. Apart from that, it was fine, if incredibly frustrating, now that most of his tactics were no longer effective, useless under the red light of the Sharingan. But well, he had to know what he was up against, if he was to beat super-jounin one day, as per their plan. The resolve had made Sasuke laugh. That was nice too.

So things should have been good, but the teachers had inexplicably been much more hostile to him in the past few weeks. He would have dismissed it if it was only one of them – adults taking out their sadness and frustration on him were nothing new – but they were ganging up this time. The only one who escaped the trend was Mizuki, who was even being extra nice and complacent. It
didn’t sit well with Naruto either. Mizuki was probably the worst of them all, and him being good was nothing but suspicious.

Once upon a time, he would have just skipped school until things blew off, but now he had to account for Sakura’s scolding. He had no idea where that sudden interest in his education came from, but she was taking it very seriously. And somehow, he didn’t like disappointing her.

So he went to school and endured. It didn’t help – or maybe it did? – that slowly, Sakura, then Sasuke, and even some others like Shikamaru, began to defend him in class. When he was being sent out for no reason, when he was being wrongly accused in someone else’s place, he no longer bore it alone with no support. They didn't stand up outright for him, but they made little remarks, pointed out that he had done nothing wrong. Naruto hated it, both because it was embarrassing and pointless, and because of the warmth it spread through his chest, all the way down to his bones.

Still, he was on edge, and so when Mizuki came to find him on his usual spot on the roof one afternoon after class, he was instantly on guard.

“Hello Naruto. How are you?”

Naruto couldn’t figure out that man. He was convinced deep down he was just an asshole who hated children with a passion, so he didn’t get why he was a teacher, and why no one else saw that there maybe was a problem with that.

Even when he was being all nice and acting concerned, Naruto couldn’t help but distrust him.

“Fine,” he said curtly.

“Things have been tough at school right? I’m sorry about that.”

Yeah, right.

“What do you want?”

Mizuki’s smile didn’t waver but there was no missing the clenching of his jaw.

“I’m just concerned, that’s all. I figured I could give you some advice. To help you out.”

“I don’t need your help.”

It was easy to eat at the man’s patience. He must have been more determined than usual though, because he kept on his act.

“Seriously though. I noticed you had a hard time with ninjutsu. Wouldn’t you want to get your hand on something that could truly help you out?”

Naruto refrained from saying that it was supposed to be the man’s job. He had pretty much given up on ninjutsu anyway. He was confident now that he would be able to perform the ones required for graduation, so he was much more on board for studying fuinjutsu, which was easier and cooler and all around better in every aspect.

He wasn’t about to say that to Mizuki though.

“I guess,” he said mildly. He was curious despite himself. What game was the man playing at?

“I could tell you how to get your hand on a scroll. Something that contains a truly good method for people who are struggling, like you.”
The offer would have been tempting if Naruto thought he could trust it in any way.

“Really?”

“Yes. You could catch up to the other. You could even get some recognition.”

Now that was what definitely broke the deal for him. If he doubted Mizuku was sincere before then, he was sure now.

Because they both knew that nothing, no amount of power and talent, would ever get him any recognition around here.

“Sorry, Mizuki-sensei. You’re going to have to raise the stake.”

The change was instantaneous, almost scary. Mizuki lost all his fake cheers and plastic smile, and Naruto felt like he was seeing him for the first time as he really was.

“What do you want then brat?”

Naruto found it kind of refreshing.

“There’s nothing you can give me.”

And he wanted nothing from this man.

Mizuki smiled then, a mean, self-satisfied smile, that had Naruto recoil slightly, wary.

“I think there is.”

Naruto raised an eyebrow but said nothing, waiting. He regretted not standing up when the man had first arrived. Sitting here at the top of the water tank, he felt vulnerable, exposed.

“If you get me what I want,” Mizuki said, with an air of conspiracy, “I’ll tell you a secret.”

Naruto scoffed.

“What secret?”

“Well, your secret. I’ll tell you about your life. I’ll tell you why it is that everyone treats you this way. I’ll tell you everything.”

Giving the satisfaction on Mizuki’s face, Naruto could only assume the effect of his words were plain visible on his own face. Naruto hated it had this power on him, but Mizuki had struck a chord. It was one of the few things Naruto wanted – to know, at last, the reason behind the village’s hatred of him, to know why his life was at it was.

It wasn’t the first time people came to him with dubious requests like this, convinced for some reasons that he would be on board with whatever shady business they wanted him on. None had ever offered him anything he wanted or needed though.

But this, this…

“Go on.”
Naruto waited for the streets to empty out, the shops closing for the night and people ushering home to their family. It was the best time of day to wander around Konoha – when there was no one else out to bother him.

The Hokage Tower would take more time to quiet down, since there were always people coming and going, crisis to take care of, messages to relay. The last one to leave was always the Hokage, when he didn't just sleep right there in his office. Naruto waited for a lull in the area’s activity and snuck inside the building.

He didn’t know if he was still persona non grata – he hadn’t entered the Tower for years. Better not to be seen though, it was a habit more than anything. If he wasn’t seen or heard, if no one knew he was here, he could move freely.

He could escape the unbearable weight of their attention.

It had been a while but it was still just as easy going up the floors unnoticed. There were not many people left to wander the corridors and he knew this building by heart. He made quick work of reaching the Hokage floor, all the way to the top. The library was situated a few doors down the Hokage’s office, with just one chunin to stand guard according to Mizuki, and a seal easy enough to break. Naruto had played dumb when the man had explained briefly what a lock seal was and how to go through it. He wasn’t about to advertise his dabbling into fuinjutsu.

He approached the library door, and walked right past it.

The Hokage was sitting at his desk, as predicted. Did he ever get up at all? Maybe he actually lived there. Maybe he had fused with the chair and could only move by rolling it around.

“Hi, old man.”

He didn’t seem particularly happy to see him, but then again, he never seemed happy about anything. He looked so old, much older than in Naruto’s memories, old and weak and useless.

“Naruto. To what do I owe your visit?”

Naruto took his time, building up his effect. The jounin standing next to the desk, that he had interrupted in the middle of a mission report, was looking at him with a mix of resentment and wariness. He had small, round sunglasses that made him look very suspicious, even creepy. Naruto ignored him entirely.

“I just wanted to inform you that Mizuki-sensei is a criminal and a traitor.”

That, at the very least, caught their attention for good.

“That, at the very least, caught their attention for good.

“What are you talking about?”

“He just tried to bribe me into stealing some forbidden scroll from your library.”

The jounin started to protest, outraged. The Hokage silenced him with a raised hand.

“This is a serious accusation, Naruto. Do you have proof of what you’re saying?”

The boy rolled his eyes. He knew for sure that, had he brought that same accusation to anyone in his class, any kids at the Academy, they would all have said “it figures” with a shrug. He also knew no one in the higher places cared about them and had any idea just how truly terrible a teacher Mizuki was. So it wasn’t surprising, but it was annoying all the same.
“He talked me through infiltrating the place. He even gave me this.”

Naruto pretended like he didn’t see the adults flinch when he reached inside his pouch and got two pieces of paper out.

“Seal breakers. For the door and the protections on the scrolls.”

Sunglasses took them for closer examination before nodding once to the Hokage. The old man made a sound and three ninjas with white animal masks appeared in the office, one knee respectfully on the ground.

“What is it, Hokage-sama?”

“Find Mizuki. Bring him here. Be warned, he may be dangerous.”

The one in the middle, a man with silver hair, nodded once, and they were gone again. Naruto breathed out a relieved sigh. He didn’t like the masked ninjas – they made him uncomfortable, with their concealed face and the quiet threat they carried with them. Often he had seen one of them watch him from afar, and he was sure way more often he hadn’t seen them, as they left food and clothes in his apartment or simply spied on him. Since the Hokage’s gaze had shifted away from him – and since he had started trapping his door and windows against intruders – he didn’t see them so often. He still knew to be wary of them. They were no ordinary shinobis, for ordinary shinobis had no use for covering their face. More than not knowing their identity, what was most unsettling was not being able to read their face. Did those people even have feelings? It was impossible to tell.

Another jounin entered the room, a young man with a bandana and a senbon between his teeth. He had a casual, unhurried demeanor, despite walking fast enough that he missed Naruto entirely.

“Hokage-sama, what is happening? We heard…”

That very second, one of the masked shinobi from earlier, a woman with purple hair, popped back into the room through the open window.

“Mizuki resisted arrest. He’s on the run.”

The Hokage, still sitting at his desk, still motionless, hands crossed in front of his face, took a short moment of reflection before addressing the senbon guy.

“Genma, pass the message to all available jounin and chunin. Tono Mizuki is suspected of theft and treason, and is currently on the run. All efforts must be directed into catching him. Go.”

The man’s eyes caught on Naruto’s while he was exiting the desk. He faltered, just barely, but didn’t stop, and was soon gone, as well as the masked woman.

“As for you, Naruto,” the old man said, “you’re dismissed. We’ll sort this through. Go home.”

“What?” he exclaimed. He marched on to the desk and slammed his hands on the wood, displacing some papers. “I want to be part of it! That bastard…”

“Go home!” the Hokage thundered without moving a muscle. Out of the corner of his eye Naruto saw Sunglasses tense up ever so slightly.

“Tsk. Whatever.”
He made a show of storming out of the office with a flurry and took a few steps in the corridor, to make sure he was out of view, before producing what he had snatched from the desk.

Was he that good a thief, or were they just bad observers? He didn’t know which one would please him the most.

He had taken back the seals given by Mizuki.

The Tower wasn’t quiet in any way now, shinobis running the corridors in a hurry, passing messages and reporting on the tracking of the Academy teacher. Naruto didn’t care about that though. Mizuki was already out of his mind.

He had been tempted by the offer. Really tempted. But he had decided just a few weeks ago to try to move forward in that village, despite everything. He had no use for the knowledge of the village’s hatred anymore – he was sure it was something stupid. People hated each other for the most petty things. His leading theory was he was bearing the crimes of his parents, who had probably been traitors or even foreign nins, enemies. After all, no one in the village bore the Uzumaki name, and no one looked like him in any way either.

It didn’t matter now. Sasuke and Sakura didn’t care about that. So he wouldn’t either.

However, the opportunity was just too good to pass up. Everyone was busy, and even the chunin guarding the library had deserted their station to go after Mizuki.

One seal to put over the one laid across the door, and he could sneak inside. One seal to neutralize the alarm guarding the row of dusty shelves covered in scrolls and books, and he could pick up whichever he wanted.

It was just too easy.

The man had given him clear instruction as to what scroll to take, but as Naruto set to find it, it occurred to him that he didn’t need that one in particular. It was supposed to be full of powerful ninjutsus, but Naruto sucked at ninjutsu, he hated it, and he didn’t see that changing anytime soon, scroll or not.

But really, what definitely made up his mind was his eyes catching on a familiar red spiral, decorating a big scroll propped up against a shelf in a corner of the room.

Naruto approached it carefully, aware that some of those things could contain dangerous and volatile jutsus. He took the scroll with some difficulties – it was the size of one of his legs. The red spiral was painted at each extremity and on the sealing tag that closed the paper. And under it, hand-painted in wide, bold strokes, was some of the only kanjis he could decipher. The ones that spelled out “fuinjutsu”.

There were noises and voices outside. He strapped the scroll to his back and put his hoodie back above it, before taking back the breaking seals and sneaking out of the room.

The scroll was better than anything he could have hoped for.

He couldn’t read the instructions, but once again, it didn’t matter much. The seals were easy to identify and he could speculate from there with the drawings and symbols written all over the paper. He was grateful for whoever had designed those scrolls and decided that the person learning from it had to be able to follow its instructions even without any reading abilities.
The red spiral was drawn everywhere in the scroll, in the corners, between seals, in the decorative borders. He didn't know what it meant. It had been tapped to his door for as long as he could remember, and he had decided to make it his own long before discovering it was actually stitched to every ninja uniform in the village. No matter. The sign was his, and they were the ones borrowing it. Did anyone else have it on their door? No. Proof.

He had found himself a quiet corner of the forest to escape the frenzy of the search for Mizuki. How hard was it for the whole of the shinobi force to catch a single Academy teacher? It didn't concern him anyway. He was focused on the first seal of the scroll. From what he understood, it was an offensive seal, to be laid on the chest of an opponent during a fight, if he interpreted correctly the little drawings at the bottom. He didn't recognize any of the symbols associated with chakra sealing, like on his other scroll – it had to be something else. Or not.

He felt though that it wasn't harmless in any way. Maybe it was a good thing he didn't have anyone to test it on.

Firing a seal directly from his palm was different from activating one drawn on paper, but he had several hours in front of him and nothing better to do. The heart of it was the same, anyway. It's just that the circle wasn't explicit like on paper. It was formed by his five fingers that he spent a long time wriggling around, trying to get them to crook in the right shape.

Firing the seal wasn't hard. Like the other and unlike ninjutsu, he didn't need refined control of the quantity, just a general direction. The hardest part was the timing. If precision wasn't needed in the flow of chakra, it was essential in all the other aspects of sealing – be it the painted symbols or the position of his hand.

He could feel the seal taking form despite having to lay it a tree. There was no sign indicating that it worked in any way, but he knew he was getting close.

The ruffling of leaves interrupted his practice.

He fell quiet and motionless, all his senses on high alert. Someone was coming. He hastily rolled the scroll and strapped it to his back, but thought better of it. He had been practicing the storing seal shinobis used to conceal weapons and other objects in scrolls, and he found it very handy. He got a small scroll from his pouch and unrolled it past the traditional storing spot for kunais and shuriken, until he found a blank one. The person, whoever it was, was getting closer.

"Enclosing!"

The stolen fuinjutsu lesson disappeared in a puff of smoke. Naruto put the storing scroll back into his pouch and sat at the foot of the nearest tree, intent on looking as innocent as possible to what was probably one of the shinobis out on the manhunt checking out the area.

He wasn't so far off, he realized when the person in question landed in a branch above his head. They were part of the manhunt indeed.

"Hello there, Mizuki-sensei."

Naruto regretted deeply having sat down in such a vulnerable position.

"You fucking… you sold me out, you rat!"

The man looked exhausted and out of his mind with rage. Naruto almost expected foam to start
bubbling at the corner of his mouth. He got up casually and took a few steps away, ear straining to hear the man’s movement.

“I wouldn’t say “sold”. I got nothing in return.”

Alright, maybe provoking the chunin that was already after his blood wasn’t the smartest move. Mizuki let out a piercing cry of rage – so much for being discreet – and lunged himself at Naruto who jumped back on impulse.

A good impulse, because Mizuki had two kunais out, and the look in his eyes made Naruto shiver. He wasn’t really out for his blood though. Was he?

“I can’t believe you went to the Hokage you fucking brat! I’m going to fucking murder you!”

“You should have raised up the stake!” Naruto yelled back before dunking into the trees. He had to escape that crazy bastard. It was sort of a chance that half the village was already after him – surely someone would stumble upon them. Maybe Naruto would even be congratulated for his capture or something.

“Isn’t it what you wanted? Knowing where it comes from, their hatred for you? Knowing why your life has always been so miserable?”

Mizuki sounded focused enough despite his anger. Maybe making others suffer was therapeutic for him. Naruto clenched his teeth and regretted running around the trees meant he couldn’t plug his ear shut. It was the first time he heard it acknowledged so bluntly. The very few times he had tried to broach the subject with the Hokage or another teacher, his concerns had been quickly dismissed, and he had been made to believe that he was imagining all this. Playing martyr.

“What would it change? I don’t care! If people are assholes…”

“Or but they’re not, Naruto. Do you think that’s it? That they’re just mean and you’re a victim? Tell me, monster boy, didn’t it ever occurred to you that they had a very good reason indeed?”

Naruto stopped in the next clearing and Mizuki didn’t come closer. He was up on a branch, looking down at Naruto, delight obvious on his face.

What a sick bastard.

Naruto had heard it before. Monster boy. Beast. Abomination. But it was just things people said. It didn't mean anything.

“Fuck you,” he said weakly.

Mizuki’s features softened. He crouched on his branch like he was bored suddenly.

“You know, I really was going to be honest about it with you. And to let you peek into that scroll too. Why on earth would you turn that down?”

“I don’t fret with traitors,” Naruto spat out.

Mizuki’s eyes widened for a second, before he burst out into an ugly laugh.

“What, is that what this is about? Loyalty to the village? What has that village ever done for you, monster boy, that you would have the urge to defend it?”
Naruto stayed silent. He wasn’t about to spill his inner struggle to that man, but it wasn’t about the village, not really. It was maybe about loyalty though. He had no interest in helping people who would turn against their own, break their promises. Loyalty was important, no? Be it to the village or… something else. A person, an idea. A purpose. A dream. Was Mizuki loyal to something too? Who knew.

And maybe it was also about people seeking help from children, disregarding the consequences it would bring upon their head.

About seeking his help, and being convinced it would be granted.

Why? Mizuki hated him, and it was mutual. He could have asked anyone else. Well, maybe not anyone, but any other no-name kids from the Academy, desperate for attention and recognition, and one that didn’t despise him so openly.

So why?

“Why did you ask me anyway?” Naruto asked, curious despite himself, despite not really wanting to know the answer. Mizuki laughed again.

“I figured the monster boy wouldn’t refuse such an opportunity.”

“Stop calling me that.”

“What, monster boy? But it’s…”

“Stop it!”

“It’s only the truth though.”

He had to leave. Now. Where was everybody? What were those garbage jounins doing, why hadn’t they caught up to them already? He wanted to leave this place. He didn’t want to hear anything. He didn’t want to know.

With any brain faculty left, he would have known it was a stupid idea to turn his back to his opponent to run away. As it was, it only occurred to him when a kunai pierced his hoodie and shirt and embedded itself under his shoulder blade. He cried out and stumbled, but he didn’t stop.

He wasn’t running fast enough though. Not fast enough to escape that voice.

"Tell me, Naruto, how do you think it's possible to kill a Tailed Beast?"

Naruto almost tripped, caught off guard by the sudden change in topic.

“Answer, it’s not. It can’t be killed, not by men anyway. The only way to stop it is to seal it you see. But not seal it into an object or a scroll, no, that would be a waste, wouldn’t it? Such power, it has to be available at some point, even if it’s so very hard to control. So it’s better to seal it into a human.”

_Shut up_, he pleaded silently. _Shut up, shut up, I don’t want to know, I don’t want to know._

“And newborns are the best because they don’t have a will to oppose the invasion of the Beast. An adult would fight against it, even unconsciously. But a child…”

Mizuki jumped from his branch straight on Naruto, his two feet colliding painfully with his back. Naruto met the harsh ground with brutal force, putting in extremis his hands in front of his face to
avoid breaking his nose and all his teeth on some rocks. Dizzy from the shock, he still managed to take advantage of Mizuki losing his balance to turn on his back. The man was already on him though.

“Tell me, Naruto. Don’t you know anyone that happened to be a newborn on the night Kyuubi was defeated?”

Naruto screamed.

Mizuki laughed. He had a knee pressed on Naruto’s chest to keep him from getting up. He straightened up, kunai high in hand, ready to strike.

Naruto, mind running in overdrive and seized with panic, grappled at the first thing he could think of.

The last thing he had learned.

The seal came easily to his hand. He could barely move, but he could move enough that, when Mizuki struck down, he could slam his palm against the man’s heart.

Naruto cried out again. His attack had shifted the angle slightly and Mizuki’s kunai had missed his own heart, but it still plunged deep into his shoulder. Mizuki straightened back up, ready to strike again, to finish him off.

But he didn’t. He had left his kunai where it was to grip at his chest, above his heart. He choked on a breath, eyes wide with panic.

“You… You bastard… what did you…”

He collapsed on top of Naruto, trying to bring a hand around his throat, in vain. It was over in only a few seconds. His body went limp, his face froze in a horrible grimace of pain and chock. For a long moment, nothing moved, no sound was heard. Naruto stayed frozen in place, barely breathing, indifferent to his pain, to the steady flow of his blood, to everything other than the weight pinning him down.

Mizuki was dead.

Contrary to what everyone – his teachers – believed, Naruto was a fast learner.

He was a fast learner when he was actually taught something. As a result, he was self-taught in most of the areas of his life. There was one thing in particular, that he had learned late in life but very quickly.

Up until the first few weeks of his Academy days, Naruto had had solely his own experience to rely on when it came to illnesses and injuries. Meaning, illnesses weren’t a thing, except after eating food gone bad, and injuries, no matter which, were a minor inconvenience most of the time. He had been patching himself up forever. He had once tumbled down a rocky patch in the forest and scrapped his legs enough that the bone was showing, but he had just bandaged it and it was fine after a few days. Same when another time when he had missed a branch and crashed on the ground. After carefully putting out the piece of wood sticking out of his side, it had healed in no time.

Naruto thought it was just how things went.
So he had been very confused when, during their first-ever throwing practice, he had accidentally planted a shuriken deep in Hyugaa Hinata’s arm thanks to his terrible aim, and she had immediately started bawling while everyone around them stopped dead in their track and the teacher started fussing hysterically.

She had been excused from school that day and the next, and she had sported a thick bandage on her arm for an entire month.

An entire freaking month.

Naruto had been yelled out by the teacher and someone he assumed was from the girl’s clan – same eyes – and he had understood that it was serious.

He had kept a close eye on his classmates from then on, and he had learned his lesson. He had discovered it was yet another thing that set him apart from the rest of them. They were brought down by the smallest of injuries. They were sensitive to pain and wary of damaging their body. They needed weeks to heal from things he didn’t need to concern himself with for more than a few days. They were horrified when things like embedded kunais and broken limbs happened, and he had taught himself to follow their lead, to pace himself on their absurdly weak bodies. It was one little thing he could control, so that he didn’t stick out even more.

Not that it had helped all that much.

When they had started sparring with Sasuke, he was constantly on the lookout for an incident of the sort. There were blows he knew Sasuke wouldn’t just bounce from, things that would put him out of commission when Naruto would just walk it off.

He’d learned on his own, like everything else. Learned that it would freak people out if they saw him walk with open wounds and bleed all over his clothes. Learned that things he could endure would kill anyone else. Learned to hide it.

So the first thing he did, once he had recovered some parody of calm, once he had crawled from under Mizuki’s lifeless body, was to rip the kunai out of his shoulder, and bandaged his wounds. He took off his sleeveless hoodie and tied it around his waist, in a way that would hide most of the bloodstains.

It was already the color of blood anyway. All the blood was his own, except from one tiny little stain where Mizuki had coughed it out before dying. Naruto had never really thought about the practicality of the color before. He just liked it. All his clothes were like that. Blood red, bright red. Or black. Neither happy nor sad, neither bold nor bland.

Sometimes he actually forgot about the bloodstains. He often got injured. He wasn’t careful enough to protect his own body. He had never learned that one, since the wounds closed easily, and since he didn’t care for the pain.

He bandaged his wounds, mechanically, without looking at the lifeless corpse, avoiding its unseeing eyes, its distorted mouth.

Of course it’s only then, that someone did find them.

“Naruto.”

He raised his eyes to the newcomer. It was the senbon guy. He recognized him from earlier, from the Hokage’s office, but he didn’t otherwise know him. Why were they always addressing him as if they knew him? Even if they did, couldn’t they at least pretend? He’d heard the old man call him
Genma, but that wasn’t a reason for him to start addressing him with it, right?

Couldn’t they at least pretend not to know who he was.

What he was.

Oh hell. Oh hell.

“What happened? Are you alright?”

“’m fine.”

Another shinobi arrived a second later, a strict looking man with an impressive scar running from the bridge of his nose and spreading onto his cheek like roots. He went directly to the motionless form of Mizuki still lying on the ground.

“He’s dead,” he said in a breathe, both incredulous and already accusing.

“Yeah, no shit.”

“What happened?”

Naruto focused on the senbon one, who looked less angry than the other. There was no doubt in his mind that the next word that would come out of his mouth would be a lie though. Even if he hadn’t been desperate to hide the secret of the sealing he had stolen and learned, even if it had been something else…

In other circumstances, maybe he would have told them. He had only defended himself after all. The man was a known criminal and death would have been his punishment anyway. Killing an enemy, a traitor, was nothing uncommon for them shinobis.

But Naruto wasn’t a shinobi, wasn’t he? He wasn’t an aspiring one either. He wasn’t even a child. He wasn’t human.

Maybe he would have told them, had he not just realized why it was that he was always punished so much harsher than the others, why he couldn’t get away with things everybody else did. Would they believe it was self-defense? From him?

From the monster?

He was feeling sick.

“I don’t know. He just collapsed.”

He wondered if the seal would leave any mark. If it was well thought out, he guessed not.

“Looks like a heart attack,” the other man said, still skeptical. Naruto avoided both their gaze.

“Did he attack you?”

A shrug.

“Are you hurt?”

Another shrug.
“Naruto…”

“Stop saying my name.”

He didn’t need to look at the man to picture the surprise on his face.

“We’ve never met before. Stop saying it.”

Why didn’t he just called him monster boy to be done with it. Or that other one that he had never truly registered because it was the one that made the less sense, that he thought was the least attached to him.

Demon Fox.

Ha.

“Let’s go back to the Hokage Tower,” the senbon man said. His partner hauled up Mizuki’s body on his back. Naruto almost expected him to move again, to come back.

He’d never realized death was so finale. So brutal. Here one second, gone the next.

Gone by his hand.

He wondered what he was supposed to feel.

“I don’t suppose you’ll let me go home,” he mumbled without conviction, without any venom. He was so tired all of the sudden. He wanted to sleep. Sleep, and not wake up.

“You’re coming with us,” Senbon said as an answer. Naruto wanted to believe he at least looked apologetic about it, but it was probably just wishful thinking.

One of their teachers – he didn’t remember which one – had come into the classroom one morning looking sullen and gloomy, and he had announced bluntly that one of their classmates had died.

A freak accident, or maybe she was sick? He didn’t recall. He didn’t even know her name, they had never talked and he didn’t care much. The class had been shaken though, and even he had felt a little bad about it, because it was… just weird. Kids weren’t supposed to die, right? Death was for the old ones.

He remembered distinctly though that the very first reaction of most of them had been disbelief. Several kids had chuckled nervously, urged their teacher not to joke like that. It had taken a few minutes for the truth to really set in, for him to convince them that he wasn’t joking in the slightest. Naruto had found it strange. How in hell would a teacher lie about something like this? And still, there had been a girl, who was very close to the one who had died, and who had refused to believe it. She had simply refused. The truth didn’t hold a candle to what she wanted to believe, to what she desperately wish to be true.

Despite all evidence, she had kept that up for days.

Naruto was in the Hokage’s office and he wondered if the Hokage knew about that girl and her friend. About not wanting to see the truth, no matter the proofs, no matter what. Then again, he certainly did. Naruto had heard lots about Danzo after all.

That’s why he decided he would ask. He could stay silent if he wanted to. He could deny
everything and go back to his life. He could make up his own truth. But what was the point in that? The girl had broken down, eventually. Danzo had been found out and the Hokage was in disgrace, even if they were pretending he wasn’t. The truth always came out, eventually.

There were other people in the room. The senbon guy and his teammate. Sunglasses. Sasuke’s father. Shikamaru’s too. And wasn’t that a Hyuuga?

“So you say he just collapsed? You didn’t see anything else.”

“I was trying not to get impaled. Sorry if I didn’t pay much attention to the rest.”

What did they hope he would say? That he had ripped out his heart in cold blood or something? Why did it matter anyway. The traitor was dead. End of story.

At least it looked like they hadn’t noticed about the missing scroll. Naruto didn’t want to think about it. About what would have happened, had he tried that seal on anyone else.

About how he still wanted to learn in spite of it.

The Hokage stayed silent like he always did, for an absurd long time that made everyone ill-at-ease and restless.

“Very well. You can go then.”

The other adults had stayed quiet but it was obvious they weren’t mere observers. They could have objected if they wanted to. They didn’t. He was free to go. Free to run back and not ask.

But what was the point in that.

“Old man.”

“What?”

It was hard to remember that the man had looked at him somehow fondly once upon a time. Naruto had thought maybe he had one ally in him, but the Hokage had quickly lost interest in his fate. His eyes were cold now, cold and tired, dead already.

“Mizuki said something to me.”

“Huh? What was it?”

The others’ attention sharpened. But Naruto stayed focus on the man. If he didn’t want to give him a straight answer, Naruto would have to read it on his face, in his eyes. He inhaled deeply. No turning back.

“Is it true that I’m the demon fox?”

He instantly got his answer.

He didn’t pay attention from them on. Not to those who protested, not to their air of quiet shock. He saw without seeing it the pained expression of the old man. Why? Naruto was the one in pain.

Or was he? What was the point of being a monster if he couldn’t escape hurting.

So that was it. That was the answer. He was a demon. He had killed hundreds of people in the
village ten years ago. And he could still kill more. Hadn't he just done that? Was that where this power was coming from, the sealing? He was a monster.

All those years they had hated him, and they had been right.

He had promised himself he would stop running away, but really, right now there was nothing else he could do.

He could lose jounin in the streets of Konoha. He had done it before. He took full advantage of the small respite he got where everyone in the room stayed stupidly frozen, before they realized what was happening. Second manhunt of the day. But he wasn't as stupid as Mizuki.

He just had to run away. He had to run away from this place. He had never realized how much he still hoped to find his own peace here, to carve a corner for himself. He thought they would forget about him eventually, forget about what crimes had been put on his head before he was even born. It would have passed eventually. He would have found his place. He would have been happy here. He still had hope.

He had been so stupid.

He had to leave, he had to leave right now. To get far away from here. What if he could really be dangerous still? What if the beast was let loose? He didn't want to hurt anyone. He didn't want to kill.

What if Sasuke found out?

What if they fought someday and Naruto slipped, what if Sasuke knew, what if he was hurt? What if he lost control in class and killed another kid? Why had they never told him about it, told him that he was a danger to be around?

But hadn't they? He'd been told time and time again that he wasn't to befriend anyone, that he couldn't be loved. He should have listened. They had been right all along.

He had to leave, now. Leave this place and found a hole in the ground he could crawl up in a die, because it was over. There was no hope for him anymore. He would never be home here, he would never be home anywhere. He would never be loved. How could he face Sasuke and Sakura again, now that he knew what he knew? They would have never have befriended him, had they known. They would have stayed away like their parents had told them to.

He had to leave and not come back. Leave and be free of this mess. Free of the pain he could cause and the pain that could be caused to him. Wouldn't it be a blessing to be alone out there? To hide forever, away from everything? Maybe he would stop thinking. Maybe he would truly become a beast and stop thinking, stop feeling.

Naruto ran and ran, deeper and deeper into the forest, barely looking where he was going, indifferent to the branches tearing at his clothes and skin, his feet bumping harshly on the uneven ground. His lungs were burning, his wounds screaming. He didn’t stop.

He wouldn’t stop. Not until he was in an entirely different world. Not until he was someone else.

Or maybe just until a tree branch grew in his path and tripped him to the ground.

Caught up in the momentum, he rolled around for several meters, rocks and sticks digging at his skin. His mind was in shambles, he couldn't register what had just happened. Had that tree grown just right then? Was that even possible?
Only then did he noticed them.

Two for now, but more would come. Masked. One had silver hair – he had seen him earlier. The other, unknown. When he signed some more mudras, another branch sprouted out of nowhere, right in Naruto’s direction.

He jumped purely on instinct.

“Naruto, calm down!” Silver hair urged. His mask was painted with a dog face, hiding his expression – it was impossible to know if he really felt the urgency that could be heard in his voice.

Not that Naruto cared.

“Let me go, let me go, let me go!” he screamed, hysterical, as the branches wrapped around his arms. He trashed and kicked and only managed to make them tighter, tight enough to be painful. He wasn’t about to stop though.

“LET ME GO!”

“We can’t do that Naruto, please…”

“I don’t want to stay here! Let me go!”

Was he crying? It felt like he was, but he couldn’t be sure. He heard more than felt something break in one of his arms. The other man, the one with a ca mask who could grow the trees, let out a distressed groan and the grip weakened just a smidge.

“Naruto, you’ll hurt yourself.”

“I don’t care!”

“Naruto…”

“STOP SAYING MY NAME.”

He wasn’t Naruto. He wasn’t anyone. He wasn’t even there. Where was he?

Where was he? It was dark, and damp. It smelled terrible.

*I want to break free,* it said.

*Me too, me too.*

*I want to break free.*

*Me too, me too!*

For one, maybe two exhilarating seconds, Naruto burst out with power. He was flooded with chakra that was foreign to him, bright red and burning, setting fire to his vein and to his whole mind. He didn’t care. It was power. Strong enough to break, strong enough to fight.

Strong enough to break free.

For one, maybe two exhilarating seconds, Naruto hoped.
And then a paper seal was slapped to his forehead, and all was dark.

Ironic, it said. But not very funny.

Naruto opened his eyes. Or well, he tried too. His eyelids were as heavy as lead. His whole body hurt. Not just muscles from harsh training or a strain from injury, but a bone-deep pain all throughout his body, pinning him to the ground as surely as if he'd been in chains.

He tried to move. He heard something rattled.

Oh. It wasn’t the pain.

He managed to sit up. He managed to open his eyes and for a second he panicked because he couldn’t see a thing, but it was just dark, there was a single candle burning in a corner somewhere. He couldn’t see much, but he could see enough.

The heavy metal circling his wrists and ankles, enough.

The chain attached to it, crawling on the ground to their anchor in the raw stonewall, enough.

And the bars cutting through the air, setting him apart from the rest of the world, enough.

Caged.

Naruto screamed.

Chapter End Notes

What fun we're having.

Next chapter won't be super happy either and then we'll kinda get better a little, but yeah, you get the spirit. Naruto isn't going to have a great time from now on... I was always going to introduce Kurama to him much sooner than in canon, since he's closer to the surface here on account of Naruto being super full of rage ^^ It's going to be a rocky path. Keep in mind that I'm still on the Role Reversal Train hehe. This is the first blow for Naruto but it's certainly not the last. Sorry.

Say hi on tumblr and tell me what you think! Work is picking up for me so updates are probably going to slow down a little, but I'm committed to this mess, promise :p
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Naruto and a cage.

Chapter Notes

I never put much thought into those chapter summary thing and I feel like I should haha. But you get the spirit. Things continue to suck around here, yay! This time I can confirm that Academy graduation will be chapter 13’s theme, so we’ll hang back to canon, more or less. Canon's arcs at least. Wave mission, chunin exam (GAARA)... exciting stuff! Thank you all for your support and for sticking with me. Enjoy ;)

Maybe that’s how life was going to be from then on.

It made sense that they would imprison him. He was a dangerous monster after all. But why, why hadn’t they done that sooner then? Or even right from the start? Was it so that he could enjoy life a little, until it was too risky to let him out? Or was it a form of punishment, of torture, for all the lives lost because of him?

Was he going to stay in that cell forever?

No way. No way. They had no right, no right. It wasn’t his fault, if he was this way. He didn’t ask for this. He had tried to leave this place, to keep it safe. Why stop him if it was to cage him? Why not let him go?

He didn’t remember much of what had happened. There were the two masks in the wood and then… Had they knocked him out? So that they could throw him in there? He had never sustained any injury that put him out more than a few minutes. What had they done to him? There had been a paper seal… How long had he been unconscious?

He pulled at his chains, again. He hit the ground and the walls he could reach, again. He felt weak and sluggish still despite having been awake for hours now. His wounds had been dressed properly at some point, but they were mostly gone already. And yet, his strength was spilling out of him.

Would no one ever come to visit him? Was he looking at what the rest of his life would be like?

He wondered what the others would say. He wondered if Sasuke would look for him.

But then he remembered that Sasuke could never know about him. So maybe it was okay like this. He left only good memories, or well, not too bad ones. They would forget about him soon enough, as he wasted away here.

The sound of footsteps echoing against the bare stone interrupted his spiraling thoughts.
He crawled toward the bars to get a better view, but the chains were too short for him to reach them. The warm hallow of a moving torch came closer and closer, slowly invading the cage with light. He squinted, trying to see who was there beyond the light.

“I’m sorry, Naruto.”

He slumped back, defeated. The old Hokage. It figured.

“Let me out of here.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

He wanted to sound angry, to sound menacing, and he hated how his voice was just weak, pleading. He sounded like a whiny child. But he was so scared and lost and he didn’t understand why this was all happening to him, why he had to go through this. What had he done to deserve it?

Oh, that’s right. He had done plenty indeed.

“This won’t last, Naruto. It’s only a precaution.”

“A precaution?”

“The seal needed to be reinforced. It’s for your own good.”

Mizuki’s voice was echoing around in his mind. “The only way to stop it is to seal it.”

He wrapped his arms around his knees in a vain attempt to provide himself with some warmth and comfort.

“Why can’t I go if it’s done?”

“We need to make sure… It could still be weakened. We need to make sure.”

So it was possible to break the seal. To let the Beast lose. That was absurd. Even with his very limited knowledge on seals, he knew that they could be made as sturdy and unbreakable as one wanted, provided one had some talent.

Maybe that was the issue.

“How-how would we know?”

He was tired and cold, and hungry too. It drove him crazy to look through the bars, to have them standing there in his field of vision, unmovable. To have the certitude that he couldn't go anywhere. Caged. Trapped.

“It depends on you, Naruto.”

“What?”

“It’s… tied to your will. You are the one who weakened the seal. You are the one who can strengthen or weaken it even further.”

He had this vague memory, of a strange looking place, of a deep, scary voice.
Of a door. Bars just like those ones. And beyond them…

“I’ll do it. If I do it you’ll let me go, right?”

The long pause didn’t bode well for him.

“You can’t leave the village, Naruto.”

His blood turned to ice.

He didn’t know what it was, but there was something in the man’s voice, something that told him this was different from all the time he had been told that before, or had been told he couldn’t do something period. It wasn’t “you can’t, it’s dangerous” or “you can’t, it’s too hard for you”, “you can’t, it’s frowned upon”, “you can’t, you’ll hurt yourself or someone else.”

It was different. “You can’t, because it’s forbidden to you. You are not allowed. And you will never be.”

“Why the hell not,” he spat out. Anger was bringing back some fire inside of him, some alertness and warmth. It felt good.

“I wish it had gone differently. You weren’t supposed to learn about this until much later, when you were ready to hear it. But what is done is done. I don’t know how much Mizuki told you, I’ll go straight to the heart of it.”

Despite his words, the old man took the time to take out and lit his pipe, like they were just chatting over tea and not on each side of a damn prison wall. Anger turned white hot inside Naruto’s head.

“It is true that the Nine-Tailed Fox was sealed inside of you on the day of your birth. It was the only way to save the village from annihilation. It that sense, you saved us all, Naruto.”

“Yeah, right.”

The man pretended he hadn’t heard him.

“That power lives inside you now. It is enormous, more so than you could imagine. And as such, it’s is a great weapon.”

There was a pause. The old man was waiting for his words to sink in, but they wouldn’t. Naruto refused it, refused to hear them. It couldn’t be it. It couldn’t…

“This is why this has been kept a secret. You understand, don’t you? If words got out about you… A lot of people would want to get their hands on you Naruto. Outside the village, we wouldn’t be able to protect you.”

Protect him? Really? That was it? What was it that Mizuki had said… “Such power has to be available…”

So he was in prison after all. Even if they unlocked the chains, opened the door to his cell, he was never getting out of here. He was never leaving that place.

He would never be free.

The anger reached its boiling point, invading his mind and body, ready to lash out. Before it though, he felt the life being sucked out of him like juice from a juice box, leaving him squeezed
out and empty.

“What…”

“This place was designed to keep very strong shinobis in. Using chakra is ill-advised in that kind of situation.”

Naruto felt the burning of hot tears sting at his eyes, and he ducked his head between his knees so that the old man wouldn’t see.

Why couldn’t they just kill him and be done with it.

“I’m truly sorry, Naruto.”

“Y-yeah, right…”

The Hokage sighed deeply.

“As long as you don’t come to term with this… We can’t let you go. It’s for your own safety, Naruto.”

Naruto howled, enraged and heartbroken, and had the bleak satisfaction of seeing the man take a step back. He trashed against his chains, only to feel them drain him again – he kept going anyway.

“Naruto, stop it. You’ll hurt yourself.”

The old man sounded worried – a whole lot of good it did now, for his to care about Naruto. Now, when he was chained like a criminal, an animal, now that they had stolen his future away from him. Naruto snarled and tugged again as hard as he could, until the chains fought back, and, depleted and despaired, he passed out.

It was the Great Itachi Affair all over again.

No one would tell Sasuke anything about what was going on. It didn’t seem to be the matter of the whole village like it had been back then, but it was of much more significance for him this time.

Because Naruto was missing.

It was only two days, and maybe in other circumstances Sasuke would have thought nothing of it. But both his parents had stormed off in the middle of dinner two nights ago, and his class had been informed the next day that Mizuki-sensei had unfortunately died of a heart attack during the night.

Naruto had been gone since then.

His mother was out of her mind with anger. The previous night he had had to give up on sleep because she had yelled after his father for hours, getting him worked up enough that he had started to yell too. He couldn’t make out what they were saying – Itachi was sleeping in his room so that he could keep an eye on him and make sure he didn’t eavesdrop. He seemed worried too. Sasuke was pissed.

He couldn’t help but worry, but they would tell him right? If something had happened to his friend. They wouldn’t just keep it from him.

Would they?
He was back there again.

So he hadn’t imagined this place. It looked like some sewers, damp and dark, unpleasant. He was ankle-deep in murky water but he didn’t feel it on his skin. He didn’t feel his own body.

“Where am I?”

He was alone down there. He had wandered the corridors for a while, afraid of getting lost in this maze and yet unable to just stand still, to stay where he was. He’d stumbled quickly back in that room. The one with the prison bars.

There was something behind it.

On the lock where keyhole should have been, there was a seal. A simple sheet of paper taped between the two panels, the “seal” kanji painted on it. It was anything but simple though, he could tell.

The paper was slightly dented in the middle, like the door had open just a smidge and ripped the border.

_I want to be free_, it said. He remembered that. Remembered that voice.

“Me too”, he answered on instinct, because it was the truth, back then and now too.

_But you can’t. You’re too weak._

“Well, seems like you can’t either, so maybe you’re weak.”

There was a laugh. Or was it a snarl? It was terrifying. But Naruto knew he was right. Knew that the seal wouldn’t break, the gate wouldn’t open. He was somewhat safe on this side of the barrier. Safe from that at least.

_I could make you strong._

The rush of red chakra in his vein, the sheer power, he wanted to feel it again. He wanted to be strong. But…

“I don’t need your help.”

_Are you sure about that?_

“I don’t want it then.”

It moved behind its bars. The cage was enormous, but it was small for what it was supposed to contain. Naruto couldn’t help but take a step forward…

Five massive claws sprung out between the bars, nearly impaling him. He fell back on his butt in a splash of water as the thing laughed.

_You will._

In the darkness beyond the bars, two red eyes opened to focus on him. He could make out faintly the rest of the face, the vibrant orange fur, the massive body.
You will.

“Nothing?”

Ino shook her head, frustration obvious in her tensed shoulders and closed fists, and Sakura tried to hide her disappointment for her sake. It had been a long shot, with how tightly the adults were about the whole issue, and Ino had already done more than Sakura could hope for.

“Nothing?”

The vague shape of a giant fox.

“It wasn’t even about it being absurd – Naruto didn’t get sick, Naruto could recover from a cracked skull in a matter of days. It could have been it still, could have been poisoning or anything of the sort. But Sasuke looked so worried, and he said something was going on, and Sakura believed him. If Naruto was just sick, why couldn’t they see him? Why would no one just tell them that directly, and tell them what was wrong with him exactly, keep them in the loop? Again, could have been nothing. If it was anyone but Naruto. Because Naruto was special. No one knew in what way, but it didn’t change the fact.

“Thanks, Ino.”

“For what? I couldn’t find anything.”

She looked upset. She prided herself on her ability to dig up anything about what happened around the village, including confidential matters that she really had no business knowing about. It was a blow to her self-esteem, to be beaten by something that should have been a mundane issue.

It only served to prove that something very suspicious was going on.

“I’m sure he’s fine,” Ino added after a while. Sakura stared at her, surprised. Ino wasn’t really one for comfort. She pouted, but she said it again. “He’ll be back in no time. Don’t you worry.”

She didn’t seem very convinced, and yet she had to be right, right? People, kids didn’t just disappear like this. Naruto had to be somewhere.

She couldn’t help it though.

“It’s just… You know how… How people aren’t… always so nice to him. And I can’t help but think…”

She sniffled, mortified that her tears were getting the better of her now. She didn’t want to cry, there was no point, it wouldn’t help in any way. And yet tears gathered up in her eyes, her throat tightened around a sob.

“That… that maybe no one would care. If he…”

That right there was her real fear. Maybe they couldn’t find out about anything because the adults themselves didn’t know. And maybe they didn’t care. Who would look for Naruto if he disappeared? Who would care about his fate? Wouldn’t they be happy, on the contrary, to be rid of the trouble kid?
Ino slammed both her hands on Sakura’s shoulders, hard enough to make her waver. Her gaze was fierce – Sakura couldn’t look away.

“That’s not true.”

“What?”

“You care. Sasuke does too. And even… even me, okay? And freaking Sai, of all people. We’d care. We’ll find out. Don’t you worry.”

Stupidly enough, that’s what got the dam to broke. Sakura sniffled loudly and panic crossed Ino’s face, but she didn’t let go. She didn’t close the distance between them either. It didn’t matter. She was keeping Sakura upright, keeping her on her feet. It was enough for now.

Was the thought his, or was it the demon whispering into his ear? He was having trouble dissociating the two. The idea came anyway, unbidden and unwelcome, as he was contemplating the perspective of a life bound to the walls of the village.

*I would be free of that village, if the village didn’t exist.*

“No!”

He had exhausted himself trying to get free of his shackles and now he couldn’t wake up anymore. He had to wait for his body to recover some measure of strength, and in the meantime, he was stuck down there with the fox.

“I won’t let you harm them! I’ll stop you.”

*Why? Why protect this place, these people? What have they done to deserve your loyalty?*

“Nothing. I’m not loyal to them.”

The village could burn to ashes. He didn’t care.

But Sasuke did. Sasuke loved this place. His whole family was here, his friends. Naruto wouldn’t let any harm come to them.

*Friends?*

“I won’t let you,” Naruto said again, stubborn. The fox was right, Naruto was weak and useless, and that power could grant him his freedom. But at what cost?

He still had something here. Something small maybe, but still. He had Sasuke and Sakura, and he would let no harm come to them. That choice at least was easy to make, even if it meant letting go of his only shot at freedom.

He could feel murderous intent, hatred far greater than his own, spilling out from the cage and into the water. Maybe it wasn’t even water. Maybe that was it, it was these dark and terrible thoughts trying to reach him, to drown him out. But Naruto had never wished death upon anyone. That’s not what he wanted, not what he was after, and he wouldn’t let the fox poison him like this.

He laid a hand on the paper seal, just like Itachi had done to stick the chakra sheets together. The memory left him queasy, unbalanced. it seemed so surreal, so far away from him. What was going on outside? How long had he been stuck here? There was no window in the cell, no source of light
other than the flickering candles in the corridor, no sense of time.

Where they still waiting for him?

When he took his hand back the sheet was whole once again, the tear gone. The fox roared. Naruto woke up.

“We’ll find a solution, Mikoto. We’re working on it.”

“When? How long do you plan on leaving him in that cell? I swear if it was up to me…”

“Well it’s not.”

“Maybe it should.”

They held onto each other’s gaze, none of them willing to back out and look away first. Fugaku’s patience was rapidly dwindling, and he tried to remember when things had started to go so wrong in their life. Even this was put to question now – his leadership of their clan. It had never been before. Fugaku’s father was the clan head before him and he has raised his oldest son to take his place one day. Mikoto’s own father was his second in command – their marriage had made sense. They would have kids and their eldest would in turn inherit the clan, and that was it.

Except Mikoto didn’t like that anymore, and she wasn’t the only one starting to question it. It was the women, mostly. Working themselves up over their place in the clan, what more they could do, displeased with their fate all of the sudden. Plus there was the increasing concern about Itachi. Fugaku had never worried because Itachi was the best shinobi the clan had produced in a long time, and he thought his leadership would never be doubted by the others.

It hadn’t. Not by them, anyway.

Time passed and Itachi was still only a desk jounin. He wasn’t back on active duty. He wasn’t back on regular training.

He didn’t look like that path appealed to him in any way anymore.

“Would you have us free him without condition? Without guarantees?”

“Yes.”

He rolled his eyes. He knew she was dead serious and yet he couldn’t help but see it as a provocation.

“Naruto is not a criminal. He has done nothing warranting that punishment.”

“Don’t be so naïve! If he’s in there, it’s because he’s dangerous, to all of us!”

“And since when do we lock up those of us who are a threat, huh? Did we lock up Itachi?”

He closed his mouth, shocked, expecting her to take the words back. She didn’t, despite the pain it brought her. She wasn’t going to pull her punches.

“What if Naruto loses control and levels the whole village, Mikoto? What then?”

Once again he thought she would back down, would finally see reason. Instead her gaze only
hardened, and he didn't recognize the harsh expression on her face, a rage bordering on hatred that looked out of place on her gentle features.

“Then we will only have gotten what was coming for us.”

“Please let me out. I’ll be good, I swear. I won’t try to run away anymore. Please.”

“I want to, Naruto. I want to believe you. But it’s not so simple.”

In a way, Naruto was impressed. He had always considered the old Hokage as being too nice, too soft to be the village leader. To discover how wrong he had been left a bitter taste in his mouth. The Hokage was unyielding, unmoved by his pleas and his threats, firm in his resolve even in front of a whining child. Then again, it had to help that he probably didn’t see Naruto as a child at all. Why be emotional over a demon?

The man was right to doubt him anyway. He would have said anything to get out of here. But was he really ready to swear off his freedom? To agree to his own captivity?

“We’re looking into a solution. So that what happened in the woods won’t happen again.”

Naruto nodded, even if he didn’t know what that was exactly. Was it the power that had leaked out, the red chakra that had brought fear into the two masked ones? Or just that he had tried to escape?

At least they didn’t intend to leave him here forever. Small mercies.

“I know you’re eager to go out… And you’re friends are waiting for you,” the Sandaime said, trying to sound encouraging.

Naruto hadn’t asked, and he didn’t want to know. He hated that he wished for both equally – that they didn’t care about his fate, going about their lives, proving once and for all that he had to forget about them. And that they worried, that they were looking for him, because he wanted them to miss him, to miss him as much as he missed them. It would only be fair.

He hadn’t asked though because he didn’t want the Hokage to know about them. That was too great a weakness in the man’s hands. Too late for that, it seemed.

“They’re worried, of course,” he went on. “They want to know what happened to you.”

Naruto didn’t have the time to feel relief or annoyance before he was hit full force with a sense of impending doom. He leaned forward on instinct, even if his movements were still very much restricted.

“You didn’t tell them, right? You won’t tell them about me?”

The panic made his body react just like the anger and he could already feel the chains working against him. He willed himself to calm down, shoving down all his emotions behind a wall where they couldn’t bother him, couldn’t get him into trouble.

“They can’t know. They can’t know.”

“Calm down Naruto. Of course no one will them. I told you it had to remain a secret. For the safety of all, and for yours too.”

Deep, deep down, Naruto knew that was a lie. Because they all knew. All the adults anyway. They
all knew to treat him like the threat he was, they all knew to stay clear of him. Even their kids knew that, the only difference was that they didn’t know why exactly.

Sasuke had still approached him because he didn’t know. If he heard about it too…

“Unless there’s a good reason, they won’t be put in the confidence.”

Naruto heard that as the threat it was.

It was fine. Great, even.

“If… If you swear that they won’t know, then I’ll stay put. I promise. I’ll never give you any reason to tell them.”

He was showing all his cards now. No one was supposed to know that he cared about them that much, that they had such power over him. That they could sway him away from his own goals.

But if he was trapped here forever, he needed at least this. And he would have to learn to live with the rest. If he had only this…

The old man studied his face for a long time, assessing his determination, his honesty. In the dim light, his immobility made him look like a statue, with only eyes to show for the life inside of him, like a soul trapped in a body of rock.

Naruto shoved down the rage, like he shoved down everything else.

What was the point in feelings, really. He would have much rather have been numb to everything. That way he could have listened to the demon’s voice, and then…

No. No. Not that. Never. Even if he didn’t have feelings, he didn’t want others to feel bad because of him either. The pain he would cause would become his own. And he had more than enough to go by already.

“I believe you, Naruto.”

Naruto sighed deeply, relieved. But the man turned away and left without another word, and Naruto was crushed by the sheer helplessness of one’s fate being entirely out of one’s control.

*How do you like that, brat.*

“Will you do it then, Shisui?”

Had he not made his decision already, Shisui would have surely done it now, faced with Mikoto’s steady but pleading look. She was making admirable efforts to appear calm and open, to make him feel like the decision was his, that he was free to refuse.

As if he could refuse such a heartfelt plea.

He had already decided anyway.

“Of course I will.”

With just as much control, she just let out a slow sigh of relief that barely moved her face. At her side, Fugaku sat crossed armed and sullen, expression set in stone. Shisui had no idea what he was
thinking, but if he had agreed to this, he had to approve to some extent. He wasn’t a man whose
hand could be forced.

Or was he? Mikoto had been grilling him hard…

“We can go now, if it’s okay with you,” she said pleasantly, again making a terrific job at keeping
any impatience out of her voice and face. He nodded. They all stood up from the kitchen table
where their tea had gone cold, untouched. Out of the corner of his eyes, Shisui saw a flickering
movement disappear behind the wall. It figured.

“Just a second, I’ll be right out.”

Sure enough, Sasuke was standing a few feet away from the door, trying to look innocent.

“You’re not fooling anyone,” Shisui said gently. He wasn’t so bad at faking cheer, but Sasuke saw
right through it.

“Are you alright?” he asked. His concern was cute. Sometimes Shisui had a hard time remembering
how young he was exactly. How old too, by their fucked-up standards.

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Is this about…”

Sasuke bit his lips. It’s not that he couldn’t ask – more that he couldn’t get an answer. He asked
anyway.

“Is this about Naruto?”

Shisui should have denied it, but what was the point? Besides, he wasn’t too fond of lying to
children.

“Yes.”

“Is he alright?”

“…He will be.”

Shisui tried to look convinced. In truth, he didn’t know.

“Okay. Okay.”

Shisui was surprised that the boy wasn’t assaulting him with questions, but it seemed Sasuke had
learned his own share of patience and to bid his time. He had looked so worried these past few
days, so lost. He was probably past caring about the details – he just wanted to see his friend again.
To know he was okay.

Shisui ruffled his hair but couldn’t bring himself to be as harsh about it as he would usually be.

“It’s gonna be fine, Sasuke.”

Shisui turned away before the boy could see the lie.

He followed Mikoto and Fugaku out of the district, all the way to the Hokage Tower. They didn’t
enter it though – they aimed for the next building, the one that hosted parts of the Archive, the
Intelligence and Interrogation department… And the ninja prison.
Morino Ibiki was waiting for them in the entryway, as scary and serious as ever. He looked displeased too.

“You’re supposed to go alone,” he said gruffly. Ha, so that was that. This place was his own little kingdom, and he was upset about hosting a guest that he couldn’t approach himself, that he could do nothing about. He explained the way to Shisui and led him to a narrow staircase that plunged down into the lower levels, carved out of the ground.

“Maybe it would be better if… if there’s no one around when we come back up,” Shisui said offhandedly. He didn’t wait to see if they would heed his suggestion.

He ignored the first few doors, knowing he had to go to the very last level. It couldn't even be called that. The stairs ended abruptly on the hard-packed earth, and behind a low stone arch, there was a single space cut in half by metal bars.

And behind the bars, there was Naruto.

As always, Shisui hadn't be given much detail, but he didn't need it. He could piece it back together just fine. The simple fact that they had asked him, of all people, was enough to paint the bigger picture – if it was true that any Sharingan could, in theory, grant control over the Tailed Beasts, in practice no one in the Uchiha clan knew how to manage such a feat.

Shisui was a special case though. Shisui had a Mangekyou Sharingan, and a very peculiar one.

He could control anyone he wanted just fine.

“Hello, Naruto.”

He had whispered, and still his voice was obscenely loud in the silent cave, piercing through the still air like a spear. The boy was sitting in a tight ball as far from the bars as possible, head buried between his knees, arms wrapped around it. He made no indication he had heard Shisui, or even noticed his presence.

The key slid easily in the lock but it took several tries to turn it. Naruto still didn't move, even when Shisui stepped inside the cell, kneeled in front of him. He went for the ankle rings first. The key was also a seal breaker, and he felt it disperse as the shackle cracked open.

“Naruto… Naruto, come on. Give me your hands.”

Shisui wasn’t acknowledged in any way, but Naruto didn’t resist when the older boy pried his arm away from his knees gently. The last chain clattered on the ground.

“Naruto…”

“Don’t look at me.”

His voice was hoarse, probably from screaming. He hadn’t moved a muscle.

“Please. Don’t look at me.”

And Shisui had known that. He’d known Naruto would ask and he’d known he would agree. It was ironic, because they didn’t know how wrong they had been to ask Shisui, how pointless it was.

Because he wouldn’t call on the Sharingan. No way.

“I won’t. I won’t, I promise.”
Naruto raised his head then, to look directly into the black of Shisui’s eyes. They held gaze for a long, breathless moment. Shisui forced himself to remain steady, like Mikoto had, to look strong and reassuring and not as distressed as he felt.

Finally, after an eternity, Naruto finally unfolded, his joints cracking painfully as he stretched his tightly coiled body.

“Let’s go,” Shisui said once he was up. Naruto was staring at the ground, and they made their way back up in complete silence.

Shisui was grateful to see that the first floor had been deserted like he had suggested. Even the street in front of the building was empty. The sky was grey, but it wouldn’t rain. It would have been appropriate though.

Shisui didn’t know how to broach the next subject, how to tell Naruto what had been decided for him. He grasped at the first thing he could think of saying.

“Sasuke has been looking for you.”

It didn’t have the intended effect. Naruto finally raised his eyes from the ground, but it was to cast a panicked look at Shisui. His eyes widened in fear and his face contorted in an awful expression of pain and anguish Shisui had a hard time not looking away from. He cursed himself for his lack of tact.


“I won’t. I won’t.”

“Don’t tell them.”

“I won’t.”

Naruto was supposed to have slept most of the time spent down there – the only thing that had remotely placate Mikoto enough to dissuade her from blowing up the prison herself – but the dark bags under his eyes told a different story. He was shivering even if the air wasn’t so cold, and he looked like he wanted nothing more than to sleep for a hundred years.

Shisui could relate. Unfortunately for both of them, it wasn’t going to happen.

“I want to go home,” Naruto whined. It was strange to hear him sound like an actual kid for once. Too bad Shisui had to be the one to steal the kid’s lollipop.

“You can’t.”

Master of tact, that’s what he was.

Naruto looked seconds away from spontaneous combustion.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry! It’s… it’s the condition for you… wandering around. You can’t be left unsupervised so… You’re coming with me. Like. To my place.”

At least it was absurd enough that for a moment, Naruto forgot to be angry, too busy processing the level of bullshit he was currently dealing with.

“What?” he said weakly. Shisui could see he was already resigned to his fate though. He didn’t
even try to argue any further. He just looked away – because he was angry, probably, not to hide tears or anything – and his shoulders sagged in complete defeat.

“Whatever. It’s whatever. I don’t care.”

Shisui hated this.

The questions would come later, probably. He hoped. The boy wouldn't stay so apathetic for long, right? He would be back to himself in no time and he would make Shisui’s life miserable, as was his right. His duty, even.

“They don’t know anything, right? They don’t know about me,” Naruto asked again.

“No. they’ve been told you were sick, nothing else.”

He exhaled a sigh of relief, although he still looked shaken.

“Cool. Cool. That’s cool.”

Shisui had feared it would be like that. That Naruto would want to hide, keep it a secret. It would only serve to deepen the breach between him and the others – maybe it was even his purpose. And it was wrong.

Now wasn’t the time to touch on that subject, but it would have to be soon. Or they would lose the boy for good.

"What about you?" Naruto asked as they kept walking toward the Uchiha district. His eyes were firmly trained on the ground, determined not to see anything, or anyone.

“What about me?”

“Do you know? About… About what I am. And what’s I’ve done.”

“I do,” Shisui said, trying to sound calm and firm, careful to rid his voice of anything that could sound like fear or disgust. He thought Naruto would ask more – ask what he knew exactly, what he thought of it.

The boy kept silent. All the way to the Uchiha district, to Shisui’s modest house. It wasn’t inside the district, but just out, facing the outer wall. A feeble rebellion from his part – moving out of the family house after his mother had died, and leaving the district. He had hoped Itachi would eventually dare to follow and move into the spare room. He had thought that would be for him that he would have to move all the junk he had accumulated there. Instead, it was for Naruto that he had hastily cleaned it up to turn it into a bedroom.

Naruto knew nothing of that though, since he didn’t ask. He unrolled the futon, shed most of his clothes, and disappeared under the covers without a word or a look toward Shisui.

“I’ll be downstairs,” the older boy said lamely, at a loss as to how he could help, what he could do. Resigned, he exited the room, hoping some sleep would bring back some fight into Naruto’s abused mind.

He would find something. Shisui hadn’t agreed to this for Fugaku or the Hokage or any of the other ones in charge who thought the boy had to be watched at all time, who feared him staying here and him vanishing equally.
He had agreed for Naruto and no one else. He would do it for him, for the same reason Mikoto had pushed for this even if she couldn’t like it all that much. Even if she knew how reluctant he was to use Kotoamatsukami, which he did his best to keep hidden. He had agreed, not so that he could monitor Naruto, but so that Naruto wouldn’t be left on his own after all this, left to go through it alone, to make sense of it himself, without support or help.

So that he wouldn’t be another discarded child.

"I want to know," Sasuke said, as serious and firm as a ten-year-old could be, "why the hell would Naruto go live with Shisui out of the blue."

"Language, Sasuke!" Fugaku growled, a hair away from snapping. The look Sasuke threw at his father made Mikoto wonder if she was going to hear him say the word “fuck” for the first time. That it would be a “fuck you” to his father wouldn’t be surprising in the slightest.

Instead, Sasuke, who occasionally knew how to pick his battle, looked away from the fuming man and settled to stare at nothing at all. His fists were closed on his folded legs and he was sitting straight and rigid on the tatami. By his side, Itachi was just as tensed, eyes flickering between his parents, kneeling in from of him, and brother, by his side. “Them” against “us”.

“What,” Sasuke tried again, breathe short in his efforts to remain calm, “happened. To my friend.”

“It doesn’t concern you.”

“Of for f…”

“Itachi!”

Itachi had been quicker than her. Or maybe she had had no intention of stopping her youngest from disrespecting his father in a way that would have guaranteed some broken paper rice door. Sasuke wasn’t throwing a childish tantrum, and she believed he was fully aware of the consequence of his words and actions.

Itachi disliked violence though, be it physical or verbal. He always chose de-escalation. And Sasuke listened to Itachi on all things.

“It is true that something serious happened,” Itachi said, voice calm and even, ignoring Fugaku’s noise of protestation. “And the fact that you can’t be told what is out of our control. You are well aware that Naruto is a special case, and that there are things about him you don’t know. You can insist all you want, but you should know that he also requested that you and your other friends were kept out of this.”

Sasuke was drinking his brother’s words, expression a careful neutral despite the questions that were no doubt swarming in his mind.

“Regardless of what you know, he needs you right now. It’s possible that he’ll reject you, and he’ll try to pull away, but he will need you all the same. You are his friend, right?”

Sasuke nodded seriously.

“Can you wait then? If he wants to share it with you, he will. But if he doesn’t, what will you do?”

Sasuke mulled this over, a deep frown on his young face making something churn in Mikoto’s
guts. No matter what they did, the children ended up caught up with it anyway. She managed to convey to Fugaku to stay silent. He obeyed, reluctantly, but still.

“It doesn’t matter. I’ll help in whatever way I can,” Sasuke said eventually. She was proud to see he had understood the lesson – obviously, he still wanted answers, and maybe he would still look for them. But he wouldn’t let it show.

“Then do your best for things to go back to normal. There’s nothing to worry about for now. I promise.”

Her two boys looked at each other, communicating silently in a language she had no hope to decipher. They shared something parents couldn’t intrude in, no matter how much they wanted to. In the end, it was always them against the rest of the world, and for kids, parents composed a vast portion of it.

They turned back to face their parents. Sasuke bowed without making eye contact with either of them.

“I’m sorry for my insistence.”

Fugaku at least didn’t have the gale to look pleased by this.

“You can both go,” he dismissed, defeated. She had a strange sense of foreboding, about what their future relationship with their sons would be like.

The things he had on him when he had been stopped in the woods were already at Shisui’s, and the sealing scroll was still there in his weapon pouch, untouched.

No one had found out then.

Sitting cross-legged on the futon, Naruto stared at the palm of his hands, his five fingers crooked to form a circle. Such a simple, easy thing to do, power the seal, lay in on the opponent’s chest, and then…

The heart stopped. It just stopped. And they were gone.

The technique had a name, probably, but Naruto couldn’t read it. He would call it the Heartbreaker Sealing Technique. Seemed appropriate.

Buried deep in his psyche, the fox laughed hard enough to rattle the bars of its cage.

Chapter End Notes

Compared to "Harem no jutsu", there's been an improvement in the naming department I think.

Don’t know if I said it before somewhere but Kyuubi is much closer to the surface than in canon here, on account of Naruto being an angry bean. That's why they're already in contact and will get in synch much sooner than in canon, but not now cause for now Naruto wants nothing to do with him. I'm bringing you Naruto & Shisui's
brotp haha, although Shisui will be doing all the work here. Naruto is angsty edgy emo in this but keep in mind that no one actually sat him down and explained to him the sealing thing. For all he knows, he's actually possessed by a freaking demon. I'll have to have a Sandaime POV at some point because he's not actually as cold toward the situation as Naruto believes. When you think about it his actions even make sense sort of. Kinda. I shall convince you of this (I just want to express that it's not a "boo he's evil" bashing thing. Nuances and all that)
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Life goes on even if Naruto is a monster now.

Chapter Notes

It's when I'm about to drop a 10k chapter on you that I feel bad about not having a beta... But I'm not patient enough for a beta x) so yeah, 10k, I should have split it maybe but I didn't want to... Don't get used to it.

I got a lot of reactions on the previous chapter, that was great! I'm glad you people liked it. A bunch of new readers too, welcome :) I love to hear about your thoughts and to read your rants and ramblings, please don't hesitate haha.

Also I forgot to link it last time but my last drawing is Naruto and Sasuke more or less as they are at this point of the story. I'll draw them again.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

What was Naruto supposed to do now?

How was he supposed to bear the look of all those people, now that he knew why they stared him down like that? And the look of the kids who didn’t know, who he was deceiving, endangering by his mere presence?

Was it right of him to keep training, to keep trying to become stronger? What devastation would he bring if he lost it like back then in the woods, if there was no one to stop him?

What, what was he supposed to do?

“Why you?”

Shisui took the time to finish filling both their bowl with steaming fried rice before sitting down in front of Naruto across the table. He had all but dragged the young boy out of bed, pushed him in the shower mercilessly and forced some of his own clothes down on him while he washed Naruto’s. They still smelled like the cell.

“Why me what?”

“Why is it you. That has to look after me.”

It didn’t make much sense to him. Shouldn’t it have been someone higher ranked or more powerful? Shisui was plenty talented probably, but he was also under twenty.

“Ah… Well out of all the Uchiha, it was the least… politically sensitive choice, let’s put it that
way. I don’t have much status inside the clan, and not much ambition either."

"Why did it have to be an Uchiha?"

That was the real question, and the one Shisui had tried to dodge. Naruto stared at him, unblinking. Would he tell him the truth? Or would he lie, like all the others? Naruto wouldn’t have faulted him for it. He found it amazing enough that the older boy could even stand to be in his presence, to have him in his house, knowing what he knew.

“The Sharingan grants control over the Beast,” Shisui said simply.

He went back to eating while Naruto choked on his rice.

“Wh-What?”

“I imagine that’s why it makes you so skittish. I have… a special form of it. Which is what qualifies me as your guardian.”

Or guard. Jailer.

Naruto looked away then, unable to bear his gaze even when it remained black. The panic he had felt faced with Izumi’s Sharingan felt sharper now, taking the form and shape of the chains that had weighed him down in the cell, restricting his movements, draining his power.

He had to put his bowl down. He was shaking badly, and he was losing his breath as if he has been running for a hundred miles. They could control him. If he looked in Shisui’s eyes, he would be at his mercy. Helpless.

Forced to do their binding. To destroy. To kill. No way to fight it. No way to break free.

“Naruto. Naruto, look at me.”

Hands on his cheeks, guiding his face. He closed his eyes tightly.

“Naruto, please.”

“No, no. Don’t look at me. Please, please…”

“Naruto. Open your eyes.”

Was he crying again? Maybe. Shisui’s voice was gentle but firm, very close. It wasn’t commanding. Maybe this didn’t work without eye contact. Small mercy.

“Come on, hey. Open your eyes. See for yourself.”

They stayed like this for an absurdly long time, Naruto sitting on the ground, Shisui kneeling in front of him, cupping his face, waiting. Naruto gulping useless mouthfuls of air, and Shisui very still in front of him, steady as a wall, steady enough to grab onto. Naruto thought he would give up, start to yell or storm off, but he didn’t move or said another word. His hold was loose on his face. Naruto could have escaped if he wanted.

Eventually, he opened his eyes.

The black gaze of Shisui was trained on him, focused and steady.

“I won’t use it on you. You won’t ever see it. I promise, Naruto. You are safe here, with me.”
“Wh-Why? Why would you do that?”

“You’re not a prisoner. And I won’t treat you like one.”

“What if I…”

“I trust you.”

Naruto’s breathe disappeared all over again, punched out of him by the absolute certitude in Shisui’s voice.

“I know I won’t ever have to do that to you. I trust you. You are free, Naruto. You are.”

It was a lie.

“I trust you, and I hope you’ll trust me. You have my words. Never.”

That one though. That one maybe was true.

Kakashi had been the one to carry Naruto’s unconscious body back to the village.

He was so light, so small. It was hard to believe he was ten already – he was short for his age, probably underfed. One would have given him eight years under his belt at most, especially when he was asleep, his face relaxed and his eyes closed.

When they were open, it was hard not to give him twenty years more.

Kakashi had carried him through the woods, all the way to the Hokage’s office. It was crowded with the high-ranked of the village and they didn’t want the boy out of their sight, so he had ended up perched awkwardly on the Hokage’s desk with Naruto in his arm. The seal was still sticking to his forehead – as long as it was, he wouldn’t wake up.

Some thought it wasn’t such a bad alternative.

He had not participated in the discussion, despite all he wanted to say. Despite his outrage at some of their words, his gratitude for others, he had not said a thing, he had stayed silent. Between the clan heads, the tokubetsu jounins, the senior officials, all with a word to put in and a thought to give, he had simply listened and rocked slightly the sleeping boy in his arms, knowing full well he wasn’t sleeping. Had he been asleep, surely all those people debating his fate loudly would have woken him up. But he was kept under by the seal, and so he hadn’t stirred.

Kakashi had been the one to carry him down to the cell.

“It’s temporary,” the Hokage had said. “It won’t last. Just the time for us to find a solution.”

It wasn’t any consolation when Kakashi had been the one to close the chains around the boy’s limbs.

It was necessary, and he knew it. In the forest Tenzo and he had barely reacted fast enough to stop the demon from making an appearance. There had been no warning, no transition – in an instant, the Beast was there with them, threatening everything and everyone around. They had no idea how Naruto would be when he would wake up, who they would face. If he would have regained control over the Nine-Tails.

If he would even want to.
Kakashi had been the one to lock the door of the cell.

It wasn’t the worse thing he had done in his life. He had locked up or delivered to prison plenty of people. Never children, but that only depended on the definition of the term. He had fought and killed shinobis who were Naruto’s age. He had fought and nearly died when he was his age too.

This was different though. Naruto wasn’t a shinobi, he wasn’t a soldier. No matter how one looked at it, he was nothing else but a victim. And he was the one being chained.

Being punished.

And Kakashi was the one to do it.

Kakashi had stayed far away from Naruto, but he had observed him a lot. He had seen him with Fugaku’s youngest son, with the pink-haired girl. He didn’t seem to be doing so bad. He wasn’t as alone as he used to be, he was interacting more with his classmates. Kakashi had been convincing himself that he was fine staying out of the boy’s path. Kakashi was bad news to anyone he befriended – it was better this way. Naruto didn’t need help, he didn’t need anything from him.

He had been a freaking fool.

The portrait painted by the Uchiha, by Fugaku and Mikoto, and by Itachi and Shisui, who were the only people among those involved in Naruto’s future who had as much as talked to him in the past few years, had nothing to do with what he had made up in his head. They described an angry child, at war with the entire world, eager for freedom and independence, unwilling to let anyone in. He was wild and aggressive, feral at times, quick to lash out, wary about everyone. The two kids, Sasuke and Sakura, and a few others of their grades, were the only one who could hope to approach him without getting their head bitten off, and even that wasn’t always a given. Naruto was bitter and lonely. He was miserable.

Kakashi had seen nothing of it.

Or he had just… squinted his eyes. Looked away. He hadn’t decided to keep his distances because he had seen he wasn’t needed. He had decided, and then he had looked for the excuse, the justification.

They all had. They all had come up with their own reasons, all had constructed their story carefully, so that they could reject the blame if it ever laid on them, like a game. Pass it on to the next one over.

But the others had no obligation towards the boy. Not like Kakashi had. Naruto was Minato and Kushina’s son, their treasure. And Kakashi had abandoned him. Worse than that, he’d all but turned against him. Became his persecutor.

He had failed him, and them, completely.

“Please,” he said, breaking the heavy silence blanketing the Hokage’s office, “please don’t ever ask anything like that of me again.”

The Sandaime didn’t raise his eyes from the report he was reading, but Kakashi had been part of his personal guard for years now, and he could tell when the man was actually focusing on the task at hand, and when he was failing at it. He had been staring at the same page forever, and had accomplished pretty much nothing at all since the beginning of the day.

He still kept silent for a while longer, before giving up and letting go of the report. He rested his
forehead against his crossed hands, elbows on his desk, his usual meditative pose. His face was
carved into deep lines of worries and guilt. He had always looked so much more lively and strong
that would be expected for someone his age, but in the past few years it was as if time had decided
to catch up on him. It wasn’t about fighting skills – no one questioned the fact that the old shinobi
could still lay down most of them flat on their ass in a fight.

But being a good fighter and being a good leader wasn’t always linked. Maybe they should have
thought of that before.

“I think you should retire from Anbu, Kakashi.”

Ah, the man loved to drop bombshells like that.

More often than not, Kakashi was grateful for the mask. He liked it for the exact reason why most
people didn’t – it hid his face, his emotions, his feelings. Granted, he never showed much of his
face anyway, but there were times where he pondered the merits of never taking his Anbu mask
off anymore. People would forget what his face looked like, and he even that he had one. That he
was human. That he had feelings at all.
The mask hid his shock, his hurt too. Had he failed his Hokage so badly that he would want to
retire him? It was stupid of him to be upset, while he had been the one to all but request it just a
minute ago. What good was an Anbu who wouldn’t follow orders?

"It should have happened way sooner. No one is supposed to wear the mask for so long. Besides,
the boy is going to need a teacher soon."

Kakashi couldn’t hold back a quiet gasp.

“Surely you don’t mean…”

“Who else would you put in charge of his genin team, Kakashi?”

There were about a billion candidates more suited to it, that would do a far better job. Guy sprung
to mind, Kurenai too. Even that jerk Asuma would be a better choice than Kakashi.

And yet.

Hadn’t Kakashi done enough running away?

It was his chance to make things right by Naruto. The boy was far gone already, full of hatred and
resentment. But he wasn’t yet lost to them.

“I will do as you wish, Hokage-sama.”

“I know you will.”

There was something like bitterness in his Hokage’s voice.

.

Fresh out of his bath, standing naked in front of the full-length mirror, Naruto was staring at his
reflection.

He avoided his face, since he couldn’t help but look for tells, like the events of the past few days
could somewhat show. He had taken to wonder about every little thing – which of his features
were a demon mark? His blonde hair, the bright blue of his eyes? His whiskers had to be, for sure.
He didn’t look. Instead, he focused on his belly.

Specifically on the massive seal that sat right there.

He had figured that the seal had to show, somewhere on his body, for seals couldn’t be hidden, not at all time anyway. They left a trace even after they were gone – on that matter, he hoped nothing would be found on Mizuki’s heart. But there was no seal expert in Konoha.

He had had to concentrate pretty hard on his chakra flow for the seal to show up. And now, here it was.

It looked nothing like the few he had already seen. He could speculate over its complexity and power, over the quantity of chakra and energy poured into it so that it would work. For all intents and purposes, it was a giant lock on a set of chains. Biding the fox to his body, and not letting go.

He wanted to claw it out of his skin.

And yet, he found it beautiful in a way. An intricate work, stable and efficient. A job well done. By who? Who then had the talent and skill, the power to do such a thing? Where were they now? Dead, gone? Why had they done it?

Why him?

“Naruto! We have a visitor.”

Naruto rolled his eyes at Shisui’s cheery voice. The older boy was unbearable with his good mood and good humor. Naruto had no intention of indulging in Shisui’s attempts at cheering him up. What could he possibly do to help? What did he know of what was happening in Naruto’s mind?

Naruto had seen no one else but him since being moved here a few days ago. For the most part he had stayed in the small bedroom allocated to him, lying on the futon and staring at the ceiling. Shisui brought food – sometimes he ate it, mostly he didn’t.

Shisui asked him what he wanted to do, if he needed anything. A nice sentiment, but Naruto had no idea.

He got dressed – some of his clothes had mysteriously appeared in the room the day before, because no one had any qualm about raiding his apartment while he wasn’t there, apparently. He debated briefly just ignoring the other boy and going back to lie down in his room.

“Don’t think of skipping on us and hide back in your room!” came Shisui’s voice downstairs, teasing but promising retribution all the same. He would carry Naruto downstairs if he had too, that was certain. Better not risk it.

He hoped it wasn’t an adult. He hoped it wasn’t any of his friends either. In fact, he hoped it was just thin air, or at worst someone he didn’t know at all, and most importantly, who didn’t know him.

Instead, it was Uchiha Izumi.

She reacted much faster than Naruto, and even Shisui. Maybe she was anticipating his reaction. He didn’t even have the time to turn around that she was by his side. The hand she landed on his shoulder was light, and he could have broken away from her hold if he had wanted to, could have run away and hide like he wanted to.
Instead he was rooted to the spot. It was so gentle, that hand, without pressure or command. It occurred to him that maybe he had assumed wrong, and she didn’t know. How else could he explain this? Had she known, surely…

“Don’t… don’t you know? About me.”

It was the question haunting him now, that would cling to him when he decided to step back into the world. Who knew, around him, in the people who looked at him, the ones he passed in the streets. Who was aware of his secret?

“I do,”

It wasn’t possible. She couldn’t.

He let her guide him to the small backyard, let her sit him down on the patio. Shisui was hovering behind them, eyeing the scene worriedly. Her hand was still on Naruto’s shoulder.

“How are you, Naruto? I heard about what happened. That must have been terrible. I’m sorry you had to go through this.”

He shrugged. No one had asked and he hadn’t thought about it. He preferred not to. The urgency of running for his life, that visceral fear of dying, and the feeling of stealing the life out of another… those were better forgotten. As was the eternity he had spent in the cage. A day was a thousand year in the making when he didn’t know if he would ever walk free. He was the bars when he closed his eyes, felt the weight bearing down on his wrists and ankles.

How do you like that, brat?

Forget, he willed himself, ignoring the barb. Forget.

“Aren’t you mad at me?”

He couldn’t help but ask. Maybe he just liked to make himself suffer. She looked surprised though, the questioning tilt of her head disrupting some hair that came rushing down her shoulder. They were dirty, as were her face and hands. She was still in her chunin uniform – fresh back from training then, or even a mission. And she had come here straight away.

“Why? It wasn’t your fault, was it?”

Was she being dense on purpose, so that they wouldn’t talk about? But Naruto was never one to make anything easier.

“I killed your father.”

Even that didn’t seem to shake her up, to make her realize who was sitting next to her. Her face hardened.

“No you didn’t.”

“Didn’t he…”

“He died on the night of the Kyuubi attack, yes. The Beast killed him, or caused his death anyway.”

“Then…”
“Naruto, would you look at me, please?”

He complied, against everything in him that told him to just get the hell out of there. It’s not like there was anywhere he could go though.

She put her other hand on his shoulder and squeezed lightly, just so that he could feel it. He couldn’t help but lean into the touch.

“The Kyuubi’s crimes are not your own. I don’t care what people say, they are not. Never was a prison guard accused of the crimes of the ones under his watch, and you shouldn’t be either. You’re not the Kyuubi, Naruto. You’re just a bratty kid. You’re not a demon.”

“That’s not true.”

“Naruto…”

“Isn’t it exactly how it is? How it happened? I received the weight of it, all of it. I bore the consequences. All their hatred, all their anger and pain… That’s what was sealed inside me. That’s what I am.”

He wasn’t a child in the world’s eyes. He wasn’t a person.

How could they be so sure that he wasn’t the Beast anyway? Maybe he was. Maybe he was its human incarnation. How would he know? He had never been just Naruto.

Naruto didn’t exist.

Don’t be so pretentious. You’re not me.

And that damn fox who wouldn’t shut up.

“It doesn’t have to be that way. You don’t have to be what they want to be, or to play the role they want you to play. You can choose who you are. And stand by it.”

Izumi looked pointedly at Shisui, who shuffled clumsily to sit on Naruto’s other side.

“You’re not on your own,” he said with a smile, softer than his usual confident smirk.

Naruto wasn’t sure it mattered anymore.

“He’s not fine. At all,” Izumi sighed as soon as they regrouped with Itachi at the dango shop. She sat down by his side and stole a sweet from his plate, but she couldn’t even bring herself to look smug about it, and she munched on it unhappily. Itachi didn’t protest.

“No shit,” Shisui deadpanned. They had had to leave the house so that they could talk without being overheard by the very subject of their conversation. Since Naruto still refused to go out and see anyone. He was due back in school in a few days, and Shisui had no idea what he was supposed to do if the boy simply refused to go. They had been left to their own devices of course, as soon as the village had dumped Naruto into his care.

As always, there was no one to help in any way.

He was being unfair to Mikoto, who had stopped by with foods and some of Sasuke’s old clothes for the boy, but hadn’t stepped into Shisui’s house despite her forlorn look to the first floor where
he was holed up in. Shisui hadn’t been lying when he had said that he was the best candidate for
the job, both because of his Sharingan, and because of his lack of political weight. The elders were
skittish enough over the monster boy being in such close quarters with the Uchiha clan. Mikoto
still had to tread carefully, even if her patience for such bullshit was very obviously dwindling.

“He looks tired,” Izumi added, mostly to herself.

“He doesn’t sleep well,” Shisui answered anyway, because he needed to share that with someone.
Someone who would care.

“Nightmares?” Itachi enquired, signifying that he was also joining the conversation. Until proven
otherwise, Shisui tended to assume he wasn’t, that they were just sharing space. Itachi’s mind was
often far away from his body.

“He says it’s nothing unusual, that he has them all the time but… I listened. I think he dreams of
the cage.”

Naruto slept with the door and the window open despite the chilly night air. Shisui had noticed he
even left the bathroom door slightly open when he was inside. Izumi’s face soured and she pushed
the plate back to Itachi. He didn’t seem interested in it either.

“Did you heard him talk?”

“Not… exactly. Not in his sleep. He… talks. I heard him say it plainly. “I see the bars.” Like he
was confiding in someone.”

“It’s common behavior for victims of isolation and social ostracization.”

Itachi had a knack for deadpanning facts like that.

“He doesn’t feel like he can tell anyone, but it helps to say it anyway,” Itachi elaborated, vaguely
embarrassed by the sudden focus on his rambling.

Therapy was doing him some good, that was for sure.

“That sucks,” Izumi said, for lack of anything better to say. Shisui hummed in agreement.

“What did Kakashi said?” Itachi asked next. Their mentor had cornered Shisui after one of the
meetings at the Hokage office they had been forced to attend as “insiders” of Naruto’s life. Shisui
didn’t mind telling them what he knew, but he found it astonishing that it was the best they got.
That there was no one else to ask.

“He wanted to know if I was sure about it, if I was going to be okay, stuff like that. He asked if I
could keep him informed about Naruto’s wellbeing. I think he felt guilty about what happened.”

“He’s always had an interest in him,” Itachi commented, pensive.

Kakashi often asked, off-handedly, about Sasuke and his friend, when he met with them around the
village, seemingly at random. He and Itachi were very close, closer maybe since they had left
Anbu, while Shisui was more reluctant. Kakashi had been quick to apologize for not seeing
anything and not helping with the Danzo affair, and too quick, in Shisui’s eyes, to take the blame
for it. Distributing guilty tickets wasn’t the point, to him anyway. That was more Itachi’s forte – he
hogged all the tickets to himself. That’s why he and Kakashi got along so well, even if they had to
fight for the tickets sometimes probably.
“Maybe, but he never showed it to the one who’s concerned.”

What did they all have with the silently watching from afar, really. Another thing Kakashi and Itachi shared – Itachi had pulled a similar stunt with Sasuke, convinced it was for the best. How could staying away and not say a word be for the best, how could it solve anything between two people? It was the most basic communication lesson. In order to work, communication had to happen first.

Shisui believed Kakashi to be genuine in his worry and concern, but when Shisui had suggested Kakashi just dropped by and saw for himself, he had received a flat not for an answer, a claim that it wouldn’t be well received. Shisui had wanted to say Kakashi wasn’t the judge of that, but Naruto was skittish enough already, that Shisui wasn’t going to try to force stranger into his company if said stranger didn’t even want to put in the effort either.

“Thanks for earlier by the way,” he said to Izumi. “I thought it would help. You’re better at this than me.”

“What do you mean? You did great.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“He was up and about, and even talking. That’s more than I expected you know.”

Shisui shook his head dismissively, embarrassed by the praise.

“I tried my best,” he said lamely.

“Why?”

His eyes snapped back to Itachi, surprised.

“Why what?”

“Why did you? Why agree to this?”

Itachi was as impassive as ever, his cold eyes trained on Shisui. His tells were almost unnoticeable – the subtle folding of his mouth, a barely there tightness around his eyes. Shisui wondered if you could ever remain a good shinobi to those who knew you the best. Wondered if Itachi still had the capacity to hide things from him.

“You could have refused,” he continued, mistaking Shisui’s silence for confusion. “If you had wanted to.”

There weren’t any judgment or reproach in his voice. He was just trying to understand, as he often did lately. It could make him appear callous and unfeeling, to those who didn’t know him, when it was the opposite really.

Izumi looked curious too. She too wondered, but she hadn’t dared ask. Itachi wasn’t aware enough of the weight of his own words to be concerned with that.

“I could have said no,” Shisuis agreed. He had thought about it – it was such a big responsibility, especially since he had no intention of acting as a prison guard. “But then, they would have asked someone else. Who would have probably said no too. Ask enough people and they would have given up, decided that he could be left on his own after all, as long as there were Anbu watching him from afar or something. They would have sent him home alone, and that would have been the
end of it.”

The politics of the matter were sensitive enough that no high-ranked could be asked, and the lower shinobis wouldn’t want to approach the matter within a hundred miles.

“We would have all forgotten about it and move on. But not him.”

It was easy to see that Naruto was adrift. He didn’t know who he was anymore, and what to do.

Shisui could relate to that. And Itachi could too.

“Do you remember?” he asked Itachi. “After it… all went down, what everyone said? They said “you should have come to me.” “You should have told us.” “I was on your side.” “I would have listened, would have helped.” They said it like it was obvious. Your parents and the other Uchiha leaders, the clan heads, the Hokage… And we even agreed after a while. That we could have, that we should have. It’s easy to say now, now that we know how it turned out.”

He wasn’t aware of how much Itachi had told Izumi about that whole mess. Enough, judging by the look of understanding on her face. If not the details then the generals, how they had found themselves cornered and alone, seeing no way out, no one to turn to.

“But if we didn’t, back then, then it couldn’t have been that obvious. There’s a reason why we didn’t ask for help. Why we kept it all to ourselves. Because no one ever told us… No one ever told us that. Clearly, without detour. “You can trust me. I’m on your side. Whatever it is, I can help you through it.” They all fancy it to be such a given, all think they are above any doubt… But the truth is, nothing is ever obvious, as long as it’s not said aloud. Especially for us shinobis. Those things are useless if they are kept quiet.”

He took a sip of Itachi’s tea, hoping they would interrupt him, say something, anything. They didn’t. He went on.

“And they think they’re on Naruto’s side too. They are, some of them. And they would have said, “I can’t help, but it’s fine, because he can come to me, if he needs to.” But how is he supposed to know that? I agreed because… I wanted to do it, for real. I wanted him to know without a doubt, that he had even one person in his corner for sure. Isn’t that what adults are supposed to do for kids? We’ve been told enough that we weren’t kids anymore so… He won’t be left to his own device like we were. I won’t let that happen.”

Only when his voice faded away did he realize that he had gotten carried away, and he ducked his head, blushing, embarrassed by the way his two friends were staring at him. He hadn’t meant to get so lyrical, and he felt self-conscious about his ambition. Wasn’t that pretentious of him, to think he could do better than everyone else? But that’s why he was angry at Kakashi, who had decided he couldn't help without even trying. Shisui wouldn’t do that. He wouldn’t turn his back on the angry kid.

Neither Itachi nor Izumi mocked him in any way. Izumi smiled proudly, and Itachi kind of smiled too, soft and subdued, a sight that was slowly becoming familiar.

“You will make a great teacher, Shisui,” was all he said as an answer. Shisui looked away, trying and failing to hide a smile of his own. He had told only Itachi about it, had made no formal demand yet. He was scared of being denied, but the more time passed, the more he was convinced this is what he wanted to do. This was the only thing that made sense for him.

“Do you think he will believe you?” Izumi enquired with a worried tone.
“I don’t know. Maybe not, not anytime soon. But I hope it’ll make a difference, someday.”

“It will,” Itachi said. “…As it would have for us.”

“It will,” Izumi confirmed, confident. “You know we’ll help, right? We’ll be right there beside you.”

“We don’t make such a bad team,” Itachi added, pensive. He said that with such a serious face, like he had pondered over the question in great details. Who knew, maybe he had.

“That we do!” Izumi laughed, slamming a hand on his back. The dango stick between his teeth flew straight out of his mouth and into his tea.

“Gross! I was drinking that!”

“It’s my tea.”

“Yeah, go buy your own!”

“Izumi, you were drinking that too.”

“Huh. True.”

The shop owner was starting to look at them dirty anyway, seeing that they had purchased a single tea a single set of dango sticks for three. Shisui got up to order more tea and more dango, after Izumi’s dramatic plea that she was a poor chunin on a poor chunin budget and that Shisui was the responsible adult here. Itachi had the gale to laugh, that traitor.

Shisui wondered why life couldn’t be easy like that all the time.

Hiruzen looked at each of the clan head standing in front of them, one by one.

For all of them he could call up a memory of a time they barely reached his waist, he could still see them running through the streets, laughing carelessly, or coming back from the battlefield, grim and bloody, haunted. He had seen them all grow, become stronger and stronger, build their family and nurture their clan.

Here they stood now, a united front, a vision he had always hoped for, that was more than welcome.

Even if they were united against him.

“We believe it would be for the best, Hokage-sama,” Shibi said with his ever-calm voice and composed attitude. He was as neutral as they came in the dynamics between clans. They used to have Shikaku address him for such matters, but he was deemed too close to the Hokage’s power now, and he himself was reconsidering his position in their government.

It was all changing, and Hiruzen would have been a fool to say it wasn’t for the best.

Not that he wasn’t a fool anyway.

“I agree.”

It was satisfying to see he could still surprise them. They had already dismissed him as an old
inconvenience, but he would keep his seat as long as no one suitable came up for replacement.

Which they were already thinking about, apparently.

“You do?” Fugaku asked, skeptical. He had always been the wariest of Hiruzen, understandably so, but it was reasoned now, practical. They had all grown. It was good to see them like this, with both the village and their own interests at heart, trying to build something together instead of each looking for the most profit on behalf of their clan.

The tangibility of one of those clan’s annihilation could have that kind of consequences, he pondered.

As he often did, Hiruzen’s thoughts drifted back to Danzo. How convinced he was to always act in the interest of the village, how much more prone he was to “the means justify the end” than Hiruzen had ever been. Hiruzen had not approved of most of his friends’ action.

But he had never seriously tried to stop him either.

The worst thing about uncovering Danzo’s many schemes was to realize how much of those Hiruzen already suspected. The questionable methods of Root, being for training or recruiting, the summary way he had dealt with anyone he deemed a threat to their safety.

His encouraging of Orochimaru’s experiments.

None of them he had lived up to in the end. When the time had come to be held accountable for his actions, he had either denied or tried to downplay it, invoking the village, always. The sacrifice of the few.

Hiruzen couldn’t help but notice that Danzo himself was never the one to be sacrificed.

He shifted his head slightly, just to catch a glimpse of a cat mask out of the corner of his eyes. Both Kakashi and Tenzo were here in his back, silent guards over that difficult conversation. He wondered what they were thinking about. He wondered if Tenzo resented him, like Kakashi did, even if he tried to deny it. Tenzo would follow Kakashi out of Anbu, it was practically a given. Whoever came after Hiruzen would have to build up their own entourage of trusted allies.

Hopefully they would do a better job at it than Hiruzen, but he wasn’t naïve enough to believe they would be spared the kind of terrible decisions that had led to where he stood today. Even Minato had been fully aware of that.

“I do,” Hiruzen confirmed, coming back to the present where they were still hanging on to his every word. Amazingly enough, they still retained some respect for him. More than he deserved, at any rate.

“So if we do bring a worthy successor,” Tsume stated, liking things to be laid out on the table as clearly as possible, “you will step down.”

“I will.”

They couldn’t understand how much of a relief it would be, granted it was someone he could trust with the village’s future. There weren’t many, and most of those people were either dead, absent or missing, but he trusted they wouldn’t make any hasty decision. Hiruzen had done his time. More than his time, really.

They turned away then, not without a last salute. Hiruzen dismissed the two Anbus – they would
only be standing outside the window, but it was an illusion of privacy he could deal with.

As always, he couldn’t help but remember he shouldn’t have been the one to be sitting in this chair at all.

Minato stared at him from his portrait, unblinking, still as death. Thinking about what could have been was an exercise in futility, and yet Hiruzen couldn’t help but indulge. Minato was supposed to be better than all the others, better than him, on all account. He would have united the clans much sooner. He had the unparalleled advantage of not being from any of those either, and not being a Senju, who had had a hold on the village from the very start. He had a knack for politics, no matter what his detractors said about his brash nature. His emotions were his strength, not his weakness – he empathized with all, allies and enemies alike, and he could bring about compromises that could resolve the most dire situation.

He was young. Full of passion. More in tune with their world than old Hiruzen who was from an age long gone.

He wouldn’t have treated the jinchuuriki this way either.

Hiruzen could tell himself all he wanted that he had had no choice but to restrain Naruto, that the boy was a very real threat to the safety of the village, that one outburst could bring down all they had built in these past few years. He had had no choice – but he had been the one to let the situation come to this in the first place. Naruto’s distrust and anger were on him, as was everything else. He had naively believed that the boy would be fine, would make friends and grow up like any child. He had turned his eyes away from the matter – faced with the overwhelming scope of Danzo’s crimes, it had seemed unreasonable to focus on the one child.

He had thought that someone else would step in. But wasn’t that what everybody thought? Leave it to someone else? Someone else hadn’t come. No one had.

Jinchuurikis truly were the power of human sacrifice. It wasn’t just their body, offered as a prison to the Tailed Beast. It was their whole life, their very humanity stripped down from them, peace built on the ruins of their future. Receptacle of the hate and fear the Tailed Beast elicited in people, as well as of the Beasts themselves, suffering so that others could thrive.

Why was it this way?

Why couldn’t they do better by those who had received such a burden? But people were all too happy to have an outlet to their grief. How easy it was to have Naruto to blame, instead of a nameless calamity they couldn’t see or reach, instead of the tantrum of a fate they had no control over.

If it was even fate at all. He had heard about the Uchiha looking for one of their own, gone rogue and turned against them. What supreme irony would it be if the fox wasn’t responsible either.

Things were as they were now. The past couldn’t be changed. Naruto’s look when he had recognized Hiruzen behind the bars of his cage wasn’t the first child’s desperate face that would haunt him for the rest of his days.

He couldn’t even reasonably affirm that it would be the last.

“"It doesn’t have to be that way”, she had said. “You don’t have to be what they want to be, or to play the role they want you to play. You can choose who you are and stand by it”, she had said,
with such determination, such fierceness.

Izumi was born half-in, half-out of the snobbish Uchiha clan, and she was a girl. Not a winning starter pack. She was still an accomplished chunin at 14, soon to be promoted, or so Sasuke had said, pleased as punch. It was easier for him to relate to her, hard-working and headstrong, than to his brother, who was so unlike him. Naruto understood what his friend was in her, why he liked her so much. She was proud and unyielding, and no one could tell her what to do, who to be.

She didn’t get the point though. Naruto had said that he was the demon, at least in everybody’s eyes.

He had not said that he didn’t like it.

His goal wasn’t to be liked, it had never been. He didn’t care about what they thought of him, he didn’t care for being feared and hated. As long as they left him in peace, what did it matter what they all thought?

All he wished for was to be free. As a demon or as something else, it didn’t matter. He couldn’t change how they saw him. It was on them, not him. Their problem.

And Izumi willing to put up with him, that was her problem too. Surely she had known, before coming to find them at the training ground to give them a hand. Shisui too. They had approached him without fear.

He wasn’t going to try to change their mind. He didn’t understand it, so he just had to accept it and move on. He wouldn’t rely on it anyway. In the end, his goal was the same as it always had been. He had to get strong, strong enough that he could leave this place behind someday, no matter how long it took. Since they kept him here for his own safety, then he had to become so strong that nothing, no one outside the village could harm him. Then they would let him go.

And by the time he could do that, his friends would be strong too, and they would be able to protect themselves. He could leave without regrets.

At least now he knew where he stood. He would no longer wait and hope for any form of recognition and acknowledgment, for anything coming from the village. Now that he had the certitude it would never come, he could let go of these stupid wishes. It was a relief in a sense.

What mattered now was that no one ever found out. No one more. Among his generation, nobody knew about him, and he would make his damn hardest to keep it that way. He would never lose control again like he had in the woods, he would never use this power in any way. As far as he was concerned, it didn’t exist. He wouldn’t listen to the fox and let it seduce him to its side. Nothing had to change. Life sucked just as hard as it had before, which was what he had always expected of it.

Naruto didn’t care. He didn’t need them, their acceptance and their support. He had made do just fine without it and he would keep doing it the same. Nothing had changed, in the end. His life didn’t have to change in any way.

It was all fine.

“Are you going to be alright tomorrow?”

Naruto groaned a non-committal sound back and had the small satisfaction of witnessing Shisui trying very hard not to roll his eyes in exasperation. Naruto was actually losing his mind over the perspective of going back to the Academy the next day, and Shisui was the only one around to
receive the expression of his worries.

“Do you want me to come with you?”

“I don’t need a fucking babysitter.”

Another aborted eye-roll, another short exhale of air through his nose and brief moment of clenching teeth. This was fun.

“You’re so badly behaved.”

“Yeah, sorry. No one raised me.”

Shisui really didn’t deserve that, but then again, those who deserved the burn of one’s anger were rarely there to take it – that’s why they deserved it in the first place.

“The orphan boy excuse can only take you so far you know.”

Naruto snorted, surprised, and choked on a mouthful of ramen.

“That’s pretty mean,” he said around a cough.

“I know, I’m terrible.”

Despite his obvious frustration, Shisui was keeping his cool, no close to anger in any way. He treated Naruto as the annoying brat he was, nothing more.

It was destabilizing, but it would have been a lie to say it was unpleasant.

“Are you going to tell your friends?”

If only he could quit it with the serious questions.

“No.”

“I think you should.”

“No way.”

“They wouldn’t mind, you know. You could…”

“I said no!”

His hand hitting the table disrupted their bowl, making a mess on the old damaged wood.


Naruto swept the table quickly before hiding back into his bowl.

“I don’t care what you think.”

That was kind of a lie.

.

Silence fell on the classroom as soon as Naruto walked in.
He had intended to arrive much earlier, but he had underestimated the time needed to walk to the Academy from the Uchiha district. He had thought he’d left early enough to avoid Sasuke on the way, only to find the boy already there when he arrived. All faces turned toward him. He did his best to ignore them.

Sakura didn’t though, and she scrambled to her feet to run to him as soon as she spotted him by the door. For a horrifying second, he thought she was going to try and hug him, but she stopped at an acceptable distance, a wide smile on her face that folded her scar in half.

“You’re finally back! I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

He shrugged, embarrassed. Did she have to be so blunt about it? It had only been a week. It’s not like they could have missed him or anything.

“Must have been pretty sick indeed,” Ino drawled at Sakura’s side, casually leaning against her friend, an arm propped on her shoulder.

“I guess,” Naruto said warily. What did she know? She was always so damn noisy, always meddling. Would she tell, if she had heard? He didn’t feel like building up a lie onto that, especially not to counter her. If they started to ask too many questions, he would just leave.

Now was as good a time as any to wonder if Shisui would scold him for skipping classes. That would be crazy.

They didn’t ask though. Sakura shot Ino a warning look and the girl shrugged but went back to her seat without another word. Naruto couldn’t do the same – Sasuke had taken her place, right there in front of him.

“Are you alright then?” he asked.

It wasn’t concern, in his voice and on his face. They couldn’t care that much.

He didn’t want them to.

“Yeah, of course.”

“You sure?”

“I’m telling you! You don’t have to worry about me.”

Sasuke crossed his arms, displeased.

“I’ll worry about you if I want to.”

What was Naruto supposed to answer to that?

Thankfully, nothing, because Daikoku interrupted them to send them to their seat so that he could begin the lesson.

It was fine. Naruto could do it, easy. Nothing had to change. Nobody knew anything.

He had almost managed to convince himself of that, until class ended and the teacher told them to stay put.

“Just a minute, everyone. I have information to pass down to you, concerning Mizuki.”
Naruto’s blood turned to ice in his veins.

“It has been unearthed that Mizuki was very likely working against the best interest of the village. You are the ones who have had the most contact with him. If there is anything that comes to mind regarding this matter, something that happened that you found odd or suspicious about him, you should take it up to one of the teachers. We are trying to evaluate the scope of his actions, and your help is needed.”

Daikoku didn’t look at Naruto once. It still felt like there was a spotlight cast on him. The room erupted into indiscreet whispers as soon he was done, speculating about what Mizuki could have done, what they could say.

“I guess he has been sabotaging us from the start then,” Shikamaru said casually to Choji in Naruto’s back.

“Yeah, that makes sense,” Choji answered, otherwise unconcerned. Mizuki’s particular brand of terrible teaching had been a given for so long, no one seemed moved by the confirmation that he was most likely doing it on purpose. No one would miss him either.

Did that make a difference to what he had done?

Sasuke cornered him at the end of the day, just as he was going to elope.

“You don’t want to train?”

“Sorry, I have a lesson planned with Sai.”

He was pretty sure Sasuke didn’t believe him and tried not to feel too guilty about his hurt expression. Naruto just didn’t feel ready to face him. He didn’t know what to say. It was so strange, because nothing had happened for him. Apart from Naruto vanishing for a week, things were the same in Sasuke’s world that they had been a week ago, while Naruto’s had been torn apart, left in shambles. It felt alien to be there now, to act as if nothing was amiss.

It was good though. Back to normal.

“If you want to talk about it,” Sasuke said, eyes boring into Naruto’s, refusing to let go, “I’m here. To listen. I can help”

Naruto considered it. For a wild moment he was on the verge of the precipice, of spilling everything. Of asking Sasuke to reassure him, to tell him everything was okay, things could be salvaged, that they would be alright.

But despite all the things Naruto was willing to risk, ready to lose, this, this one, he just couldn’t.

So he lied.

“I’m fine,” he said, taking a step back from that urge, shutting it out. Feeling that he would never have the courage to reach out for it again. Seeing disappointment on Sasuke’s face, fleeting but unmistakable, before he agreed, before he stepped back too. The moment was lost.

Naruto would never tell.

Sasuke watched Naruto’s retreating back, screaming and raging in his head, begging him to turn
around, to change his mind. Tell me what’s wrong, he wanted to yell to his face, tell me what happened, tell me how I can help. I’ll do anything. Please don’t shut me out. Don’t go away.

He said nothing at all.


“We didn’t have a lesson planned,” Sai deadpanned when he opened his door. He still let Naruto in.

Sai lived with his brother Shin above the Yamanaka flower shop. A way of asserting they were under the clan’s protection and tutelage, even if they didn’t live in the main compound with the rest of them, by their request. Naruto could understand – who would want to go live into a foreign clan out of the blue? He kind of had, but what he wanted irrelevant.

The flat was small, but nice enough, full of sunlight throughout the day and nicely set up. The walls were covered in Sai’s painting – Shin insisted to hang most of them.

In a corner, there was a small calligraphy, three kanjis clumsily arranged together. “Na-ru-to”, one of his own works. It was strange, because Shin didn’t seem to like him very much, even if he never said anything. He had still hung that one up next to Sai’s name, and his own, done in much nicer brushwork by their residential artist.

Other people’s feelings and thoughts remained a mystery to Naruto. As much, he supposed, as they did to Sai.

“You didn’t have a lesson planned,” Shin remarked upon seeing him, a hint of reproach in his voice. Sai dismissed it though, and Shin followed suit with a sigh. He tended to let Sai be.

“Well, I have some errands to run so… yeah, I’ll leave you to it.”

He was either considerate enough to leave them the apartment for their little sessions of knowledge-exchange, or he wasn’t comfortable sharing Naruto’s space. It didn’t matter either way. The result was the same – he was out of their hair, and Naruto could breathe easier.

“What did you plan on making?” Sai asked, walking to the little kitchen in a corner of the main room. Naruto set the grocery bag he had in hand on the table.

“I was thinking something sweet. Matcha rolls.”

“I’m not much for sweets.”

“…Me neither. But most people are.”

“I see. Food is usually an appreciated gift.”

Naruto nodded without commenting. He hadn’t really thought this through – he just needed an excuse to come, and an impromptu cooking lesson was one as good as any.

They fell into it easily. Sai did as asked, always with manic precision and an abundance of questions as to how, exactly, he was supposed to perform the simplest task. “How precise does the measurement have to be, what do you mean "liquid but not too liquid", is it bad if I put three pinches instead of two”… Naruto had yet to drill into him that this wasn’t poison making and that it didn’t matter all that much. He kept his calm and answered as best as he could, and when he snapped, Sai just looked at him blankly, waiting for him to calm down. Which he did quickly enough – anger died out fast when there was nothing to fuel it.
“Seriously… I said gradually, not one grain at the time!”

“How many then?”

“How… you’re having me on right? I know you know we don’t count the freaking grain of sugar.”

This was Sai’s way of trying to be funny. Most of the time it flew over people’s head because they couldn’t tell the difference between his genuine confusion and him deliberately playing the ignorant fool. Naruto liked to imagine it was also a way of getting back at people who had often complained about how he didn’t know anything about nothing, how he couldn’t perform the most basic tasks. He had seen a teacher try to explain to Sai five times in a row how to fasten his weapon pouch properly, which Sai knew how to do perfectly well. Naruto kind of envied him his impassivity, to be able to pull such pranks.

To be able to hide his emotions so well, because he wasn’t stupid enough to believe Sai just didn’t have any. That wasn’t possible anyway. He knew – he had tried.

He lost track of time, engrossed in an activity that had always brought him solace, if only for a little while. It never lasted long enough though. Soon enough the cake was baking in the oven, the cream was done, and he had nothing to occupy his hands and mind anymore.

“Was there something you wanted to ask me,” Sai asked with his usual way of putting zero intonation in his questions. It made him sound like he already knew the answers, which in turn made people more inclined to spill. Whether he did it on purpose or not, it was pretty effective.

“Yeah.”

“Do you want to ask now.”

“I’m not sure.”

That was the extent to which Sai would go to obtain an answer. If Naruto stayed silent, he wouldn’t ask further. Both because he didn’t feel like insisting, and because he didn’t care, probably.

Naruto took a steadying breath

“You’ve killed people before,” he said. “Haven’t you?”

If Sai was surprised by this line of questioning, he didn’t let it show, like he didn’t let anything show as a rule. Some kids had laughed at him for not having any functioning muscle in his face, as they had said. He had stared at them until they had been too uncomfortable and ran away.

Naruto wasn’t supposed to know about his brother and him and where they had come from, but Naruto had had a mind once to dispute Ino’s title of best informant of their year, and he had an easier time sneaking into the Hokage Tower.

“Yes.”

“How many?”

“I don’t know. Several.”

Sai seemed unfazed. Figuring he would stop answering if he wanted to put an end to the conversation, Naruto went on.

“How did that make you feel?”
Sai took a long, long time to answer.

The rumors of the busy street filtered through the gaping window. The shimmying of the bell that hung above the door of the flower shop carried all the way into the apartment, an uneven rhythm of soft jingling, before the door closing cut the exchange of greetings at the shop counter. All so very mundane, peaceful and bland.

So close, and yet so far away. Untouchable.

“I don’t know. Nothing in particular, I think. I was following orders. Or I was trying not to get killed.”

“Were they all shinobis?”

“No. I am, though.”

That justified it, or at least that was supposed to. Shinobis obeyed orders. Shinobis had a right to kill.

“What did it make you feel.”

Yeah, tell us little boy, what did it make you feel?

Naruto his a grimace behind his messy hair. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t tune it out, not fully. He didn’t know if it was a change in the seal, or if it was just because he was aware of that presence now, locked up at the back of his head. It wouldn’t leave him be.

Sai didn’t look otherwise perturbed, and Naruto figured he didn’t know. He just assumed, assumed that was where Naruto’s questions were stemming from. That right there was what made it a good choice to ask him – his inability to be surprised by anything. And to judge in any way.

"I'm not sure. I didn't mean to, but I don't really regret it either.”

“Why did you do it.”

That, at least, was a simple enough question.

“I didn’t want to die.”

“Fair enough. What’s the problem then.”

“I feel like I should feel bad.”

“And you feel bad because you don’t.”

“Put that way, it sounds pretty stupid. But, you know, I’ve always heard it said that killing someone was a terrible thing and that… it changed you as a person but…”

Had he not learned what he had, he wouldn’t have been so disturbed by his lack of emotional response over Mizuki’s death. He couldn’t help but wonder now.

Was it because he wasn’t exactly human? Was it because he was damaged somehow? Unable to feel what others did?

Was he just heartless?
Why are you trying to put all your faults on me?

Naruto growled, frustrated.

I don’t take pleasure in death either.

It sounded almost… hurt.

“I don’t know if that’s what they say,” Sai answered, oblivious to Naruto’s internal warfare. “But it’s pretty hypocritical of them. We are raised to kill, after all.”

He wasn’t wrong. Maybe it had been truer for him than for the rest of them, but it was still true in the end. Wasn’t that where they were all heading, eventually? There was no such thing as a white shinobi. Eventually, they would all be covered in blood.

“In all probability, you will kill again. It’s a good thing not to be too torn up over it.”

“You’re so depressing, Sai.”

“Am I.”

The oven shimmed in, bringing them back to the present, to more earthly concerns. They spread the cream on the cake, rolled it, cut it into slices. It didn’t look so bad. Such a small thing, but it made Naruto feel a little better.

“I’ll take half.”

“I thought you didn’t like it.”

“It’s not for me.”

He hoped Shisui did like sweets.

“Thank you,” Naruto mumbled on the doorstep, looking away from Sai’s blank face.

“You were the one to teach today.”

Naruto chuckled. Often enough it didn’t change a thing if Sai was serious or not. An easy way of handling him was assuming he never was.

“Thank you for letting me teach you then. See you later.”

“Goodbye.”

Naruto ran down the narrow staircase, feeling restless after their loaded conversation. He was ready to start running his way back to Shisui’s place when Sai’s voice stopped him from the window.

“Naruto!”

“What?”

“It’s a good thing. That’s you’re alive.”

It was such an odd thing to say. Especially with such disinterest. Naruto wasn’t sure it was true, but…
“You too,” he answered, though it didn’t make much sense. Sai nodded solemnly, and maybe it did, a little.

Even if it was hard to believe.

Chapter End Notes

Stop it Naruto do you want to make me cry. And Kakashi my guy, you're being way too optimistic about how this is going to go down. I have to admit I have little compassion for the guy I'm mean like that.

When you think about it, we never had like, a proper reaction from the other characters to the Kyuubi, or even from Naruto for that matter. It's unclear when they learn about it and to what extent, what they know... I wanted to talk about it because I imagine Naruto's sense of self and identity would be pretty much destroyed by this. I played it hard here because he really considers himself a monster now... I binged watch Code Geass again lately and I think it's showing, like the part on being receptacle to people's feelings as much as the monster, yeah it's safe to assume it stemmed from there.

Also I kinda feel like I sound anti-adult, which is pretty sad cause I'm probably someone who's considered an adult now haha.

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed this. As I said before we're jumping a bit to go straight to graduation next chapter! 76k to reach this point x) what am I doing with my life. See you!
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Wonder who's gonna be on team 7...

Chapter Notes

I'm having a bit of a crisis of "omg what am I doing with this story it's going to be a billion words long and I can't plot this was a bad idea". It's manageable though.

I actually drew team 7 but I need to wait till they're officially on track to post it... The frustration. The struggle.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I’m really sorry, Sasuke.”

“It’s okay. It’s fine. Don’ worry about it, Izumi.”

Izumi smiled, impossibly fond, and ruffled the boy’s hair gently. He grumbled a bit but didn’t protest – despite his reassurance, she knew he was disappointed.

But Sasuke had grown quite a bit in the past few years, and he wouldn’t protest or complain. She wasn’t sure it was such a good thing that he had grown so serious, so understanding of their circumstances as shinobis that forced them away from their family and friends, from their home and village. It was a lesson they all had to learn though, sooner or later. Besides, she had a feeling it was more than that. Sasuke had eyes on bigger goals, he didn’t stop at such small inconveniences now.

“How long will you be gone?” he asked after a few steps. They were walking back from the training ground where she had come fetch him – she wanted it to be just the two of them, to break the news to him and him alone. His pouting expression brought another smile to her face – he was still a child, at least a little. It made her feel warm and loved, that he cared about her like that, that he would miss her when she was gone. She would miss him too.

“I don’t know. At least a few months. I don’t have much information. It’s a very important mission, and it’s confidential.”

“Really? Should you be telling me then?”

She had honestly no idea. It was so secret that even she didn’t know what they would be doing exactly. Anko had been given this special assignment to be carried out quietly, and she had requested Izumi as her assistant. They were going to travel a lot, only the two of them. From what Izumi understood, they were looking for someone, but she didn’t know who.

She couldn’t tell him any of that, but she could still say something to cheer him up a bit.
“Only because it’s you, but don’t go repeat it, okay?”

It startled a small smile out of him, before he nodded seriously, never one to take anything lightly.

“And you’re leaving soon?”

“At the end of the week. That’s why I won’t be able to be there… Your graduation exam is just next month, right?”

“Hm.”

He wasn’t as excited as he once would have been about graduating from the Academy and into the shinobi forces. His ambition had grown quite a bit, and making genin was a minor milestone in his path.

There was something else he surely was looking forward to.

“You’ll get your genin team then. Are you excited?”

He wasn’t as enthusiastic as she expected. He just shrugged, face set in a displeased frown.

“What is it Sasuke? Are you worried you won’t get paired up with your friends?”

“It’s not that.”

It had been one of her and her classmates’ biggest concerns, she recalled, when graduation had started to loom over them. They had no idea how the teams were formed exactly, and everyone was speculating, hoping, fearing the outcome of the repartition. The first genin team was a big deal, and often gave birth to lifelong bonds and friendships. She knew a few adults around her that still had a close relationship with their genin teammates and instructor – when they were still alive.

Sasuke’s situation was a little different though. There were a few associations that were a given, with no suspense whatsoever – the Ino-Shika-Cho trio, or how the Aburame and the Inuzuka were almost always put together. His future team wasn’t really a secret either, but not for the same reason.

“I know they’ll put us together. It’s not like they have a choice,” he said, a little bitter.

She didn’t know if he had been told explicitly, or if he had just caught up on his own. In any case, he was right.

There was no way Naruto would be put with anyone other than Uchiha Sasuke and Haruno Sakura, on account of any other combination being a recipe for disaster. Naruto had not settled down in the slightest since the whole ordeal with Mizuki. He was just as closed off and aggressive, if more, at times.

“Are you and Naruto still fighting?”

Sasuke’s expression soured.

“We’re not… fighting. At least, I don’t think we are.”

His frustration was obvious, and heartbreaking. No matter what he did, Naruto simply refused to let anyone in, keeping his friends at arm’s length. Sasuke had merits for sticking to him despite everything – another kid would have given up a long time ago. Naruto wasn’t outright dismissive or distant, and it was worse, in a way. Izumi had witnessed it enough to know the pattern by now.
They trained and spent time together, like in the early days of their friendship, and both seemed content with that, but then Naruto would snap, like he was suddenly remembering that he didn’t want that after all. Usually it was because Sasuke had crossed some invisible boundaries that no one had been able to map out – if he suggested they went to his house, they did a certain activity together, if he said a certain thing. Naruto would shut down, retreat within himself, with no hope to be reached. Sometimes it lasted only a few hours – sometimes it went on for days.

She knew for a fact that Shisui had similar issues. One step forward, three steps back. It wasn’t for lack of trying or goodwill, not from their part anyway.

It was Naruto. He simply refused. It was his will working against everyone’s attempt at breaking through him. He didn’t want to get closer to anyone than he already was. He didn’t want to be soothed, to be tamed. Didn’t want those bonds to get any deeper.

Shisui at least knew where it stemmed from and what he was up against. But Naruto had stubbornly refused to share anything with his friends, even the closest ones, and as a result Sasuke and Sakura were still in the dark about their friend’s true nature and abilities. The rift it created between them was unbreachable as long as Naruto remained secretive. Sasuke knew something was up with him, but he had no idea what it was, and it drove him crazy.

“I don’t know how to help him,” Sasuke confessed.

What could she answer to that? No one knew. Sasuke and Naruto had been getting into fights more and more lately, the only way they could express their frustration at each other, their impossibility to communicate frankly. Sasuke was hurt that Naruto didn’t trust him with whatever it was that was going on with him.

And Naruto was terrified of him knowing.

Despite their best efforts and reassurance, there was nothing they had been able to do to alleviate that fear. Naruto wouldn’t budge. He himself hated what he was, hated the demon and its receptacle in equal measures, and he couldn’t fathom anyone thinking differently.

They walked all the way to his house without much more talking. She popped in just long enough to greet Mikoto but refused her offer for a drink or a snack – she had things to do and stuff to pack before her mission. Time with her mother to spend too.

"I'll come to say goodbye before I leave," she promised Sasuke on his doorstep. He still looked down, and she didn't like to see him like this. She ruffled his hair again.

“’You’ll figure it out, Sasuke,” she promised reassuringly. He nodded.

She was confident he would try his damn hardest at least.

“’I’ll be waiting outside with Itachi. You can join us after you’ve received your headbands,” Shisui said as he tried to get the rice cooker to cooperate with him. Naruto always felt guilty when he saw Shisui pester after the old thing – it was working fine enough before Naruto had hit it hard one day out of frustration.

“’How can you be so sure I’ll get it anyway.”

“’Why wouldn’t you? Your grades are fine, and you can perform all the standards jutsu without trouble.”
Naruto huffed, annoyed as he always was by Shisui’s heartfelt answers when Naruto was just trying to rile him up. That man was so very hard to anger, it wasn’t even funny.

“Right.”

“Aren’t you happy to be done with the Academy? I remember it, it couldn’t have ended fast enough.”

“I guess.”

The rice cooker gave a reluctant beep and complied with Shisui’s plea. He went back to sit at the kitchen table in front of Naruto.

“If it’s so terrible to graduate, you can just stay in another semester.”

“What? No way!”

“Then what’s the issue?”

It was too late to pretend nothing was wrong. Naruto wasn’t as good as he would have wanted at hiding his feelings, not from the Uchiha anyway. And after almost two years of living under the same roof, Shisui was fluent in his tells.

That didn’t mean he had gotten any luckier at getting Naruto to talk.

Before starting the Academy, Naruto had been excited about it. After starting, he had been excited for it to be over and to become a genin to get the hell out of there.

Now he was wondering why he had ever gotten in at all.

He was not interested in being a ninja. He had thought that ninja meant training, fighting and getting stronger, which was his main goal in life. Now he understood though that being a ninja meant, first and foremost, serving the village.

He would be a genin soon, and for what? To do pointless missions helping old hags around the village? To take people’s money in exchange for doing shits for them? Naruto already had a livelihood – stealing it from others. And the village paid Shisui to look after him anyway.

He would get a jounin instructor, but he didn’t need that either. Training with Sasuke and Sakura was more than enough, since Sasuke did have proper teachers already and shared what he knew with his friends. Naruto had all but given up on ninjutsu more advanced than the Academy basics to focus on fuinjutsu, and no one in the village could help with that – because no one was any good at it, and because no one knew and it would stay that way. Who would be their instructor anyway? Naruto knew most of the jounin sensei and they all more or less sucked.

Why was he even becoming a ninja?

The others didn’t question that in any way. The sons and daughters of powerful clans had never even imagined doing anything else, and the civilian kids who were still there by the time graduation rolled around didn’t wonder either. They couldn’t envision another life – civilians and shinobis lived in completely different worlds that rarely met beyond childhood.

Not that he could go there either. Civilian life was all but closed off to him.

He had no future in this place.
Shisui would try to dispute this if he told him, and Naruto wasn’t in the mood for a fight. He didn’t answer.

“What about your team? Surely that’s not so bad.”

The team was the other problem.

If he was put with anyone other than Sasuke and Sakura, he would just quit and be done with it. That would be the simplest solution actually, the easiest.

He doubted it would happen though. Because the village *wanted* him to become a good little shinobi. And Naruto’s will didn’t matter in any way against the will of the village.

The “Will of Fire”, they called it. Destructive and all-consuming. Sparing nothing and no one in its path. The village above all else, always the village, the village, the village.

Why did they all care so much about that damn place.

“It’s not fair to them to end up stuck with me.”

If he was in a team with Sasuke and Sakura, he wouldn't be able to just quit on them. Despite his resolve not to get too attached, he had never managed to really go through with it, cut all ties. He didn't want them to hate him, even if he tried to achieve it, sometimes. It would have been for the best, he knew, to stay away, but was it so wrong of him to cling to that one, small good thing he still had? Most days, he couldn't answer. As a result, he was terrible to them both, and they didn't deserve to have that follow them after the Academy as well.

“You know they’ll be elated to keep your little trio intact.”

He did know. It made it worse in a way. Why couldn’t they just give up on him, since he didn’t have the nerve to do it himself. That would solve it.

"The higher you climb, the freer you'll be, Naruto. In a year tops your team will be sent on missions outside the village, you'll get to…"

“Shut up!”

Practiced in the exercise, Shisui lifted up both their glasses as Naruto slammed his hand on the table, preventing them from tipping off.

“That won’t be like that for me! You know it! They told me I couldn’t leave the village. They’re not going to send me on any goddamn mission!”

It wouldn’t be long before Sasuke and Sakura questioned this. They would wonder why all their friends got to travel the land and see the world while their team stayed on patrol duty at the outer wall or something. What would they tell them then? They would run out of excuses soon enough, and then…

Or their team would be split up. The both of them out there with their instructor, and Naruto staying behind, chained to the village. What was the point of a team then?

“It doesn’t have to be like that, Naruto,” Shisui said calmly. He always had an answer, to everything, always opposed rationality and compromise to Naruto’s abrasive thoughts. “Things can change. You’ve done well these past few months, and you’ll keep getting stronger. We’ll plead your case again. It doesn’t have to be like that. It doesn’t have to go the worst possible way every
time.”

Naruto couldn’t deal with Shisui’s faith in him. He didn’t know where it came from and why it was. It made no sense whatsoever.

And still, Naruto wanted so badly to believe him. Even when he encouraged him to just talk to Sasuke and Sakura about the demon, assuring him that all would be fine, Naruto wanted to believe it, to trust that he was right.

But the risk was too high. If he was wrong… Naruto had nothing else in this world. Absolutely nothing. If he didn’t have them…

It was too high a risk.

“Maybe,” he conceded grudgingly. Shisui didn’t insist. He was used to Naruto never agreeing with him.

There was one thing though, one thing that could make it all a little easier.

“Say, Shisui…”

“Hm?”

“Is it… Can you… Can it be you, with us?”

“What?”

“Can’t you… can’t you be our instructor?”

It wasn’t official but Naruto had heard Shisui talk about it with Sasuke’s mother during one of her visits. Shisui wanted to be a teacher – he would be a good one, Naruto believed. He was never telling him that though.

“That’s… you’re not supposed to know about that,” Shisui sighed without any heat. He sounded fond, more often than not, when he talked to Naruto. Even when he was annoyed. It was very strange.

“Sorry, Naru-boy, I’m still being formed. I’m actually going to teach at the Academy for a while, I won’t get my first team until next year.”

“Oh.”

Naruto tried hard to hide his disappointment. He didn’t think he succeeded very well.

“I’m sure you’ll get someone great though!” Shisui said to cheer him up, a bit sheepish. Naruto shrugged. Whoever they were, they wouldn’t be as cool as him.

Naruto was never ever telling him that either.

.

“Do you have everything you need? Are you sure you don’t need an extra snack? Aren’t you going to be cold? What about…”

“Mooooom, stop it, it’s fine! Come on, I’m going to be late!”
Sakura batted her mother’s hands away, eager to escape her fretting. She was way more stressed out than Sakura was and she was starting to stress her out too. It was only a lame exam, a formality. The results were a given.

At the end of the day, she would come back home a Konoha genin, her headband firmly tied around her head. She was more excited than anxious.

“All right, all right, I’ll stop…”

“Sakura? You’re not gone yet?”

“I would be if mom would let me!” she answered her dad with a dramatic sigh, but not much heat. Her mother had always been a worrier, they weren’t going to change her now.

“I’m leaving now.”

“Sakura!”

Sakura kept an eye-roll in, intrigued by her mother's sudden seriousness. She turned to face both her parents standing under the porch, looking at her.

“We’re… we haven’t always been… as supportive as we should have. But we’re very proud of you, Sakura.”

As a reflex, she raised a hand to her cheek. The scar had faded away a great deal, but it was still visible, still pulling a little at the corner of her mouth and the skin under her eye, making her face a little asymmetrical, a little weird. She didn’t mind all that much. Many shinobis had scars, on their face or elsewhere, and the older she’d get, the less peculiar hers would be. She was used to it by now, the feature as normal as her nose or her big forehead. Neither good nor bad, just… there.

Her parents didn’t stare at it so much anymore either. Funnily enough, the short hair had been harder for them to get used to. She liked them that way. They were barely long enough for her to gather them in a small ponytail at the base of her skull if she wanted to. They stuck in all direction despite her best effort to tame them. Ino said it looked stylish though.

“Thank you, mom, dad.”

They didn’t go as far as a hug, but the sentiment was there. She was happy they had finally come to accept her choices in life, and to believe she could stand by them. She smiled at them one last time before hurrying out of the front yard and into the lively street. It wouldn’t do to be late on her graduation day.

“What took you so long?” Ino asked once she spotted Sakura rushing toward their usual meeting spot.

“Sorry, sorry. Just my parents getting emotional,” she said with a grimace.

“Don’t complain, at least your parents give a shit.”

“They give too much.”

“Better than not at all.”

Sakura pondered whether or not to ask. When she was upset, Ino was either eager to spill or would get mad about being questioned, and there wasn’t any pattern to it. She usually liked to rant about
her father though.

“What happened?” Sakura asked, decided to give it a try.

“Bad enough that he forgot. But then he didn’t even own up to it. He said he did remember, but
that he just thought it wasn’t such a big deal, because I was supposed to have more ambition than
this. He said he’d be there when I make jounin commander.”

“That… sucks.”

“The worst thing is he thinks he’s actually being encouraging. That he’s just pushing me for more.
One, I can push myself, thank you very much. And two, I didn’t ask him to throw a freaking
celebration party or something. It just wanted him to give one shit about my life. My mom is lost
fuck-knows where in Water Country on a top-secret assignment and she still managed to have a
message sent to me. It was two days early but what the hell, that’s fucking sweet. Fuck.”

Ino had discovered the fine art of swearing about a year ago and she was practicing at every
opportunity – most noticeably, to piss off her father, who swore just as much and had probably
taught her all she knew, and didn’t like it in the least. There was a lot of yelling going on between
them as a general rule – nowadays, a week couldn’t go by without Ino crawling through Sakura’s
bedroom window right after dinner time, worked up and shaking with pent up anger, ready to
punch her way through a wall. If it wasn’t too late they snuck out to go trade punches in a small
yard nearby. Otherwise, she simply laid face first on the bed while Sakura read aloud whatever it
was she was reading. It didn’t matter. Ino said her voice was soothing.

They often ended up falling asleep side by side on her narrow bed, after talking and venting well
into the night. Sakura felt guilty about how much she enjoyed those nights – she didn’t want to be
thankful for Ino’s terrible relationship with her father.

“So you want to come by after school? My mom will be plenty proud for the two of us.”

Ino shrugged, always needing to be a little difficult.

“Don’t you want to hang out with the boys?”

Sakura looked out in the distance, more bothered by the question that she would have liked.

“It’s not that I wouldn’t want to,” she said. “I’ll invite them too actually, but I’m not sure Naruto
will agree.”

“Still being difficult huh. Men are such a bother.”

Sakura chuckled. Ino was saying that to cheer her up, dramatic tone and all – even if she stood by
that sentiment. They both knew though that the issue with Naruto didn’t stem from the propensity
of the boys their age to act like stupid idiots. She wished it was that simple.

“You sound like Shikamaru,” she teased to change the subject. Ino rolled her eyes with a dramatic
groan.

“Don’t talk to me about him. I’ll soon be stuck with him and Choji days in and days out, I don’t
need to take a head-start on that.”

Ino had mixed feelings about the inevitability of the Ino-Shika-Cho formation. Shikamaru and
Choji were more than happy to be on the same team of course, but they also agreed that it was a bit
contrived, and really no fun.
Sakura was similarly a little disappointed they didn’t get to experience the excitement and anticipation of what their genin team would be, like the rest of their class. Shikamaru’s father had visited her family a few weeks ago, to ask her parents and herself what they thought of her being paired up with Uchiha Sasuke and Uzumaki Naruto. Her parents had known better than to interfere, and she had agreed, of course.

She could have been on any team. Sasuke too. But not Naruto.

She was a bit apprehensive of how that was going to turn out, if she was being honest. She was getting tired of Sasuke and Naruto head-butting – and of head-butting with the blonde boy herself. If she was honest, she would recognize that the latter happened more often actually. Sasuke had way more patience than her regarding Naruto’s moodiness.

“Oh, where is Sai by the way?”

He usually joined on their morning walk since he lived right outside the Yamanaka estate.

“He’s not coming,” Ino said, aiming for casual and only coming off uncomfortable and defensive.

“What? Why? Is he not graduating?”

“He already has the rank.”

Sakura almost asked, but ultimately chose against it. Ino was touchy on the subject of Sai and Shin, and what she knew about their origins. Insisting was a sure way of angering her.

The Academy was in shambles when they arrived, with all the students of their year, plus the ones trying the exam again gathered in the yard, waiting outside the building before being shuffled in for the written tests. They were used for ranking more than anything else – technical knowledge wasn’t really the most valued things in future shinobis. For some unfathomable reasons.

It was a drag, since they weren’t allowed to exit the room before everyone was done. Sakura was sitting at the back of the class and she busied herself during the last hour by observing her classmates. Shikamaru was also done, napping on his crossed arms and drooling on his test. Some were writing frantically or pulling their hair, like Kiba, while others like Shino or Hinata calmly put down their answers one by one. Sasuke was proofing his answers for the third time, changing minor, inconsequential details like the freaky perfectionist he was.

As for Naruto, he was done too, looking at the ceiling, arms crossed behind his head. From where she was, she couldn’t see if it was because he had already answered all the questions – or none of them.

“How did it go?” she asked once they were released, catching up to him in the yard.

“Don’t worry,” he answered, “I didn’t waste your efforts.”

She wanted to protest – that’s not what she had meant. But it’s true she was worried he would sabotage himself. She trusted he didn’t want to stay behind at the Academy – she didn’t trust he wanted to move forward though. They had studied a lot together because he wanted to keep his grades at least passable, “so that Shisui would stop nagging at me,” or so he said. She just wanted to help.

Sasuke, coming to join them, shook his head at her, urging her to let it go. She didn’t understand how he was so chill about Naruto’s constant antagonism. She still complied, knowing he was more reasonable than her, at any rate.
They chatted their lunch break away, careful to stay clear of any topic of the slightest importance. They were good at this by now, knew the extensive list of subjects to avoid, of allusions not to make, about Naruto, Naruto’s home life, Naruto’s trouble, Naruto’s past and future, Naruto’s wishes and thoughts. It was easier to avoid it than to get lost in sterile confrontations, but it still drove Sakura up the wall that they were so determined to pretend like there wasn’t a problem in sight.

A good thing the next trial of the day was taijutsu.

Sakura would have been hard pressed to say which one she was worrying the least about. After almost four years of regular training with Naruto and Sasuke, and even if they had met up less frequently lately, she was ahead of most of her classmates at hand-to-hand combat. She couldn’t beat either of the two boys, yet. She could go toe-to-toe with them though, for long periods of brutal fighting.

As fate would have it – or just their teachers' usual lack of insight – she ended up facing Uchiha Kara for the test. It was weird how little she felt toward the girl. Sakura was a little taller than her now, and more muscular. Kara was a good fighter – Sakura was just better, by a margin. The spar was over quickly. She offered a hand to the girl, still on the ground. Kara took it reluctantly and was quick to let it go, fading back into the crowd without a word.

Sakura was fine with never crossing path with her ever again.

Sasuke went up against Shikamaru. The lazy boy’s parents had no doubt grilled him about doing slightly more than the bare minimum for once, because it was the first time Sakura saw him put up an actual fight, and he turned out to be decent at taijutsu, even if Sasuke still beat him easily.

Naruto was fighting Hinata.

Sakura hated the worried looks on the others’ face, how the instructor hesitated quite obviously to switch them with somebody else. Naruto still had the same reputation of an aggressive troublemaker, and Hinata was considered weak-willed and weak period. They honestly believed he would hurt her, and on purpose nonetheless.

What right did they have to speculate about him? She knew him. She was the one he had beaten up hundreds of time on the training ground. She was the one who could affirm he was never one to hurt on purpose, to pull up more than the other could handle, to try and assert his superiority. Even when anger got the best of him, when he was tensed and upset and more brutal than usual, he never crossed that line. As surprising as it sounded, he was a good teacher. Ruthless, yes, but efficient, useful. Which was more than could be said about most of their teachers at the Academy.

She considered stepping in when it looked like the instructor was really going to call it off. It was Hinata who cut all doubts. By starting the fight herself.

Out of all of them, she was the one with the cleanest taijutsu style, and the most elegant, better than Sasuke even. She lacked decisiveness though, intent, but Naruto wouldn’t take advantage of that. He didn’t go easy on her but he didn’t go all out either. He let her have her chance, adapted around her style so that the fight could last, so that they could both... enjoy it, in a way. She grew bolder as the match went on, managing to truly bring him into it. It was clearly the best fight of the day.

It ended when he slipped through her guard and punched her in the chest, sending her to the ground. He didn’t rush to his aid, and she got up on her own. They both had the faintest smile on their face when they bowed to close the fight.
“Did he had to hit her so hard?” Sakura heard whispered displeasingly behind her back. The smiles disappeared. She prayed for patience and fortitude, remembering that she would soon be out of there. They went back inside for their last test. Ninjutsu.

His friends were too good, Naruto pondered. They didn’t have to worry about themselves, so they could focus all their worry on him.

It was so stupid of him to be mad that they were scared he would botch his tests on purpose, since he had considered very seriously doing exactly that. He didn’t want them to think that, even if it was true. What even.

At least, it was almost over. Taijutsu was out of the way and had even turned out to be a little fun – who would have thought Hyuuga Hinata had it in her. Ninjutsu wouldn’t take long. Pop two clones out, and bam, done, they got their headband and could go home newly dubbed into the shinobi order. Great.

He had actually had a little bout of panic a few weeks earlier when he had realized that it had been months since he had attempted ninjutsu in any way. He had all but given up on it, especially since he had salvaged Sai’s attempt to cook a proper dinner for his brother’s birthday, and that Sai had repaid him by digging up fuinjutsu scrolls from who knew were. Naruto still wasn’t through with the small collection. The process was painfully slow and complex, but rewarding. His repertoire was slowly growing.

Needless to say, he didn’t have time for stupid ninjutsu.

“Uzumaki Naruto.”

He was the last one. He came to stand in front of the class, brought his hands together. Two copies of himself popped out of thin air, looking as bored and fed up as him. He dismissed them quickly enough, ready to cash in and go home.

“Wait.”

“What?”

“Do it again.”

He glared a nasty glare at the man sitting next to Daikoku. He recognized him – Creepy sunglasses. Naruto had never gotten around to learn his name. Not that he cared.

“Why?”

“Do it again.”

Sighing, but eager to be done, Naruto complied, bringing forth two more clones that bowed an exaggerated salute at the man before disappearing again.

“Are we good now?”

“One more time please.”

Naruto flexed his hands, shook his arms, trying to get rid of the building tension. Breathe in, breathe out. He had promised Shisui he would do better in the anger department. That he would try
at least, even if everyone was doing their damn hardest to be as aggravating as could be.

He only managed the one clone, because he was focused on relaxing and the fox was laughing and because he was trying and failing not to be transported back to the night of Mizuki’s death, that man was there, Naruto had stolen back the unlocking seals from under his nose and was he still there when he had been brought back unconscious, and…

“Can you do only one?”

Naruto was going to murder him.

“Is there a problem sensei?”

Ino’s honeyed voice thankfully snapped him out of his own head. She was smiling, the way she did when she was obviously lying but knowing the other couldn’t prove it, or when she wanted to convey a threat. Sakura was glaring at the instructor by her side, arms crossed, looking pissed.

“Are we all gonna have to take the test again? Because I have places to be right after that.”

“No, that won’t be…”

“Oh, so everything is fine, right?”

“Well…”

“Did he pass the test, or not?”

It was Sasuke this time, as calm and pleasant as if he was enquiring about their homework for the next day.

The man couldn’t just say no.

He handed the last headband on the table to Naruto without a word. His eyes were hidden, but that did little to hide his feelings on the matter. Naruto took it with the largest smile he could muster

“Thank you very much sir.”

The man’s anger was motivation enough not to throw it immediately into the trash.

“Well, congratulations everyone!” Daikoku exclaimed with too much enthusiasm. “You all passed! We’ll meet again tomorrow morning to give you your ranking and team assignment. Dismissed!”

They wasted no time running out of the door.

Shisui was there, as he had said, with Itachi, and, more surprising, both of Sasuke’s parents. Sasuke made a show of sulking and cursing, embarrassed, but he still picked up pace to reach them. Naruto followed unhurriedly, not wanting to appear too eager.

Sasuke had tied the headband around his forehead, but it irked at Naruto to do the same. He didn’t want to. He saw Ino wearing hers around her neck and resolved to imitate her – he pulled at the collar of his sweatshirt and pushed back the hood to tie the band as loosely as he could around his neck, not wanting to feel it. The weight on his chest wasn’t that unpleasant.

He ignored Sasuke’s family as best as he could, going straight to Shisui.

“Ta-da,” he said, uncomfortable. He was still riled up about that asshole and his attempt at… at
what, humiliating him? Failing him? It was so pointless, so unnecessary.

“Congratulations,” Shisui said with a smile, ruffling his hair as was his annoying habit.

“Did something happened?” he asked after a moment, and really, Shisui had no business being so
damn clairvoyant about Naruto’s mood.

“It was nothing,” he said quickly. Of course it had to catch Sasuke’s ear.

“Actually…”

“I said it was nothing!”

“Ebisu-sensei had him retake the test three times, even if he did fine from the start,” Sasuke
spilled, glaring back at Naruto just as fiercely as Naruto was at him. He never knew when to leave
things alone.

Sasuke’s parents exchange a look and Uchiha senior looked around, trying to spot the instructor.
Naruto looked away. He had no interest in seeing Uchiha Fugaku defend him or whatever.

“You did fine then? How high will you rank?” Shisui asked to distract him. He only got a shrug as
an answer. It’s not like Naruto cared.

“Are you coming back with us?” Mikoto asked them both. Shisui answered first.

“If it’s no bother. What do you think, Naruto?”

Now, he could say no, if he really wanted to. For all his pestering, Shisui rarely insisted if Naruto
truly didn’t want to do something. He didn’t have to – he looked at him with his stupid smile, open
and indulgent, ready to call it off if Naruto so wished.

But Shisui would want to be with them for this, and Sasuke would want them there too. What was
Naruto supposed to do against that?

“I don’t care,” he said, as much a blessing as he could give. They stopped by Sakura’s family to
ask if they wanted to come as well – they politely declined. Lucky her.

“Tomorrow,” Sakura said, because maybe tomorrow they would have cause for celebration
between the three of them.

They pushed through the crowd and Naruto tuned out the whispers around him with practiced ease.
“Why did they let him graduate”, “does he have to be a shinobi”, “he shouldn’t be here”, blah blah
blah. It didn’t affect him as much as it used to. If anything, it bothered the Uchiha around him more
than himself. He let them to their glare and elbow blows – he didn’t concern himself with these
people anymore.

He had been horribly uncomfortable the first time he had visited Sasuke’s house with Shisui, and it
was still just as unpleasant now. Shisui’s house was bearable because it was just the two of them,
and had not been occupied for long, but here, everything screamed family, memories, life. The
pictures and the scattered belongings, the wear of the furniture, the shoes lined up behind the door.
He was a stranger in this place, an intruder. A part of his friend’s life he could never be included
in.

It wasn’t so bad when Sakura was here, because she was as uncomfortable as he was, albeit for
different reasons. Status mostly, a residual shame from her clan-less background. She kept trying
to be extra polite and often failed, to Uchiha Mikoto’s great amusement. Fugaku didn’t show up in those – rare – occasions

They opened the doors to the backyard and spilled into the well-kept garden, having collected a few other members of the Uchiha clan along the way. Naruto kept to his corner, waiting for the appropriate time to beat a hasty retreat.

“Is everything alright, Naruto?”

He accepted the glass of ice tea Mikoto was handing to him and nodded, knowing it wouldn’t be enough to satisfy her. She always tried to talk to him, despite his reluctance.

“Do you want something to eat?”

“I’m fine.”

He sipped at his drink as they watched in silence the other guests mingle. Sasuke and Itachi were sharing one of their weird, half silent conversations, where they only formulated one-word sentences and interrogative noises and still managed to get their point across somehow. Fugaku was talking with an older woman Naruto didn’t know, while Shisui stuffed his mouth with takoyaki.

He could feel Mikoto wanted to say something, but he wasn’t inclined to give her a hand. He had a feeling he wouldn’t like it.

“Your parents would be proud, Naruto.”

Bingo.

“What does it matter, what the dead think.”

The topic of his parents held no appeal to him whatsoever. More and more he was just convinced that they simply didn’t want to raise the demon fox and had opted out of that ride before getting stuck on it. Cowardly, but understandable.

“Well,” she went on without missing a beat, “I’m proud of you then.”

He gulped the rest of his glass to hide his surprise, thrown off balance by the blunt confession. He didn’t understand her interest in him. He was just friend to her son. She didn’t have to be so nice.

She managed to put him at ease, not as well as Shisui did, but still better than all the other adults in his life. He had a question to ask, and he figured she wasn’t the worst person to ask it to.

“What’s the point anyway? To be a shinobi.”

He didn't get it. Why did they all choose to risk their lives, why choose such a grim path? Nothing forced them too. Well, a lot of them were bound by family obligations and the like, but still. “For the good of the village” wasn’t good enough for him. No one was that selfless. There had to be something else.

“Isn’t there anything you want to protect?” she asked in lieu of an answer.

“Is that the reason?”

“That’s one of them, I believe.”
She had her family and her clan. Her village too. Naruto looked at Sasuke, politely nodding to the old woman’s ramblings, trying not to look too bored. He caught Naruto staring and rolled his eyes, like to say “what can we do?” or maybe “help, come rescue me.”

“They don’t need my protection,” he finally answered. The few things worth protecting in this world, they didn’t need him.

They would go on the same, if he was no longer there. They would be just fine.

“You still want to.”

“Since when is anything about what I want?” he asked bitterly. He regretted it immediately – he was usually better at keeping these feelings hidden. But as time passed, he felt like his future was narrowing down to a path that was more and more restricted, set in stone. A life that didn’t need him to play out. A life he didn’t want but could do nothing to change, to escape.

“It won’t always be this way, Naruto”.

They were always saying that. He had no idea where they found such certitudes.


Naruto had been wrong – it was such a damn relief. They were sitting at the same table and they exchanged winning smiles, pleased as if they hadn’t been expecting it. He didn’t know what was in store for their future, but he knew their presence would make it a little more bearable. He couldn’t picture being in a team with anyone else. All the other kids were scared of him, or at least uncomfortable in his presence and it would have been two against one at all times. Three, if one counted their jounin instructor. Speaking of which…

“You’ll go to classroom 5 to wait for your team supervisor. Now, team 8…”

Shisui had tried to pacify him, told him it would be fine, that they wouldn’t put just anyone in charge of his team. It wasn’t as reassuring as he thought it was. He didn’t need another personal guardian. Besides, this was Sasuke and Sakura’s team too. He wanted someone who wouldn’t discriminate between them. Who would treat them all equally.

Repartition wrapped up and they went to wait for mysterious jounin. Despite what Shisui had said, Naruto couldn’t help but wish for him to walk through the door. It would be ideal – the three of them knew him, he liked the three of them. He knew almost everything about Naruto, and Sasuke for that matter. Sakura had a weird crush on him since he had started to teach her genjutsu. Really, it would have been great.

He tried not to think about all the candidates that wouldn’t be that great. The jounin that had arrested him last month with a hand in a woman’s purse, for example. All those who had dropped on him by surprise while he was strolling the woods. The ones who left the ramen stand when he arrived.

That made for a lot of people.

“I hope it’s a woman,” Sakura sighed by his side. She was fiddling with the knot of her headband, trying to tighten it so that it wouldn’t slip on her forehead – she wore it on the top of her head, tied at the base of her skull, a few wild strands of hair poking out from under the blue fabric.
“Maybe it is. There are a few,” Sasuke commented from where he was leaning over a desk with a good view on the door, arms crossed, expectant. They had been waiting for a while – they were starting to get impatient.

A female instructor wouldn’t be that bad indeed. He tried to remember what Mikoto’s genin team was up to these days. Were they already deemed good to go for the chunin exam? Maybe that would be awkward for Sasuke to be under his mother’s command but…

This line of thought was interrupted by the door sliding open.

He wasn’t late. He really wasn’t. He had arrived at the Academy early, even. But then he had stood outside in the corridor like an idiot for the better part of an hour, trying to calm his nerves.

It was ridiculous. He was a grown ass man who had been in plenty of dangerous, stressful or embarrassing situations, and he should have been able to handle meeting a trio of babies barely out of the Academy. It wasn’t even the first time he was doing this, but the third. The first two had gone well, this part of it anyway. That he had then sent them all back to the Academy was irrelevant. They weren’t good enough.

Kakashi was aware that no such thing could happen this time. But it wasn’t what made him hesitate.

He should have listened to Shisui and meet Naruto much sooner. It was crazy – and pretty embarrassing – how many times he reflected that he should have listened to the Uchiha. First, it meant that cheerful jokester Shisui was more insightful than him, and second, it also meant that he never learned his damn lesson.

He should have befriended Naruto before. It would have made this first introduction to the team a walk in the park. But Kakashi had been too cowardly to try it – too scared to be rejected like most of the adults in Naruto’s life were. It felt like he stood a better chance like this. He was there to teach them after all. Kakashi remembered his excitement at his first team assignment, the deference he felt for his jounin instructor.

Surely it wouldn’t go so badly.

Besides, Naruto had heard of him at least a little, from Shisui and Itachi, even if they had never met face to face. He wasn’t a complete stranger. Kakashi knew Sasuke well already, and the girl, Sakura, seemed decent enough. She was friends with both of them for a start, which was a feat, according to what the Uchiha said.

Resolute, Kakashi opened the door.

“Hi, brats! I’m…”

That’s about as far as he went.

Naruto jumped to his feet as if he’d been shocked. The next second he was crouching on the desk in front of Sakura, kunai in hand and honest-to-gods snarling, teeth bared and face folded into an angry scowl.

“Naruto, what is it?” Sasuke exclaimed worriedly, as startled as the others. Naruto didn’t pay him any mind, didn’t shift his focus away from Kakashi, still barely a step into the room.
“It’s you,” he growled. “I recognize you.”

“Naruto. Naruto, it’s alright. Calm down.”

The boy didn't budge, didn't relax in any way, didn't tear his eyes away from the jounin still standing shell-shocked by the door. Sasuke could tell he had at least a fraction of Naruto's attention though.

“Everything is fine. This is Hatake Kakashi. He’s not a threat.”

He kept his voice as calm and cool as he could, kept close but didn’t touch, knowing it would only make Naruto jump. He was getting good at this. It happened from time to time – he had stopped questioning why exactly. Often when Sasuke activated his Sharingan without notice, but also if Naruto was surprised by someone he didn’t know well, or, most memorably, when a jerk from a year above them had pranked them by locking them into the classroom. Naruto had freaked out, and been ready to demolish the door, the wall even, or jump out of the window.

He listened to Sasuke’s voice though. As long as Sasuke could reach him, they could make it through.

“He means no harm, I promise. I know him. I know him.”

It worked a little, enough that Naruto stopped looking like he was going to implode, but not enough that he snapped out of it. Sakura was rigid and tense behind him, slowly sitting up from her chair, knowing not to make any sudden movements.

“It’s fine, Naruto,” she insisted, soothing. “Everything is fine.”

Kakashi at least had the sense not to try to step in and make everything worse.

Sasuke decided to up his arguments. He knew what worked on the other boy.

“He’s a friend of Shisui. Shisui knows him. They’re friends.”

Finally, finally Naruto broke eye contact to turn toward Sasuke, wary but responsive at least.

“They are?”

Now really wasn’t the time for Sasuke to get jealous of his cousin.

“Yes. You can ask him yourself when you see him. They were together in Anbu.”

Naruto grimaced – that was a misstep. Was that the issue then? Naruto wasn’t fond of any type of authority, but he had it out for the special ops in particular.

“They were teammates,” Sasuke amended. “And they’re good friends. Shisui trusts him. I promise.”

Naruto nodded and slowly, slowly uncoiled himself from his defensive position, standing up on the desk. He took the time to glare down at Kakashi from up there before jumping off to join them back on the ground, eyes never leaving the man.

“Do you… know each other then?” Sakura asked uneasily, Naruto’s mistrust catching fast.
“I guess we don’t,” Naruto mumbled. He looked hurt and angry, and Sasuke had absolutely no idea why.

“Why did it have to be you?” he asked, more to himself than the jounin, voice small and resigned, like he sounded when he wanted to convey his “life can’t help but suck” philosophy.

“To be honest, I didn’t think you would recognize me,” Kakashi answered, disappointment and dejection visible even if almost all of his face was covered up.

“Instinct,” Naruto shot back. There was something more behind it, something he was telling to the man only. Something that made Sasuke categorize Kakashi immediately, under the label “people in the known”. The world was divided neatly, between those who knew what was going on with Naruto, and those who didn’t. Sasuke was of the later, to his eternal frustration. And now, it looked like Kakashi was of the former, which only made it worse.

Seeing how Naruto was glaring at him, Sasuke wasn’t about to get jealous of that one though.

“Well, I was going to have us introduce ourselves a bit, but I guess we’ve done enough team-bonding for today. I’ll see you tomorrow at training ground 10, at 6 o’clock sharp. Don’t be late!”

“You don’t be late!” Sasuke screamed after him, but the man was already gone in a puff of smoke. He huffed, irritated.

“Let’s go,” Sakura sighed after a moment where they stared dumbly at the spot where their teacher used to be, trying to determine if it could have gone any worse than that. Naruto stayed stubbornly silent as was his habit. Sakura parted way with them after a silent exchange with Sasuke who promised to deliver their friend safely to Shisui’s door. Naruto disappeared inside the house without a word, and Sasuke walked the rest of the way to his own house in bitter contemplation.

“Hello Sasuke! How did it go?” his mother asked cheerfully from the living room where she was repairing some clothes roughed up by training. She must have seen something on his face, because she abandoned her work to join him in the entranceway, expression folded with concern.

“What happened?”

Sasuke was on the verge of telling her, eager to spill, to explain and vent his frustration and confusion. But he remembered then that she was as responsible of this as Kakashi was, as they all were. They knew why Naruto was this way, why he was even more solitary and antisocial than when they were younger, why he was frightened by the things that frightened him, that shouldn’t have but did. They knew, and no one would tell Sasuke, no one would let him help.

She would sympathize and tell him to hang in there, but she wouldn’t actually help, and today Sasuke was especially resentful of that.

“Forget about it,” he muttered, shoving past her. He walked straight to his room without heeding her calls and face crashed on his futon, that he hadn’t taken the time to roll that morning. A prophetic instinct, probably.

Shisui had had a good feeling about this, that had carried him through a boring but exhausting day of going through the Academy’s lesson materials – it was dramatic how much he had forgotten about all that. He was barely ten years out of school and he couldn’t remember a single thing.

Usually, worrying about Naruto always monopolized a part of his brain, but he had managed to
Shrink it up this time because he had a good feeling about this. Being in a proper, recognized team with Sasuke and Sakura would do good to Naruto who occasionally worried about their friendship affecting the two kids’ place in the village, or about them suddenly abandoning him on the spot one day. He trusted Kakashi not to fuck it up – Shisui believed he was serious about this, like he rarely was.

So Shisui had a good feeling about this, to the point where he was humming to himself as he made his way home, eager to hear what the boy had to say about his first day as a genin.

All the lights were out, but the front door was unlocked. Shisui slipped inside, on guard but not overly worried. The house was booby-trapped to the best of Shisui and Naruto’s combines abilities, and then had been copiously insulted enough time by jounins and friends trying to drop by to know it was effective.

“Naruto?” he called. The boy’s shoes were in the entryway, but he got no answer.

He was starting to worry for a different reason now.

He got up the stairs, up to Naruto’s bedroom. The door being closed all the way could mean only two things – either Naruto wasn’t here, or something was very, very wrong.

“Naruto?” he called again, knocking on the door.

“Go away.”

Damn. Second option it was.

“What’s wrong?”

“I said go away!”

“Not until you tell me what’s wrong:”

He expected to have much more bargaining to do and was surprised by the door sliding open only a second later, Naruto’s sullen face appearing in the crack.

“Is it true you know Kakashi?” Naruto asked, voice and expression blank. He was avoiding eye contact, eyes fixed on Shisui’s shin.

“Yes. He’s a friend of mine,” Shisui answered uneasily, wondering what that was about. He had mentioned the name a couple of time no doubt, but Naruto had never met him, despite Shisui’s insistence.

“Did you know he was going to be our team instructor?”

“Yes, he told me. I thought it wasn’t a bad idea? He’s a good guy.”

“Did you know he was the one to drag me back from the wood back then?”

Shisui’s mind blanked out for a second before tumbling into blind panic.

Damn shit, they had fucked up so bad.

“I… I did, yes,” he said through gritted teeth, refusing to lie to the boy even if it would have been for the best. Naruto was a living lie detector anyway, and he took very badly to people trying to deceive him.
The flash of hurt on his face was unmistakable, before he recovered his careful expression of disinterest that certainly did not fool Shisui.

“Did you think I wouldn’t remember? That I wouldn’t know? Or did you just think it didn’t matter?”

It hadn’t even crossed their mind that Naruto would know. He had come face to face with Kakashi for one minute tops, at night in the woods while he was on the verge of a breakdown, and Kakashi had his mask. More than making him unrecognizable, it also dissociated him from his identity – they didn’t think of themselves as the person they were, when they were under their Anbu mask. The codenames were more than just military strategy, they were the second skin they put on, and Anbu members weren’t ever called out on their actions when they were out of the mask, to the point where they gave their report and were tried for their misdeeds in the mask too. What they did in Anbu didn’t exist out there in the open. An unspoken rule they all upheld.

One that Naruto had no reason to know or care about.

Naruto wasn’t a sensor, he wasn’t in his right mind at the time, and it could have been anyone retrieving him from his escape attempt. Shisui wasn’t aware of the full extent of Kakashi’s and the village’s motivation for putting him in charge of that particular team – only that Kakashi wanted to do this, which was extraordinary enough for Shisui to put his trust in it. His involvement in that night’s event had seemed irrelevant, to all of them.

Shisui had never felt so damn stupid in his whole life.

“Naruto…”

The door slammed shut in his face.

_Fucking shit._

Chapter End Notes

This week in "Naruto can't catch a break ever"... Fair warning, all those idiots actually trying to do the right thing and failing completely is going to be a bit of a recurring theme haha. But things aren't actually gonna be so bad for a little while. Because it's funnier if things are getting better before it all goes to shit.

I had no idea I was gonna build Naruto and Shisui's relationship like that? I have no idea what I'm doing as a rule. But I like this. I'll draw them someday. Hope you liked this!
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Team 7's long-awaited debut. And it doesn't even go so bad.

Chapter Notes

I still can't believe it took me 95k words to reach that point. I'm scared of how long that thing is going to be. I'm reaching that point where I start to forget about things I wrote in previous chapters... I need to take more notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Naruto had always had this instinct, since he was a child. He knew, somehow, when people were bad news.

It was more than a hard-learned skill, because it was wasn't like he could decipher some subtle signs, back up his judgment in any way. He just knew. He had been leery of Mizuki from the very start, from the very first time he had seen him at school, all sweet smile and nice act. He couldn't explain it, but there was something in this man, something twisted and dark, that no cheer could hide, not to him. He knew on sight who to avoid, people who would be sure to treat him badly. It was another one of those things he had thought was the norm for the longest time, before he had heard some girls of his class fawn over “Mizuki-sensei” and how cool he was. His classmates had been so much slower on the uptake, and he had realized it was another abnormality.

Like most abnormalities in his life, he now knew who to blame it for.

He was starting to discern what came from the fox and what didn’t. And this unease he sometimes felt when crossing path with someone seemingly innocuous, it came from that corner of his mind that wasn’t his own.

**Bad. Mean. Evil.**

Not that it made the fox uneasy. It seemed to enjoy it well enough. Naruto was the one who was made to feel uncomfortable, and it really was something he could have done without. He didn’t need further proof that people sucked.

But it was also an instinct he couldn’t deny or reject. He had come to rely on it without meaning too, especially since he had discovered the fox’s presence and became aware of the way it was influencing his life and thoughts. He counted on it to tell him who to stay clear off, who not to trust.

It had stayed silent on the jounin instructor.

There was distaste, of course, but it came from both of them, at the memory of the seal slapped on Naruto’s forehead, how they had been helpless to fight against slumber. But even then, in the
disjointed memories Naruto had of that night, he could recall no malice, no reason to believe the man was out for him. Not then, and not the previous day either, when he had strolled into the classroom without a care in the world. At the very least, he knew that the man didn’t outright hate him.

The thing was, shinobis didn’t need feelings to make an enemy out of someone.

He didn’t know how he had recognized him on the spot, where the certitude of his identity had come from. He could just feel it, as he felt the particular flavor of people’s mind and feelings around him. It wasn’t about chakra, like a sensor, it wasn’t anything he could describe. He had just known.

They had been convinced he wouldn’t, and he regretted they had been wrong.

Did everything had to go so bad every single time. Couldn’t it had been someone else, anyone. Or could he had just not identified the man. Maybe it would have come out sooner or later, but it’s not like Naruto planned on getting attached to the jounin. He would have been better off not knowing.

He always had to ruin everything though.

He had freaked out in front of his friends with no explanation, again. They probably wouldn’t ask about it, used by now to keep going as if nothing had happened, knowing Naruto would lie to them or stay silent, as always. They would still add it to the growing pile of proofs that they were stuck in a team with a basket case. It wasn’t fair to them. None of it was.

Naruto didn’t want to get out of bed.

Shisui knocked on the door.

“Naruto? Are you awake?”

“No.”

“Sasuke is here. He came to fetch you for your team meeting.”

Naruto could hear the hesitancy and unease in Shisui’s voice. It was so unfair. He didn’t want Shisui to feel bad, especially because of him, but he was so hurt that no one had thought it a distasteful idea to put in charge of his team a man that had all but thrown him in jail once. Why couldn’t his feelings be taken into consideration just once?

He knew he was probably making a fuss out of nothing. Shinobis’ alliances were shifting, ever changing. Allies turned enemies and enemies turned allies, and Kakashi was only following orders, probably. Naruto just had to get over it, suck it up and move on.

Same old, same old.

“Are you… are you going?”

Naruto hadn’t decided before the question was out there in the open, but really, it’s not like he had much of a choice.

“Yeah. I’ll be right out.”

There was a pause where Shisui stayed at the other side of the door, and Naruto waited for him to add something, but then his footsteps retreated in the corridors and trailed off down the stairs.
Naruto sighed. The day was already ruined, and it was five in the morning.

He got dressed quickly, hooked his undershirt around his thumbs, put on his usual red hoodie. He had a few more clothes, courtesy of the Uchiha that inexplicably concerned themselves with his fate, but he always came back to the same outfit. It felt like armor at this point, familiar enough that everybody was used to it, knew to spot him in the dark red and black.

Besides, he wasn’t going to dress like a freaking Uchiha.

He couldn’t bring himself to break the heavy silence that fell onto the kitchen when he walked in a few minutes later. Shisui looked like he wanted to say something again, and again he refrained, gulping down his words with a mouthful of tea.

“Let’s go,” Sasuke said without much intent, sitting up to move toward the door. Naruto felt like saying something too when Shisui looked at him above the rim of his cup, looking lost and unsure like he rarely did.

Nothing came though, and Naruto exited the house without so much as a goodbye.

He fell into step with Sasuke as they walked the silent, dormant streets. They crossed only the few wandering patrols that largely ignored them. The sun was only half out, the street lamps still burning. It felt like they were strolling a ghost town.

Like with Shisui, Naruto could hear in the silence between them that there was something Sasuke wanted to say. Naruto couldn’t help him – he didn’t know where they stood and he had no idea what Sasuke thought.

He trusted that the other boy would find it in himself to open his mouth eventually. Sasuke wasn’t a coward.

“Say, Naruto, do you want me to leave you alone?”

“We’re going to the same place.”

Sasuke huffed, already irritated. Naruto was good like that.

“Not right now. I mean in general.”

“Huh?”

“Do you want me to stay away from you?”

It was like Naruto’s mind had been punched right out of him. He could only ask a weak “what?”, deprived of any deeper brain function.

“You know, I always assumed you didn’t… really want to push us away. That I had to keep trying to reach out. But I’ve been thinking lately… You’re always saying how little what you want matters, and I don't want to factor into that. So if you really want me to leave you alone, if you really don't want us to be friends…”

It made no sense (except it did) and Naruto was losing his mind.

“I’ll do it. If that’s what you want. I’ll respect it.”

And that absolute idiot looked so hurt by this, so very much not on board with the idea. He would still do it, Naruto knew. He would do as his friend asked.
Naruto couldn't think, let alone talk. His mind was going in circles, following a single line of thought.

Don’t. Don’t do it. Please, please, don’t do it. Don’t leave me. I’m sorry, I’m sorry. Please, don’t. Don’t give up on me.

He stayed stupidly silent.

“Hi guys.”

He didn’t jump in surprise, but it was a near thing. It was Sakura, joining them just a few streets away from the training ground. She picked up on the heavy mood immediately.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, less inclined than the two boys to sweep her concerns under the rug.

“Nothing,” Sasuke answered without the slightest hope of convincing her. She rolled her eye.

“Whatever.”

Naruto’s mind was still reeling. Was that it? Was it the final straw for Sasuke, was he really giving up on Naruto? It would have been his right, really. He should have done it before.

Naruto still didn’t want him to. He didn’t. This wasn’t what he wanted at all. He didn’t know how to say it, how to show it, how to act so that they could see, but he liked being their friend. He liked that they liked him. He didn’t want it to stop.

But what right did he have to ask for that?

Given Kakashi’s reputation, Sasuke expected to endure hours of awkward silence and simmering resentment, and he was immensely grateful when the man decided to break habits and arrived barely an hour late. Sakura still raved about it, as much to make him feel bad as to evacuate some tension, since she had worked herself up with frustration at the boys’ silence since they had arrived at training ground 10. Kakashi apologized vaguely, fake cheer firmly in place.

Sasuke was just grateful he had decided to cut down on the pointless waiting.

What had possessed him to broach the subject so bluntly with Naruto, and so early in the morning? As if it was the right time. But the question had been eating away at Sasuke for so long, it just had to get out.

He wanted to know if he had been wrong to insist.

He wanted to know if Naruto hated him.

“All right!” Kakashi exclaimed, making them jump. “Moving on, kids. You’re stuck with me I’m afraid.”

“Wait,” Sakura said, not one to let it go so easily. “Naruto, is it alright?”

“What?”

“I’m sure we can get someone else, if we ask.”

Now that was blunt. Kakashi didn’t argue, but he was surprised enough to lose the fake smile – the
one they could extrapolate from his one visible eye anyway. At times Sakura could be even worse than Naruto at sugarcoating.

Naruto shrugged, careless, as if he hadn’t had a full-blown freak out just the day before at the mere sight of the man.

“Nah, I’m fine.”

Sakura rolled her eye. She hated what she called Naruto’s martyr tendency, when he refused something even if it would make his life easier, even if people had offered, even if it wasn’t any inconvenience, simply because he liked to make it harder for himself, or so she said.

“Go on then, sensei,” she said to the jounin. Giving her tone, she could have been the one who outranked him.

Sasuke was surrounded by ill-mannered savages.

“Too kind of you. Alright, on for a little test, kiddos. Let’s see if this team stands a chance of working out.”

“And what if it doesn’t?” Sasuke asked, not sure he liked where this was going.

“Then I can send you back to the Academy’s benches.”

Naruto scoffed.

“You can always try.”

They were off to a fantastic start.

“But first, why don’t you tell me a little about yourself,” Kakashi said, casual as if the air around them wasn’t heavy enough they could feel it on their skin.

“You’ve known me since birth,” Sasuke grumbled, too restless and unnerved to indulge the man.

“I’ll start,” he answered as if he hadn’t heard. “I’m Hatake Kakashi. I like dogs, and I don’t like waking up early. Or at all. My main hobby is reading…”

Sasuke could see one of the books from that erotic series he read all the time peeking out of his chest pocket. He rolled his eyes.

“And my long-term goal is to make good shinobis out of you insufferable brats.”

Naruto huffed and Sakura stuck her tongue at the man – a good reaction, all things considered. Sasuke wished he could have been more enthusiastic about the whole affair. He did like Kakashi, who was cool and strong and didn’t treat Sasuke like a kid. But he wanted Naruto to have a good time for a change, and it didn’t look like it was going to happen with that man.

“I’m Haruno Sakura,” the girl went next, willing to put in an effort too. “I like to win fights and I don’t like being told I can’t do things. I guess my hobby is studying. And training. And hanging out with Ino. And my goal… is to beat Naruto in a fight.”

She was far better at this than Kakashi. That brought Naruto back to them immediately, as he stared at the girl who bore his gaze, unyielding. He eventually looked away, but not before the smallest nod. An acknowledgment. He would hold her up to this.
“I’m Uchiha Sasuke,” Sasuke sighed, since he had to. “I like training with my friends or my brother and I don’t like injustice. I spent most of my free time training. And I want to be Hokage.”

He was careful to look straight ahead, uninterested in Kakashi’s reaction and unwilling to witness Naruto’s again. More and more, he just gave up on trying to understand Naruto’s thought process. He had decided that the blond taking offense at Sasuke’s ambition was his own problem.

“Really? What does your father have to say to that?” Kakashi teased, amused. Sasuke wasn’t.

“That’s completely irrelevant.”

Kakashi didn’t insist.

“What about you?” he asked Naruto, not subtle in the least. If they wanted this to have any chance to work, he was going to have to learn how to handle the blonde very fast.

“Uzumaki Naruto. I like to be alone and I hate people. I want to be the strongest person alive.”

“And why is that?”

Naruto crossed Kakashi’s gaze for the first time since his arrival.

“So that I can be free.”

The jounin had nothing to answer to that.

“Cool. Well I think that’ll be enough for the presentation. Now for the fun part. Attack me.”

The abrupt change of tone startled them. Sakura crossed her arm, unsettled.

“What?”

“If you’re serious about becoming shinobis, then show me.”

Sasuke and Sakura fell into position. Naruto didn’t.

“I don’t want to become a shinobi,” he deadpanned, hands in his hoodie’s front pocket, the perfect picture of complete disinterest.

Why did he have to be so damn infuriating.

In an instant Kakashi was in front of him, his fist flying fast toward Naruto’s head who barely blocked it with his forearms. The impact made him take two steps back.

“If you’re serious about becoming stronger then,” Kakashi said casually. “You’ll have to beat me.”

Naruto wasn’t one to resist a challenge.

“We’ll be done here if one of you manage to land a hit on me,” Kakashi said before taking his book out. He was infuriating too. Naruto and he had that in common at least.

They dispersed, taking cover into the woods around the training ground. Sasuke only had Shisui and Itachi as a reference for how strong jounin-level shinobis could be, and he had never gone very far when fighting against either of them. He’d have to be clever about it.

Sakura strayed deeper into the trees, no doubt wanting to set up a trap, her favorites. A passion she
shared with Naruto on occasions – fortunately, they preferred to turn it against experienced
shinobis, to raise the stakes as they said, rather than on an unsuspecting Sasuke. Generally
speaking.

Naruto was nowhere to be found.

And coming out of his thoughts, Sasuke realized Kakashi wasn’t either.

He cursed after himself for getting distracted, frantically looking for the older man who was no
longer standing in the empty field. Where had he…

“Boo!”

Sasuke did not startle.

Kakashi tried to trap him in his hold, kunai in hand. Sasuke was just fast enough to duck and avoid
it. If he was taken hostage and forced to go out a kunai under his throat, he would die of
embarrassment, never to show his face around the village again. Sasuke was the best student of
their year, and he wouldn’t have his friends rescue him like a damsel in distress.

He jumped down from the tree he was hiding in, Kakashi on his heels. Just when he thought he
was out of reach, he was brutally thrown back toward the man. Wires, around his torso and arms.
So Kakashi had managed to catch him after all.

The man pulled at the cable until Sasuke’s back slammed against a tree. He was effectively
trapped.

"I'll come back when I've dealt with your two friends," Kakashi said cheerily before puffing away.
Despite knowing it was a stupid test, the words racked chills through Sasuke's entire body. He
didn't ever want to hear anything like that, even as make-believe.

He had to protect them.

The wires were cutting through his skin, efficiently reminding him not to struggle too much against
them. Fortunately, Kakashi had made quick, basic work of it, and he could wriggle a hand toward
his weapon pouch. Sasuke preferred to think it was the man underestimating him or being sloppy,
instead of him deliberately leaving his student with a way out.

Then again, he couldn’t know that Sasuke was very fond of those wires himself, and that on his
mother’s advice, he was always carrying both a reserve of those and a way of cutting them.
“Knowing how to counter your own moves,” she said, “is what give you the upper hand against
someone who uses the same.”

The process was frustratingly slow – damn, those things were sharp – but he managed to reach into
his weapon pouch and get the fire seal out. It would melt the wire – and the skin of his fingers, if
he wasn’t careful.

Sasuke was just getting himself free when he heard a scream, a curse, and an obnoxious laugh. A
second later, Kakashi came barreling from where he had run out a few minutes before, Sakura hot
on his heels, looking disheveled and way too into this.

He thought she would breeze past him and ignore him, but she stopped at his level to catch her
breath, hands on her knees.

“He’s too much for us,” she stated.
“That’s to be expected,” he replied, caustic. One-day-old genins weren’t going to take down a jounin that easily, especially that one particular jounin.

“About Kakashi… He’s like, really good. Even for jounin standards.”

“Yeah, I know. When I told my parents yesterday they were like “the Hatake Kakashi”? They said he was a genius and everything. He just looks lame to me.”

Sakura didn’t take easily to people Naruto didn’t like.

“We need to be smart about it. Where’s Naruto?”

She pulled a face.

"Around here somewhere."

They would just have to do this without him.

“One hit can’t be *that* hard,” Sakura declared, determined.

She was kind of wrong.

The man was clearly enjoying himself and at this rate, he would run both of them to the ground without breaking a sweat. It wasn’t just because they weren’t good enough. They weren’t used to fighting together, not just the two of them.

What the hell was Naruto doing? Was he giving up on this? Leaving them to their own devices?

Sakura winced at yet another powerful blow barely blocked by her weaker guard. She was getting too worked up, and it made her impulsive, less observant.

They would end up seriously hurt if they didn’t do something about it.

Busy worrying about the girl, Sasuke failed to avoid the next kick connecting painfully with his stomach, sending him reeling back. It distracted Sakura in turn who received the next one and ended up on the ground next to him, groaning and cursing.

He grimaced in advance when he saw her take a deep inhale, fully acquainted by now with her lung capacity, especially when she was angry.

“NARUTO! Get your ass out here right now or I swear to all the gods of this freaking land I will…”

“Alright, alright, geez. You guy can’t do anything without me.”

He had appeared out of nowhere right by their side, casual and relaxed.

She punched him in the stomach for good measure.

“Please pretend you give one single shit about this,” she demanded before facing back toward Kakashi, who was still enjoying his book, completely unbothered.

Sasuke felt like cursing too.

It wasn’t the first time all three of them were ganging up against the same person. It was one of Shisui’s favorite training exercise, because as they got older and better at this, it became good
practice for himself too, even if his body flicker turned it into a frustrating affair. Apart from the very basics of substitution and clone techniques, Sasuke was the only one who could bring ninjutsu on the table when it came to fighting. Sakura’s strong suit was in ambush and strategy. Naruto had his fuinjutsu, but he had long since stopped sharing his progress with them, and he rarely used more than the chakra sealing technique in battle.

They were, on the other hand, all very skilled at taijutsu.

Something was off that day though, and it took only a moment for Sasuke to understand what – Naruto was usually at the forefront of their attack formation, harassing their opponents relentlessly, attracting on him their sole focus, which gave room for the other two to take them by surprise.

Naruto was strangely reluctant today, putting the barest effort into the fight and standing behind more than anything. It was obvious enough that Sakura, fed up, pushed him toward the man at some point, either to force him to get into it or to at least to use him as a distraction, figuring he was just being difficult, as per his habit.

Kakashi reached inside his pouch – for a shuriken maybe, or just for a snack, who knew – but it stopped Naruto dead in his track. He took a hasty step backward and crashed into Sakura, sending them both on their ass.

It dawned on Sasuke that Naruto wasn’t being lazy.

He was afraid.

Sakura caught it too, but as it was often the case, what filled Sasuke with sadness and dread converted straight to anger in her mind.

“Alright, I’ve had it.”

Before Naruto could get back on his feet, she crowded his space, kneeling in front of him, and grabbed the front of his hoodie to bring their face close enough that they had to cross eyes for their gaze to meet.

“What’s wrong with you, you idiot?”

He stayed stubbornly silent, mouth pinched into a displeased line.

“We’re not goofing around anymore, Naruto! We’re a team whether you like it or not. We have to rely on each other!”

“I don’t ask you to trust me!” he yelled back. He struggled weakly, but she didn’t budge, and he wasn’t worked up enough to fight her properly. Yet.

“We already do, dumbass! I’m asking you to trust us!”

Sasuke wanted to tell her to stop, to not put it out there so bluntly. But even if she was more vocal about it, he was just as done as she was with that uneasy status-quo that had them walking on eggshells around Naruto. He trusted she would drive the point across better than him – because she was better at yelling in people’s face, and that was the only thing that seemed to work with their hardheaded friend.

“We need to have each other’s back now. I don’t care what it is that you’re so scared of, what you think will happen that you have to be so careful about. We’re here too. We won’t let anything get to you. That old guy?” she intoned, gesturing toward Kakashi with her head, ignoring his weak
offended protest, “he’s no threat to you. Not as long as we’re here. So stop it with the “I’m alone against the world” act. You’re not. You’ll never be.”

She had been shaking him more and more as she got more heated up, meeting no resistance in the other boy who simply listened, limped as a ragdoll.

“Will you come after me?” he asked quietly, the whisper of a plea. “If they take me away."

She scoffed and got up, held out a hand to help him back to his feet.

“We’ll never stop looking for you.”

She squeezed his hand tightly before letting it go. He turned toward their instructor, pointing at his pouch.

“You have more of those, don’t you? Those papers.”

“Yes,” Kakashi answered without detour, looking like he at least knew what Naruto was talking about. Sasuke refrained from asking, having long practiced saving himself the frustration of questions asked but never answered. Naruto addressed him and Sakura next.

“Don’t let him pull a seal on me,” he requested, and Sasuke didn’t ask. He didn’t need to.

“You can count on it,” he agreed simply. He didn’t need to know to give Naruto confirmation.

Sasuke would do whatever he asked.

“Okay,” Naruto said, shaking his head as of to wake himself up. “Okay.”

“Do I have a say in this?” Kakashi asked from above his book. His distracted air was artificial of course – he had been following the scene closely.

“No,” the three of them deadpanned as one, before falling back into position

“We’re gonna kick your ass,” Naruto promised, before launching forward.

And really, there was no denying it, despite all the issues they had and the things they didn’t say, despite the anger and annoyance and reproach they could have for each other, they still made a damn good team.

Feeling his luck turn, Kakashi jumped backward to put distance between them. Fire chased after him, for Sasuke had gotten really good at the fireball jutsu. He could even direct it to some extent. It worked great with Naruto, because Naruto lacked the basic common sense of being afraid of fire for some reason, and liked to chase right after it to deck their opponent while they least expected it. Sasuke didn’t like that technique much, since he had burnt off Naruto’s hair, clothes and skin more than once, but Naruto got mad if Sasuke refused to do it, and what the hell, Sasuke wasn’t his mom after all. No matter what Sakura said.

Kakashi managed to substitute before Naruto could crash his fist into his cheek – he only punched a log. Sakura was on the lookout though, and she spotted the man easily a few meters away, just by the tree line. Kakashi formed the mudra to burst out a fireball of his own and give himself time to hide again – that was without counting on Naruto’s favorite and most annoying move. He got a scroll out of his hoodie.

The fire was sucked in in a few seconds.
"That's cheating," Kakashi deadpanned from his perch on a tree branch.

“There’s no such thing,” Naruto answered with a grin. He was enjoying himself at least.

“Where did you learn to do that?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” Naruto taunted, hiding the scroll back on his body. The number of those he could carry was insane – or he was just very good at pretending they were different, and he actually unrolled the same one each time at different spots. Sasuke couldn’t figure it out. Naruto’s finger work was a sight to behold – Sasuke had seen him lift Shisui’s wallet from his pocket enough time to know that.

Fortunately, he had something that made it far easier to track Naruto’s movements – or anyone’s.

It never got old, the shimmering tint the world took under the eyes of the Sharingan. It had been hard at first to get used to it, especially in combat – seeing was good, if one was fast enough to react to it. Itachi and Shisui had trained him hard on the use of the eyes in combat situation. How to spot what was important and dismiss what wasn’t, how not to miss a detail but not be distracted by pointless information either. His stamina had improved too, and as long as he didn’t go for genjutsu, he could keep it up for an honorable amount of time.

Kakashi whistled when he crossed Sasuke’s red gaze, and when Sasuke avoided easily the same blow he had barely blocked a few minutes ago. Something caught his gaze, just at the corner of his eyes. Sakura holding up a hand, and Naruto passing her…

He had to get out of the way.

He crouched and jump forward, almost in Kakashi’s legs, breathing past him with the added bonus of throwing him off balance. Kakashi turned with him, expecting an attack from behind, but it wasn’t Sasuke he should have been worrying about. Coming from above, Sakura opened Naruto’s scroll in front of him, practically in his face.

“Release!”

The fireball exploded out of the paper. Kakashi body-flickered out of the way with a little “phew” – a corner of his book was fuming. He didn’t have time to play around, Naruto was already on him. They exchanged a few blows, Kakashi aimed a fist square at Naruto’s face…

Ha. Sasuke had been wrong. This was without a doubt Naruto’s worse move.

The fist landed perfectly, crashed on his nose. His head flew sideways, he tumbled toward the floor, seemingly knocked out. It always worked, either because his opponent got worried for a split second, or just because a well-placed hit had them relax just a smidge.

His genius idea was, instead of avoiding the blow, moving just enough that it looked real – and painful – but didn’t actually put him out. And then…

Here it was. Instead of landing on the floor as anyone receiving that kind of hit would have, he threw his hands forward, transferred his weight to spin his body, and sent his foot flying toward Kakashi’s chest.

The man didn’t move fast enough to avoid the kick fully. It connected with just enough force to have him take a step back. Naruto rolled on the ground before springing back to his feet. His nose was dripping blood into his feral grin.
“One hit,” he said, triumphant.

He had decided not to put them through the bell test, both because he really didn’t need to antagonize them anymore after their disastrous first encounter, and because he hoped it was a lesson they had learned already.

The whole point of the bell test was to evaluate the kids’ concept of teamwork and their understanding of the trials they would soon withstand as shinobis. Kakashi had had no qualm about failing his two previous teams, not just because they hadn’t been able to simply consult one another for one second before jumping him, but mostly because the point hadn’t been made, even when they had found themselves either tied to a post or eating in front of a starving teammate, even when he had explained to them, afterward, why it was wrong to put orders before their wellbeing. It’s not that they hadn’t understood – they had plain disagreed. *The mission comes first*, they had said. *My teammates would understand.*

Kids would say that, he pondered. Kids who didn’t know any better. He had been exactly the same. So convinced that it was an easy choice to do, that it was obvious. Determined never to hesitate on the matter, never to stray as his father had.

What the bell test asked of them was to reflect on that. Truly, deeply. To understand the strength that could come from their mutual trust, from them staying together no matter what. It wasn’t out of naïve feelings, of believing that you could always save everyone, that things turned out fine for those who stayed true to their beliefs.

How could you explain to children that sometimes it was those very beliefs that would let them down? That they had to think hard about what they could live with, and what they couldn’t? That they had to agree to it, to voice it aloud, if they hoped their team to survive the trials shinobis went through in this world? It was too late to ask those questions in the heat of conflict, when the choice had to be made right on the spot, when death was the consequences of their decisions.

Of course, sending that new iteration of team 7 back to the Academy was out of the question. First, because if he dared fail Uchiha Fugaku’s son, he would hear about it until the end of time, but mostly because Naruto would never go with it. And they had to seriously start taking into account what the boy wanted and felt, if they didn’t want to end up with a missing jinchuuriki.

*He* had to consider the boy’s feelings, if he ever hoped to salvage the relationship he didn’t have with his late teacher’s son.

Kakashi would have still been able to fail them though, had they shown signs of being too self-centered to be part of a team. But he had had an inkling that that, at least, wouldn’t be a problem.

He had been right. It had to happen sometimes.

“I told you to stop doing that!” Sakura scolded Naruto as she fussed over him, trying to stop the blood pouring out of the boy’s nose. Even if he had pulled out from that punch, it had still connected hard. His disregard for his own safety was something they would need to work on, if only for the team’s peace of mind. He had a feeling it was hard to make Naruto do anything he didn’t want to.

“And I told you to leave me alone,” he grumbled, batting her hands away only to have her come back at it with renewed determination. Sasuke was eyeing the scene with a resignation that only came with experience.
They knew each other well.

“See? It stopped bleeding. Quit it.”

“You cut your nose open. Why do you always have to do that…”

“It worked, didn’t it?”

“What would you say if your friends tried to pull the same move?” Kakashi asked, cutting in. The way Naruto tensed up when he addressed him, it hurt like a slap to the face, but Kakashi would just have to suck it up until the boy trusted him enough that he would be so wary. Kakashi deserved it anyway.

“They wouldn’t. They’re too weak.”

“Hey!” both kids exclaimed. Naruto stuck his tongue at them.

“They could still try. Seeing that it “works”.”

“No!” Naruto protested, grimacing.

“Then you can understand why they don’t like when you do it,” Kakashi concluded. Naruto pouted and grumbled but didn’t argue further, avoiding Sasuke and Sakura’s smug looks.

“Here,” Kakashi said, reaching into his pouch. Naruto frowned, on guard, but his expression melted into one of dumb surprise when Kakashi slapped a band-aid on the bridge of his nose.

"Staying safe is also a courtesy to your teammates," he chided, knowing that was a lesson that would need to be revisited – many times, probably. Naruto was going to argue, but was put to silence by a searing glare from his two friends.

“You did good, kids,” he told them, because they had. They shrugged and looked away, playing the unaffected.

Usually that would be the moment where Kakashi opt out of it. They were obviously still uneasy with him, Naruto mostly, but the two others too, by pure emulation. He could have given up. He had almost done it, the day before, as soon as he had exited the classroom, had almost run to the Hokage and to say it was a mistake, that he wasn’t up for it after all, that they had to find someone else. But first, there wasn’t anyone else, and second, that would have meant giving up on Naruto for good. And he couldn’t have that. Shisui kept telling him that late, or in that case very, very late, was better than not at all. And Kakashi was twelve years late with a strong handicap, but dammit, he was going to pull it off.

“I think that calls for celebrations. I’m treating you to ramen.”

It was hilarious how they tried to pretend they didn’t care all that much.

“You went to Shisui, didn’t you,” Sasuke asked, suspicious.

“You will never know.”

“I could just ask him.”

“But where is the fun in that?”

Sasuke huffed around a small smile. They turned around, eager to cash in on a proposition he was
sure to regret very soon, but before there was something he needed to do.

“Wait. Naruto. I’d like to talk to you.”

There was no denying they would make a great team, with the way they consulted each other silently, with raised eyebrows and head bobbing, before Naruto nodded.

“We’ll wait,” Sakura said firmly. Kakashi didn’t have the benefice of having known her beforehand like with Sasuke, and she was clearly siding with Naruto on her opinion of him. It didn’t bother him all that much – it was better they be on their guard.

And he couldn’t forget that they had been betrayed by a teacher before.

They took a few steps away, just enough not to hear what would be said, but close so that they could jump in no doubt, if need be.

"What do you want?” Naruto asked bluntly. Aggressivity seemed to be his default defense mechanism, be it to hide unease, confusion, or fear.

“I wanted to apologize.”

That got him the boy’s attention now. He went on.

“We should have taken your feelings into consideration when assigning the team leaders. I can’t go into details as to why I was chosen for the job, but I want to make it clear that I’m not here to monitor you or reign you in. Sakura was right though – if you ask for it, I’ll be switched with someone else.”

That was more or less a lie, although he would do his best to make it happen, if Naruto so wished. Kakashi remembered all too well the frustration of never being taken seriously as a child, of his feelings being dismissed and disregarded, because he was young, he didn’t know any better, he would get over it. The powerlessness he had felt then, it was real, and it had clung to him for a long time. He could do better by those kids. He had to.

“You all seem to forget I’m well practiced in the art of sucking it up,” Naruto answered lightly, almost jokingly.

He was dead serious though, and he was also right. Most of his life had been decided without his consent or opinion, and he had been told often enough that they didn’t matter, and he just had to deal with it.

"That doesn't mean it always has to be this way," Kakashi declared firmly.

Naruto clearly didn’t believe him.

“It’s fine. Sasuke likes you,” Naruto said as an answer. “Shisui too. And I…”

He bit his lips, and Kakashi wondered what he didn’t want to say. “And I like them”? “Trust them”? Something that was too much, too revealing to say aloud.

“Another will be the same anyway,” Naruto concluded, and that wasn’t very encouraging. They were all interchangeable in his eyes. Be it Kakashi or someone else, he would take it all the same.

It had been a long time since Kakashi hadn’t felt the urge to fight for something.

“You don’t know. Maybe I’ll turn out to be the best jounin sensei of the whole place,” he
challenged lightly. It worked, at least a little – Naruto scoffed, a hint of amusement worming its way into his gloomy expression.

“Oh the worst,” he deadpanned.

“We’ll have to wait and see.”

He seemed content with that. There was more Kakashi would have wanted to say, but he was aware his position was still precarious, and he could see the two others getting agitated out of the corner of his eyes. Naruto stopped him though, before he could turn around and join them.

“I lied, earlier.”

He was gripping at the fabric of his sweatshirt, on his belly. Looking down, face unreadable.

“What do you even know,” Naruto retorted, and Kakashi was reminded that all in all, he was first and foremost an insolent brat.

This was going to be fun.

They walked back to the two other kids, only to find them chatting with a newcomer.

“Hello, Kakashi!” Inuzuka Hana said brightly. “Hello, Naruto. I was asked to make the round and take the new teams’ picture,” she explained, waving her camera around for emphasis. Sakura was already fixing her hair. Naruto rolled his eyes.

The girl’s three dogs were running around yapping, as carefree and playful as they were focused and deadly in a fight. The contrast was always a little jarring but then again, it was the same with the shinobis, wasn’t it? They easily made the switch. Easily became weapons.

“Do we have to?”

“Don’t be difficult!” the girl chided, hooking an arm into his to drag him closer. She was smiling, more relaxed now that he was. Kakashi wondered where those feelings came from, both her admiration and her protectiveness of the other boy, who wasn’t making any effort to win either. Sasuke went to stand on his other side.

“I’m not going to run away,” Naruto protested.

“We wouldn’t put it past you,” Sakura retorted lightly.

“Hey!” Naruto protested. It was covered by the click of the camera. “Hey!” he exclaimed again when he realized he wasn’t even looking at the lens. Hana took another one for good measure, laughing at their antics.
“I think you’re good to go.”

“Thanks, Hana.”

“Will we get our own?” Sakura asked, very on board with the idea.

“Of course, it’s a bit of a tradition. It will be a few days at most. I’ll let you know!”

She bid them farewell, the dogs at her heels, in a hurry to catch team 8 before they wrapped up for the day. Kakashi took his team to Ichiraku – alright so it was a Shisui suggestion, but he would have come up with it on his own. Really.

“Hello and welcome to… Oh, Naruto!”

“Hi old man. How are you doing?”

“Ah, Sakura and Sasuke too! Well, you know me, I’m always fine. What can I get you kids?”

Kakashi was aware that a vast portion of the shinobi force had a tab at Ichiraku and that the man was known to be open and friendly with everyone, and yet it was still surprising to see Naruto be at ease like this. The kids sat down at the counter, well acquainted with the place.

“The usual for me old man. Extra meat, because our sensei is paying,” Naruto said, mischievous, smirking at Kakashi as the two others made similar requests.

“Kakashi, you’re treating the kids?”

“I guess I am.”

“I hope he’s being good to you,” the old man said to the children. “Or you take it to me, right?”

“What can you do, Teuchi?” Sakura asked around a laugh, delighting in the man’s antics.

“I’m not sure I can take him in a fight…” Teuchi said, faking to be pensive. “But I can refuse to serve him. Or only give him cold soup.”

“A most horrible fate,” Kakashi said with a dramatic sigh. “I guess I’ll have to be a good teacher then.”

He made sure to make eye contact with the three of them, willing to convince them he was very serious about this. Teuchi rewarded that resolution with a steaming bowl of noodles.

“What do you think then, Naruto?” Sakura asked once they were back in the street, and Kakashi had made his goodbyes, promising “even more fun” for the next day.

At the early days of their relationship – and for a long time after that – when Sakura was a bit lost, still hurting from being attacked and not knowing what to do with herself, she had often deferred to Naruto’s decisions. She followed him around, did as he told. It was annoying and incomprehensible, but harmless. If she wanted to believe he had any kind of wisdom to impart to her, it was her problem.

He couldn’t tell when it had shifted to… this. Now when she asked for his opinions and thoughts, it wasn’t to emulate, wasn’t because she had none of her own.
She genuinely cared. She wanted to know. It was important to her, how he was feeling and what he thought.

Somehow it was even weirder.

No doubt she had her very own opinion made over the jounin instructor, but she wanted to hear what Naruto had to say about it. Wanted to know if she would have to play buffer or to be wary, if she could let her guard down or not.

Basically, she was looking out for him.

He could have told her off – he didn’t need her care or protection. But needing it or not, it was comforting all the same.

“I guess he’s alright,” he said reluctantly.

The man was no threat, at least, and Naruto saw no deceiving in him when he had pulled him aside to apologize. They were shinobis now after all, he had to make do with that kind of situation. The truth was, any jounin, any chunin, anyone in the village could have been the one to put him down, that night or any other. It’s not like the man was special in that regards. It looked like he wouldn’t be the worst possible outcome either – at least it didn’t seem like he hated Naruto’s guts.

“You sure?”

If she didn’t usually call him out for lying about his feelings, she always made sure he knew she saw straight to the bullshit. She wasn’t as perceptive as she thought – yet. More and more she could indeed see through him, to his growing displeasure.

“Yeah. It’ll be fine. Hey, who knows. Maybe we’ll even have some fun.”

She kept her scrutinizing gaze on him for a little while longer before deciding he was being sincere. She smiled, pleased, and punched both Sasuke and him on the arm, playful and smiling, which was the best look for her.

“We definitely will!”

It sounded like a promise.

She waved at them before taking off as Naruto and Sasuke took the way back to the Uchiha district. Their morning conversation seemed so far away, and yet it was all Naruto could think of.

Surely Sasuke had to know, right? But Shisui was always saying it was bad to assume people knew things without being told. More often than not, they actually didn’t.

It’s just that Naruto wasn’t sure he would be able to say it.

They came into view of Shisui’s house without having uttered a single word.

“Good night,” Sasuke said without stopping as Naruto slowed down in front of the house. For some reasons Naruto couldn’t stand the vision of his retreating back.

“Wait!”

With how fast Sasuke spun around, he was most likely waiting for it. Hoping for it maybe. Sasuke had been bold enough to talk first, that morning, and now it was Naruto’s turn.
“I know I’m not… I know it’s not easy. With me. But please, just… Don’t give up on me just yet.”

He could do better by his friends. They had nothing to do with his pain and anger, on the contrary. They didn’t deserve him to cause them further trouble. He could do better. He could be worthy of their care.

Sasuke’s anticipating expression morphed into a solemn, determined one.

“As long as you don’t ask me to,” he said, tone set like he was expressing the most absolute of truth, “I’m not going away.”

It sounded like a promise too.

.

Shisui jumped to his feet as soon as the front door opened, failing miserably at not looking like he had been anxiously waiting for Naruto’s return since the minute he had left.

“Welcome home!” he exclaimed, high-pitched, cursing his traitor voice. Naruto gave him the same weird look he always did at the familiar greeting.

“Hi.”

“How… how did it go?” Shisui asked after an awkward pause.

Naruto took the time to take off his shoes, unhook his weapon pouch that he put on the shelf next to Shisui’s. He looked pensive, so Shisui didn’t press.

“…It was okay,” Naruto finally answered, decisive.

“Listen, Naruto, I’m…”

“It’s fine.”

“No. It’s not. I’m sorry.”

Naruto’s eyes flickered to the stairs as he contemplated bolting like he usually did. This time though, he decided to stay.

“It… it did hurt. And I wished you’d think about it before. But I… I just don’t want to be mad at you.”

The boy looked tired, drained. It was crazy how he was basically tireless when it came to physical exertion, capable of training and sparing for hours on end without displaying any sign of tiredness, but emotional endeavors left him depleted and exhausted. He felt so much, so hard, even if he tried to hide it. And he never seemed to catch a break.

“Alright then,” Shisui said, willing to leave it as it was if it was what Naruto wanted, even if he would have preferred they talked about it properly, even if he wanted to apologize again.

He would just have to do better.

“I don’t have anything to do this afternoon,” he added when it looked like Naruto was going to retreat in his room to sulk. “Wanna bake something?”

The boy failed to hide how he perked up at that and Shisui could comfort himself with the thought
that this, at least, still worked.

They all got their picture, a few days later. A moment fixed in time of them laughing and pouting, with their friends and teammates, framed and hanged on a wall or set up on a shelf, so that it could be seen and remembered. To someday bring comfort and joy, or motivation and nostalgia, or regrets, anguish, pain. Or maybe a mix of all that.
Pic's on my tumblr.

I drew that a week ago but didn't want to post it without the chapter haha. Things are looking up! Not for long though, sorry. We're wandering into life promises territory. I promise there won't be as many flashbacks as in the show though. I don't expand that much on the fighting because it's the hardest to write, I hope I did okay with that... And for those wondering, the Wave Arc will indeed happen, soon enough :) Again thank you all so much for your comments and support, I'm happy you're enjoying this!

IF YOU ARE BINGE READING THIS, as I know some of you wild people are, you're almost at 100k. It's time for a break! Have a drink, a snack, go to sleep maybe, or get some of your work done. Next chapters will still be here when you come back. Take care!
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

The exciting lives of freshly promoted genins.

Chapter Notes

WE ARE OFFICIALLY OVER 100K PEOPLE. I know some of you consider that to be the bare minimum of a fic being interesting haha, but I'm a One-Shot kinda girl and it's huge for me. Tbh I wouldn't read that myself probably x) too freaking long. But writing it? I'm DOWN. We also hit 800 kudos!! You rock.

That feeling when you spot a huge plot mishap in your writing... I realized writing this chapter that following my timeline, Iruka became a teacher at the Academy at like 17 or something XD I had a minor freak out about this, but then I remembered the number of kids that were soldiers and assassins in Naruto and I decided it wasn't that out there. Let's just say he jumped into it right after becoming a chunin haha.

Anyway, you keep blowing me away with your feedback and I love you for it. I hope you'll enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Oy, Kakashi! Over there!”

The outburst got Gai dirty looks from the other patrons within reach of his booming voice – so, the whole bar – but that wasn’t something his friend had the capacity to concern himself with. Kakashi made his way across the room toward the corner where the owner had shoved his friends in, hoping to mitigate their circle of disturbance probably.

They came here often enough. Kakashi had gotten closer to the other jounin instructors since he was one himself, prompting relentless teasing from Tenzo who pretended to be amazed at Kakashi managing to score six entire friends in total.

That’s why he wasn’t invited to hang out with them.

“Hi guys,” he greeted, sliding next to Gai, who pouted if they weren’t sitting together on the same bench. “What did I miss?”

“Asuma was just telling us how his team managed to fail a D-rank mission. Again,” Kurenai supplied with way too much glee for someone exposing their friend’s misery.

“Are we playing “who has it worse” again?” Kakashi asked while gesturing for the waiter to bring another round of beer.

“I win because my kids do it on purpose,” Asuma declared to the bottom of his empty glass.
“I don’t know, I feel like that’s better than them being actually bad enough to fail a D-rank.”

“You say that because you haven’t lived it.”

On paper, there was no reason for team 10 to be worse than any other team. On the contrary, if the Ino-Shika-Cho formation was maintained, it wasn’t only because of the close ties of the three clans, but also because it was a damn effective combination.

Unfortunately, that didn’t transfer to unruly teenagers.

“Ino’s constantly out for blood for one reason or another, and Shikamaru put all his efforts into making as little effort as possible. I know how that sounds, but trust me, it’s accurate. There’s only Choji to play nice, but it’s not like he has any authority on them…”

“Maybe they’d do better on a real mission,” Kurenai pondered. It was a common enough problem among genins who tired very quickly of rescuing cats and raking leaves.

“As they are now, I wouldn’t recommend them for painting a goddamn wall, let alone carry any significant task.”

Despite his penchant for the dramatics, Asuma’s concerns were real. Teams that blew up before they could take off happened more often than they would have liked, and these kids’ status made it all the more complicated.

“I’m gonna lay it down as it is to them. If they don’t start playing along, they’ll be sent back to the Academy benches.”

The threat wasn’t made lightly.

“What about you, Kurenai?” Kakashi asked to shift the focus. The woman took a long sip of her beer before sighing heavily.

“Shino’s taciturn nature and Kiba’s brash one, I can deal with. I have before. It’s Hinata I’m worried about.”

“She’s not strong enough?” he asked, remembering the rumors about the Hyuuga heir. Kurenai scoffed.

“Are you kidding me? It’s the opposite. She can’t be stopped. She’s training herself to an early grave. I know the pressure those clan kids are under, but this is ridiculous. She’s closed off and almost non-verbal, and she has no regards for her own well-being. And I do mean none,” Kurenai insisted, distressed. Gai and she exchanged a loaded look – they both had Hyuuga shaped issues to deal with.

“You’re being awfully silent,” Kakashi said to Gai, thrown off balance by his boisterous friend being so withdrawn. He seemed lost in thoughts, and not pleasant ones. He was still staring at Kurenai when he answered.

“I might have to call for the disbanding of my team.”

The three other jounins gasped, taken aback.

“Wait, really?” Asuma called, disbelieving.

“What happened?” Kurenai asked, concerned. She rested a hand on Gai’s across the table, a silent
comfort.

“I’ve had my share of troubled kids too,” he answered, “but Neji is something else entirely. He’s out of control, and I can’t reach out to him. He doesn’t want me too.”

“Yeah, but…”

“He broke three of Lee’s ribs yesterday.”

Kurenai brought her other hand to her mouth, eyes wide. Asuma cursed and crushed his cigarette in the ashtray, only to light up another one in the same movement.

“I can’t put it on training gone wrong. He’s aware of his own strength, his level of control over his abilities is to be praised. Lee riled him up as he always does – he’s the only one that can elicit any emotion out of the boy. Not good ones though. He inflicted that blow deliberately.”

They all knew Gai had a soft spot for Lee, in whom he saw so much of himself. But he was also strongly attached to the other two – he always got so invested in these kids. Too much, maybe.

“I’m supposed to enter them to the chunin exam soon, but that would be irresponsible of me. The exam is supposed to be taken as a team, and as it stands now, they’re not one. At all.”

A heavy silence blanketed their table for a while, as they all considered the consequences of his words. He was the one to break it by banging both his fists on the table, disrupting the thankfully half-empty glasses and snacks.

“But I’m not giving up on them! We still have some time. I can break through their thick skull.”

It was a lucky thing that he was the one who had inherited that particular team. He would do his hardest for them.

“I guess I’m the one who is better off then,” Kakashi remarked, to stir them toward lighter topics.

“Really? It’s going good with the golden trio?”

“Well. You know how as instructors we’re, you know, the higher authority? How kids try so hard to prove themselves to us? More often than not, I feel like I’m the one who has to prove himself to them.”

On that matter, each kid was as bad as the next. Naruto made a point of being as difficult as possible, discussing his every order or simple advice, quite obviously out of pure spite. Sasuke was both annoyed at this and enabling it, because “Shisui does it differently” or “Itachi said it’s not like that” and “in the Uchiha clan…”. It was hard to tell if he was genuine or just as much of a little shit as his friend. As for Sakura, she was apparently practicing her future career of general inspector of the administration, questioning and criticizing his every action.

On top of that, they were so damn demanding. It was absurd for kids to be so particular about the ways they wanted to be trained to beat up others. “We did taijutsu yesterday, let’s practice chakra control, no, not like that sensei, teach us how to throw while running sensei, sensei, are you already tired we’ve only been trying to beat you up for six hours straight”.

Monsters, all three of them.

“At least you’re getting somewhere.”
“Yeah, if I stay on track they might grant me the chunin rank…” he grumbled. “What is up with kids these days.”

The question, innocuous, was more loaded than it should have been. It was worrying indeed, both case by case, and because it was so spread out. There was always the few odd trouble kids from year to year, but so many at the same time, it started to look like a pattern.

Some had been pointing fingers at the Academy.

It was largely unsupervised, left to the discretion of the chunin and jounin in charge of the kids’ education. The village had more pressing matters to deal with, and that had resulted in those kids being taught by a man that was apparently working for freaking Orochimaru for years and years. It had also come to light that a lot of shinobis seemed to see the Academy as an easy way to take a break from active duty. Shisui was always raging these days after most of his colleagues who couldn’t be bothered to take it seriously.

There had been very few teachers who had actually been fully committed to the job. In fact, Kakashi could only think of one.

Iruka’s death was still hard to accept, after all these years. It was so abnormal, so unfair. It should never have happened. He was so damn young, barely a year into his teaching position and already determined to change it all, to do better.

Danzo had been rooted out at the cost of the young man’s life. They hadn’t realized what value it really had then.

“I think we need more drinks,” Kurenai declared to put an end to their gloomy silence. It was accepted heartily. Gai immediately challenged Kakashi to a drinking contest, and training would be hell the next day, but Kakashi didn’t even think of refusing.

The kids would just have to deal with his hangover and get off his back for one damn morning.

There was nothing Ino could do about that anger.

It was directionless, shapeless. She couldn’t even put it into words, and she didn’t know who to blame it for. There was no one she could take it out on. She could only stew in her indignation.

“You said flower arrangement was relaxing,” Sai said by her side, voice as flat and unconcerned at ever, “but you don’t look very relaxed.”

She let out a long sigh and put down the poor flower she had been absently crushing into her hands. People found Sai’s apparent lack of involvement and care to be off-putting, but it was perfect to her. How could one stay mad when faced with such calm, such unemotional pragmatism? She couldn’t go as far as to praise Sai’s extreme rationalization of everything in his life, including his and other’s feelings, but she couldn’t deny she found solace into it sometimes.

“Sorry. You’re right, it doesn’t seem to be working today.”

She should have known it wouldn’t – she usually got into it when she needed to calm down or take her mind off of what was reeling her up, but since her mind couldn’t pinpoint what it was that made her feel so restless exactly, there was no steering it away from it either.

“Do you want to talk about it.”
It was sweet of him to offer, seeing how awkward emotional sharing could be for him. And she wanted to. It was about him, after all.

“Why didn’t you come to graduation?” she asked, knowing she would only confuse him. But it was the starting point.

“They said I didn’t have to,” he answered, puzzled, as expected, by this line of questioning.

“But didn’t you want to?” she insisted. She could never take her anger out on Sai. He wouldn’t have understand and maybe wouldn’t even have registered it, and she couldn’t do that to him.

He kept weaving two long pieces of ribbon for a while, pensive.

“I guess it would have been nice,” he concluded.

She wanted to break the table in half.

She had explained it to all of her friends, and all of those they interacted with, one by one. That it wasn’t natural for him to make his own choices and voice his own opinions. That he would agree to any suggestion, abide by any request. He was better at it now, and he knew not to do things simply because he was asked to. But still, she had told them time and time again – Shikamaru and Choji, who hung out with them the most, Shino and Sakura then, and even Naruto, and Sasuke by association. Ask for what he wants. Then ask again. Truly ask, until you see the gears turning into his brain, wait for it, a few minutes, an hour if you have to. It wasn’t true that he was fine with whatever, that he didn’t mind either way. It wasn’t.

He was just still in the process of being taught that he could choose. That he could have feelings, that he could express them.

All the kids had gotten the memo.

And then that stupid fucking teacher had barreled in, and what had he said? “Oh, Sai, you’re already a chunin technically. You don’t have to pass the test.”

And what was Sai was supposed to say? “Maybe, but I’d like to anyway”? As if he was going to. Sai still couldn’t say, after half a decade, what his favorite food was, and if he liked Ino’s company or not.

So of course he had just answered “okay” and later framed it as “I decided not to go.”

Fucking fuck.

The whole point of Sai and Shin being put into the Academy, instead of being integrated to the shinobi force like their rank could dictate it to, was that so they could have a chance at integrating their generation, have a shot at a regular childhood. And what had that moron of a teacher done? Sidelined Sai at the last minute. Shin had passed the freaking genin exam, because that was what the other kids did, that’s all.

At the time she had thought they had decided not to let Sai pass with them for some reasons. Angering enough. But it wasn’t even that. She should have asked him herself, should have done that job she had been doing for years now. Ask him “are you sure? You don’t want to come? Be with the others?”

People didn’t talk but they noticed all the same. Bad enough that he wouldn’t be put on a team like the rest of them, but why offer him to skip the graduation? Seriously, what was the point? To have
one less kid to deal with?

“Why didn’t you say so then?”

“I don’t know. Is that why you’re mad.”

“I’m not mad at you.”

She was mad at the world at large. It was an old feeling. Ino had been spying on adults and listening in to their secrets for as long as she could remember, and she had never liked much what she heard. She had her team now, but they were wasting their time on stupid missions and boring training and she couldn’t stand it. She wanted to do more.

She wanted things to change.

“Here’s your share, kids.”

“Wow, thanks, that’s great.”

Naruto found it quite fascinating how much emotion Kakashi managed to convey with only one eye visible. The subtility of his level of aggravation at Naruto’s insolence where all displayed by that single eye and eyebrow. Really, it was a feat.

The man deposited the few bills in each of their hands and they pocketed it without further comments. Of course, repairing and repainting a fence couldn’t pay all that much, but he was convinced that an actual professional would have charged way more.

Genins were just convenient cheap labor, it seemed.

Sakura said something about spending all her fortune on ice-cream with Ino and took off – Kakashi was already gone in smoke who knew where.

Sasuke and Naruto didn’t really have any other friend, so they hung out together in the busy streets. Sasuke avoided strolling through the Uchiha district if he could, miffed by all the people that would stop to greet him and chat with him. And, well, Naruto wasn’t exactly welcome there.

“What about your father?”

Sasuke’s mouth turned down into a displeased frown. Sasuke had said nothing in that regard but he was clearly upset with his father’s prolonged absence – vastly because he didn’t know what it was about or where he was. The man had taken off in the middle of the night a few weeks earlier, and
news had been scarce ever since.

“My mother says he’s fine.”

They had to go home eventually, even if Naruto really didn’t want to. As a last resort, he suggested Sasuke came with him. The look his friend gave him told him he wasn’t being smooth in the least, but he just didn’t want to face it alone.

As planned, Shisui’s house was a bit crowded when they made it there. Shisui was here, Itachi too. There was also Kakashi, and another man Naruto’s had never seen before.

Or well, he had never seen his face.

“Ah, welcome home, Naruto! Hi Sasuke,” Shisui said with a forced smile, still so bad at hiding his worries. “I… don’t think you know Tenzo.”

Shisui had warned him, quite bluntly, about that other friend he wanted Naruto to meet. The second man from the forest. He’d said it would avoid further unpleasant surprises. Naruto could get behind the idea, but that didn’t mean he had to like it.

“Tree guy,” he greeted, remembering how the branches had sprung up around him.

The man – younger than Kakashi, about Shisui’s age probably – smiled the long-suffering smile of someone who had been given that particular unaltering nickname a million times. Naruto was officially adopting it then.

“Nice to meet you,” Sasuke said by his sides, traces of annoyance in his voice at being left out of yet another conversation.

“Yeah, same,” Naruto added for good measure, even if it wasn’t particularly true. The situation made him antsy – between Kakashi and that Tenzo guy, plus Itachi and his creepy stare, and Shisui looking at him closely from the side…

“Okay, that was nice, we’re going to my room,” he declared bluntly, gripping Sasuke’s wrist to drag him after him up the stairs.

“You could stay around a bit!” Shisui protested without much conviction.

“We see enough of y’all all day long!” Naruto retorted just before slamming the door to his room, cutting back whatever argument Shisui had up next. Sasuke snorted and Naruto grinned at him – his comeback always made his friend snicker into his collar.

They read comic books and ate out of Naruto’s secret stash of snacks until Itachi came to fetch his little brother for dinner. The house was thankfully deserted when Naruto went downstairs to help out with their own dinner.

“That didn’t go so bad,” Shisui said cheerfully, already busy cutting vegetables, more relaxed seeing that Naruto hadn’t blown up upon meeting the tree guy.

“I can behave you know,” he grumbled.

“I do.”

Shisui gave him a winning smile. Naruto huffed, annoyed.

“Oh, before I forget…”
He reached into his hoodie for the mission’s money.

“Here.”

“Naruto, I told you…”

“Just take it!”

Shisui huffed and sighed and rolled his eyes, but he relented eventually, and took the meager salary of the day’s work from Naruto’s hand. It was an ongoing subject of quarrel ever since Naruto had started to get paid – albeit very poorly – for his missions. Since he was basically free-loading on Shisui’s ass – and since the man categorically refused to take pick-pocketed money – Naruto had resolved to give him his shinobi pay, as compensation. He knew the village paid Shisui in some way to look after his charge, but seeing what he was allotted as a child, he couldn’t imagine it was a lot. Shisui didn’t go on missions nowadays, since he was teaching at the Academy. That couldn’t be very well paid either.

Shisui, being the obnoxious idiot he was, didn’t actually take the money. He put it all in a big jar on one of the higher shelves of the kitchen – one he could access easily, but Naruto could not. He had tapped a piece of paper on it that read “The “Naruto is being stubborn” jar”.

Shisui was just the worse.

Naruto would miss it though, when it ended.

“Say, Shisui.”

“What? Do you need me to give you an excuse to go knock at Sasuke’s door again? Maybe we’re out of eggs…”

“That’s not… that was only once! Urg, whatever.”

“Sorry, sorry. What is it?”

Naruto considered pushing back the conversation, again, like he had been doing for weeks now. He kept expecting Shisui to bring it up, but it looked like it wasn’t going to happen.

“I was just wondering when you wanted me to go.”

“What? Go where?”

“Well… I don’t know yet. But, to leave, I mean. Leave this place.”

Naruto huffed at Shisui’s dumb expression. Why did he have to be so slow.

“The Hokage said I could go back to live on my own when I made genin.”

Shisui sliced through his finger instead of the carrot.

“Fucking shit!”

The next few minutes of chaos consisted solely of them both running around the kitchen trying to find something to stop the blood, make a bandage, and clean up the mess. A few minutes later they were back in the exact same position – except Naruto was the one slicing up the carrots while Shisui was only allowed to mix the eggs.
“I can be gone whenever. It’s not like I have much to pack.”

“There’s… no rush.”

Naruto shrugged. He didn’t care either way. He just wanted to have a heads up. His old apartment had probably gone to someone else, right? He had retrieved the few things worth retrieving there ages ago. He would need to go back to the shinobi district – as an orphan genin he would receive some help to pay for rent and food, until he was a chunin and got better-paying missions.

It would be weird, to go back to live alone, but he could deal. It was the natural state of things for him. This was always supposed to be temporary. It had seemed so distant when the Hokage had given him that deadline, but time had passed quickly after all. At the time he couldn’t wait for it to be over, irked by the constant presence of another person so close to him, enraged that he was being watched like a prisoner in his own living space.

But now…

It didn’t matter anyway. Things were as they were.

“I need maybe a week. To find something.”

“…Okay.”

If Shisui wasn’t pushing him out of the door, he at least had the time to look for a decent place. He dreaded having to ask the Administration for help, but who would rent him anything without outside approval? This was going to be hell.

So, life.

“…What are you going to do then?” Kakashi asked instead of like, answering that very question. Shisui had made a quick retelling of his conversation with Naruto a few days ago, and seeing how silent and pensive Kakashi had seemed, he thought he was going to give him some actual advice.

Ha. Kakashi, advice. Even if he decided to pull one out of his ass, Shisui wasn’t sure it would be wise to listen to it.

“I don’t know. I’m waiting for inspiration.”

“You mean you wrote to Izumi, right?” Tenzo asked lightly like the little shit he was. Shisui grimaced, but didn’t deny it. He was spot on.

“What else can I do? Naruto’s been bitching about going back to having his own place from the very start. He had kind of dropped it lately, so I wasn’t worrying about it anymore, but it was always meant to end like this.”

“Is that why we’re hanging around the Hokage Tower like weirdos?”

“Their answer is due today. Hayate told me he’d bring me the message out if it came.”

Shisui pulled a face at Tenzo who was good at subtly inferring through facial cues alone how done he was with his friends’ stupidity. As if he was one to talk, seriously.

“What’s the matter anyway?” he asked, weirdly serious for once.
“What?”

“What? Do you want him to stay?”

“I told you, he…”

“That’s not what I’m asking.”

Shisui looked away, unsure. They were sitting on one of the benches lining the street in front of the Hokage Tower, near the Academy. They got a few glimpses at kids running laps around the yard, their screams and laughs carrying all the way to the three jounins. Shisui was due back in class soon and losing hope that Izumi’s answer would arrive before he had to leave.

Despite what Naruto still thought, Shisui had never been unwilling to take him in, not ever. He was on board from the start, but he was aware back then that it was only temporary, just to support the boy while he went through processing life-changing revelations about his past and future.

But the truth was, Shisui liked having him around. Seeing him come a little more out of his shell day after day was direct proof that things could change, things could improve, that Shisui could help, could truly make a difference. His life was nicer and funnier with the infuriating boy around to steal his weapons and take over cooking with the most dramatic sigh because Shisui was “useless and a damn menace”. Which wasn’t even true and more often than not, they ended up cooking together, side by side in their small kitchen.

And it was nice.

Shisui had always wanted siblings.

And maybe he had hoped Naruto would think so too. Enough that he wouldn’t want to leave anymore. Shisui didn’t like the idea of the boy being all alone again, of not being able to check out on him, to look after him.

It didn’t feel right to say it though. Naruto had been forced to come live with Shisui in the first place. It stood to reason that he didn’t want it to go on more than it had to.

“That’s irrelevant,” he answered, albeit not very convincingly. That seemed to be his two friends’ opinion too, judging by their expression.

“Well, let’s see what your most intelligent friend has to say about it,” Kakashi said, pointing at the tower’s entrance. Hayate was strolling toward them, a paper in hand.

“Here you go,” he said, dumping the message into Shisui’s waiting hand. “Don’t forget what you owe me,” he added nonchalantly but with an underlying threat before rushing back inside, no doubt worried about falling behind on sorting through the numerous messages the Tower received constantly. Rumor had that in the Message Room of the Aviary, that oversaw all communications within and outside of the village, a five-minute delay at the beginning of the day was a five-hour one by the end of it.

“What did that cost you?” Kakashi asked, amused.

“I have to get him a date with Yugao,” Shisui answered with how much dignity as he could. He unrolled the message eagerly. He had been lucky enough that Hayate was willing to send his letter to Izumi and Anko with their next batch of mission pointers. He couldn’t send her anything himself, since he didn’t know where she was exactly.
The message was short, but straight to the point. Kakashi laughed after reading it above Shisui’s shoulders.

“She’s not wrong,” he said when Shisui pocketed the message. He had to think about this properly.

“I’ll have to think about this. Properly.”

“Don’t hurt yourself,” Tenzo commented. Shisui shoved him off the bench.

“How are things going on with the team anyway?” he asked Kakashi, ignoring Tenzo’s grumbling as he dusted off his dirty clothes. Kakashi sighed.

“I guess it’s not so bad, seeing how we started.”

“I was wondering… you’ve had the few D-rank missions already right? You should jump level pretty soon with the kids.”

“I guess. Why?”

Shisui’s gaze trailed off toward the Hokage Tower, to the third floor where the Assignment desk handed off missions and collected reports, then up, up to where their leader ruled over the land, decided their fate. He had seen very little of the Hokage in the last few years. He felt uncomfortable in his presence, thrown off-balance by feelings of resentment and mistrust that always caught him off guard, since he was so good at ignoring them the rest of the time. He had no interest in being bitter and vengeful, but he knew he could never fully trust the old man again.

But trusting him or not, seeing him or not, the man still had a firm hold on their life.

“I think it would do them good, if you could get a mission outside the village.”

Both his friends took on matching expressions of unease and puzzlement. He knew how it sounded. He wanted to make his case anyway.

“It can be the most boring, uninteresting mission possible, but… If Naruto could get out, it would show him that his future is… not as closed off as he thinks it is. They can’t seriously plan on keeping him inside the walls forever.”

He knew it wasn’t true as he was saying it. They could very much do that. They could decide Naruto was never to cross the gates of Konohagakure, they could even choose to restrain his movements even more.

But they didn’t have to. They could also take the other road. Trust him. Treat him like a freaking human being. Why was it so damn hard.

“Do you think it would be wise?” Tenzo asked. Shisui refrained from snapping at him – he had the right to ask, even if Shisui wished he hadn’t.

“It could be inconsequential,” Shisui eluded. “There is plenty of in-and-out missions that would pose no problem to any team. It’s just… just for the gesture. So that he knows.”

“Knows what?”

“That things can get better. That there’s hope here for him still.”

Shisui was the one who lived with the boy. He was the one who saw him bury his pain and heartache deeper and deeper as time passed so that no one could see it, and still be unable to escape
it, to forget. The way he talked sometimes… Shisui knew Naruto didn’t believe any of what he had been told, even if he nodded along. He considered himself a monster. A prisoner, a weapon. He had no hope for anything to go his way, anything to change.

He often looked longingly at the sky, at the distant mountains behind the tree lines, and there was so little, so little keeping him here with them, keeping him from just shutting off completely and retreating into himself, so little that tied him to this world.

Without hope, the boy would waste away.

“I’ll see what I can do.”

Shisui looked back at Kakashi, surprised to have him agree so easily.

“You will?”

“I’d like him to be happier too,” Kakashi said simply. Tenzo didn’t make further comment and Shisui chose to take it as a form of agreement. Tenzo was no stranger to this after all. To being seen as a useful asset more than an actual person. To being kept close and protected, not because he was loved, or cared for, but because the village couldn’t afford to lose his abilities.

Kakashi had been the one to get him out of that spot. And maybe he could do the same with Naruto.

“Thanks,” Shisui said lamely, a little choked up. He was very much not used to have things go his way.

“Do you need to leave now?”

“I still have some time.”

“Good, because there’s something else I wanted to ask you about.”

“Huh? What is it?”

“Where did Naruto learn fuinjutsu?”

As expected, Shisui didn’t know. And if Shisui didn’t know, Kakashi had little hope to find anyone who did. Well, there were Sasuke and Sakura, but they would never tell him, and would probably get mad at him for even asking.

It was stupid to wish the three of them were less of a team. It would have been fine if they were being a team with him. Ha, it would take some work.

So the mystery remained. Kakashi had played it off during their first spar so as to not spook the boy, while he was actually freaking out just a little inside. Naruto had completed that sealing jutsu so effortlessly, and in such a way that it could be thrown back into his opponent’s face immediately. There were premade scrolls that did that, but they weren’t available to the odd genins, and he was reasonably certain it wasn’t what Naruto had displayed anyway.

He hadn’t asked the boy about it, hadn’t tried to pry, but he was pretty sure the scroll was hand painted.

Had it been anyone else, Kakashi would have simply dismissed it as a gift from a family member,
an heirloom. When it came to Naruto though, whose closest relationship with a responsible adult was the barely-adult who had been put in charge of his surveillance, it was impossible.

And of course, Kakashi was biased because it was *Naruto*. As in Uzumaki Naruto, son of Uzumaki Kushina, heirs – and last survivors – of the fuinjutsu masters Uzumaki clan.

Kakashi was certain no one knew about it, because if one did, everyone would. There was no fuinjutsu master in Konoha, and there weren’t much anywhere else either. They were a prize, and not an ability that would be nurtured in silence, without the village knowing, had any other shinobi been involved in this.

Which led to the only possible conclusion that Naruto had learned it on his own.

It made sense, except for how it didn’t. How had he figured it out alone? The boy was far from being an academic genius and didn’t look like he liked studying all that much. And that was without touching the matter of where he would have found resources on sealing.

But if there was no Uzumaki left in the land, and for a long time now, their abilities were still praised years later, still remembered with equal admiration and fear. It was their bottomless chakra reserve that predisposed them to that art, but there had to be some natural talent at play.

Kakashi remembered well what power Kushina could yield.

He would have to keep a close look on it. He doubted Naruto knew only the one sealing jutsu. He could only help out with it if the boy decided to trust him with his secret, and that wasn’t happening right now.

Shisui had the right idea about how to change that though.

Kakashi walked into the Tower after his friend had gone back to his classroom and Tenzo was off to do his own Tenzo things. Shisui was obviously having a blast teaching the kids, it was a warming sight, after years of insecurity and doubts about his worth and his place in their world. He would put some life back into the school, succeed where others had failed to reach out to these kids.

Maybe he would manage to teach them more valuable lessons than how to die well.

Kakashi knocked on the open door of the Hokage office, more to signal his presence than to ask permission to enter. He nodded imperceptibly to the two Anbus standing guard by the window. Yugao and Kage nodded back ever so slightly. Kakashi had been scared of his fellow Anbu’s reaction when he had told them he was putting down the mask for good. He’d thought they would resent him somehow. He’d been wrong, of course, so as not to break habits. He remembered Yugao, laying a gentle hand on his arm, saying “would you resent us, if we left?”

She was always the most sensible one.

“Oh, hello, Kakashi. Was there something you wanted?”

It still felt strange, a bit alien, to have not one but two or three pairs of eyes falling on him when he walked into that office. The Hokage was never seen alone in there anymore. There was always one or two clan heads or other higher-ups there with him, sorting through paper works, discussing in soft – or not so soft – voices about current affairs. Kakashi made a point not to involve himself in the political struggles ragging among the Administration because he didn’t feel any threat, be it to the village or to his Hokage, in the way things were slowly changing.
He knew the old man would welcome the end of his reign, putting down the burden of the hat. He couldn’t really blame him.

But he would have preferred it was someone other than Uchiha Fugaku and Hyuuga Hiashi in the office with him.

He thought Fugaku was still out of town – the Uchihas were gone a lot lately, quiet missions out of the village that didn’t seem to tie into anything gossiped among the shinobi forces. Kakashi wasn’t overly concerned by this – Shisui and Itachi were relaxed enough about the whole thing, and Kakashi had decided to trust the new understanding that had the various clans and factions share information and decision making nowadays.

It could only be a mishap in schedule or some inevitable crisis that had those two working there at the same time though. Kakashi didn’t have anything against either of them, but together they were a handful, and made everything more difficult than it should have been. And they wouldn’t be the most on board with his request.

Ah, well. He wasn’t a very lucky person, as a rule.

He exposed the situation thoroughly, insisting on the team progresses and potential, trying to appear like he was addressing all three of them, even if in all honesty, it was the Hokage’s approval he was looking for. The Sandaime still had the authority to enforce his decisions. Kakashi couldn’t deny that having everyone in agreement would be nice too though.

“Do you think it’s wise?” Fugaku asked, with much more skepticism than Tenzo an hour ago, and eliciting much more defensiveness from Kakashi. Fugaku never seemed to like him much, but Kakashi couldn’t forget that he had been the one to ultimately rule in favor of Kakashi keeping his gifted Sharingan, as respect for the dying wish of one of their own. The more Kakashi had learned about the man and his clan afterward, the more he had understood that it had been anything but an obvious choice.

The man could prove difficult though, if Kakashi wasn’t convincing enough.

“Yes,” he answered firmly. “I think they’re qualified, and I also believe it would be a good thing both for their relationship as a team and their individual development.”

“I am not convinced,” Hiashi said from the other side of the table, and Kakashi truly hoped it was out of legitimate concern, and not just to be contradictory. He had never been an active participant in a Council meeting, but he had watched over many of those as Anbu, and the amount of pettiness and bad faith he had witnessed then among the most powerful shinobis of the village made it hard to trust their objectivity – and decisions.

“I’m in favor,” the Hokage weighed in, holding Kakashi’s gaze with an inscrutable expression. Kakashi turned toward Fugaku, who was studying him too.

Maybe it wasn’t such a bad thing that he was the one hearing this after all. Because Uchiha Fugaku, if he was known to be an intransigent, strong-headed leader, was also known to be very fond of his sons.

Probably against his will, he had been exposed to Naruto as well. And he had to know quite a lot about him through Sasuke’s gaze. As he stared at Kakashi, pondering over his answer, Kakashi saw him as a father more than a clan head, for the first time maybe in all the time he had known the man.
Quite possibly, as Itachi had reported, Mikoto was seriously rubbing off on him.

“I agree too,” he finally said. He didn’t look away from Kakashi, even as Hiashi huffed, displeased.

“Very well,” the Hyuuga said eventually.

“We’ll find something.” Fugaku added. Kakashi assumed it would be the most boring, uneventful mission they could dig up, but it didn’t matter. It wasn’t the point. And it was the first of, hopefully, many. If it went well, if they came back safely, there was a chance they would agree to more. It was in the interest of the village too – the team couldn’t be sidelined, seeing its potential. The kids had to learn.

“Thank you.”

“In the meantime, there are plenty more D-rank missions for your team to complete,” the Hokage said, amused. Surely he remembered what trying to contain unruly genins could be like.

“This has got to be the most boring one we’ve done yet,” Naruto complained as they made their way to their mission’s location.

“Naruto! Show some respect!” Sakura exclaimed, punching him on the shoulder without force. She could talk, she didn’t fool him – he had seen the look on her face when they had gotten their mission order at the Assignment Desk.

They were on clean up duty. And not just any clean-up duty. Cemetery clean-up duty.

What a way to spend the day.

Actually, they had probably done worse – chasing crazy runaway cats around or working for people that couldn’t hold their contempt for Naruto in check for one freaking hour didn’t rank that high. But hanging around decaying corpses all day wasn’t really appealing either.

Despite the early hour, there were already a few people strolling between the neat ranges of tombstones. Kakashi walked up to a man in a horrendous bowl cut and green jumpsuit, seemingly out on a morning jog, that had stopped by one of the stones. The man looked oddly cheerful for someone visiting a dead acquaintance, but Naruto was well aware that it could be faked easily. He had never come to the cemetery in broad daylight, only at night, where he went when he had heard kids at the Academy say they would come there to test their courage. He dressed up and scared them for life – petty but harmless revenge over those who used to trip him in the corridors.

It was more intimidating during the day somehow. The proximity of death and its inevitability were on display now that he could decipher the names and dates on the stones. A lot of graves had fresh flowers and small offerings scattered around them, proof that there were still people thinking about the ones lying below.

They worked in silence, their usual chattering quieted by the solemnity of the place. They mowed the lawn, tore off weeds as best as they could, and cleaned up the tarnished marble of the tombstones. Naruto tried not to focus on the names – it wasn’t hard, since he didn’t know how to read most of the characters anyway, let alone how to pronounce the words they spelled.

There was one name, however, that caught his gaze immediately.
Kakashi was reading his book at the other end of the cemetery and Sakura and Sasuke were a few tombs ahead of him in their row. No one was paying attention to him. Naruto kneeled over the stone, running his fingers on the carved kanjis, incredulous.

He didn’t know the first name, but the last name, he knew very well.

It was his own.

Naruto had never met a single person that bore the Uzumaki name, never heard or seen it mentioned in any way. But there was no doubt. If there was one word he could read, it was his own name.

The three katakana attached to it formed what he believed was a female name.

Ku-shi-na.

And the date below, was his own birthday. The date of the Kyuubi attack.

Naruto’s head was spinning. Was it possible? A woman dead the day of his birth, the only one in the village bearing his name… The old man had always been tight-lipped about anything concerning his parents. No matter how many times Naruto asked, begged for any scrap of information, the Hokage wouldn’t even tell him if they were alive or dead. Well he had said they were dead, dead for this village, but Naruto couldn’t trust anything coming from the man.

Whoever that woman was, she had to be related to him in some way. Had to be… part of his family? He’d half assumed Uzumaki was a made up name, that that was the reason why he was the only one. But there was another right there, buried in the ground.

Did it mean they were others?

Some that were still alive?

“Naruto!”

He snapped back to the present hard enough to get whiplash. Sakura was waving at him, urging him to hurry so they could get out of there. Naruto nodded hastily, mind still reeling. He quickly grabbed a pencil and a piece of paper from his weapon pouch to mark down the name, and hurried to catch up with the two others who were almost done with their row. He heard none of Sakura’s scolding, entirely taken up with what he had just discovered.

He had stopped very early thinking about his family, to spare himself unnecessary heartache. All he knew was that they weren’t there, he was alone, and it was unlikely to change – what good did it do to imagine a mother, a father, an uncle or a lost sibling walking through the door one day and sweeping him away? It was never going to happen.

But he had also never had any tangible proof of their existence until today.

Who was that woman? What happened to her? She had been killed by the Fox probably, like so many others. All the tombs of the area he was cleaning had the same date of death written at the bottom.

He worked faster while still trying to spot maybe another “Uzumaki” carved in the stone. He found none, but it hardly mattered. One was enough. One was a world away from zero.

Naruto hadn’t come out of nowhere. His name wasn’t solely his own, it was connected to other
people somewhere. Even his first name, someone had given it to him, and for the first time he could imagine it hadn’t been chosen at random by some bureaucrats eating ramen while choosing names for orphan babies. Maybe it had been chosen with purpose.

Maybe he really was Uzumaki Naruto.

“What took you so long?” Sakura asked, displeased, when he finally joined them at the end of the rows, in front of that big, ugly statue of a flame that overlooked the whole cemetery. Kakashi was staring too, expectant. Naruto wasn’t about to tell them, the discovery was his and his alone. Besides, what would the man know about his family? And if he did know anything, chances were he would be as dismissive as the Hokage, as intent on him giving up on these interrogations, forgetting about that curiosity.

Which he had managed to do until now, but suddenly he was burning with questions again. Except he knew not to ask them aloud.

“I was just distracted. So, are we done for the day?”

“No, we’re not done,” Kakashi corrected, snuffing out Naruto’s hopes to go investigate in peace. “We still have those to take care of, and then we’ll have one last stop.”

Kakashi was pointing at the three graves in his back, at the foot of the statue. Sakura mumbled a sarcastic “we?” that went unanswered as they went to investigate.

Those were more decorated and more elaborate than the ones they had just cleaned up, and Naruto quickly understood why.

“They are the former Hokage’s graves, right?” Sasuke said as they leaned over the stones to get a closer look. Kakashi hummed a confirmation. Naruto turned around briefly to glance at the four faces carved into the mountain that overlooked the village, like silent guardians watching over them at all times. He had gotten into trouble more than once for damaging the faces with paint and graffiti, and people had always seemed angrier then than when he just tagged random walls and buildings. “Have you no respect?” they would ask. Naruto didn’t bother to answer that.

He didn’t know much about the history of the village. The only Hokage whose fate he had some knowledge of was the last.

The Fourth Hokage’s stone also bore his own birth date.

“The Yondaime wasn’t Hokage for long, was he?” Sakura asked as she studied his grave. Naruto greeted his teeth. Of all the things they could have talked about…

“No. He died defeating the Nine-Tailed Fox,” Kakashi answered. At least he had the decency to look uncomfortable as he looked at Naruto. Naruto looked away. He wanted to get out of there.

“They say he was the best ninja of his generation. A genius”, Sasuke added, obviously impressed.

“If he was so good, he wouldn’t have died.”

Naruto bit his lips, regretting having said it aloud. He avoided all their gaze and walked away to the first grave, busying himself with its maintenance. He didn’t need to be reminded that in addition to all those graves in the cemetery, including the one of… the woman, he was also responsible for the death of the village’s beloved Fourth Hokage. The youngest one to be given the title, and the youngest one to have died with it. What a genius indeed.
They got to work, although those were probably the most well-kept graves of the whole place, and it didn’t last long. There were a lot of flowers there too, paper charms, sake bottle, all kind of offerings stacked neatly in front of the tombstones. Naruto felt like kicking into the piles like a petty child. He refrained.

He didn’t have the right to be angry at the guy for dying like an idiot and leaving Naruto with the guilt of it. The man was a “hero”. A dead one, but a hero nonetheless.

“Alright kids! Almost done,” Kakashi exclaimed a few minutes later, from where he was reading his weird book again. If this was what work as a jounin was like, Naruto understood why shinobis wanted to climb ranks as fast as possible.

They followed their teacher to the Training Ground Three. Or rather, a spot next to it, a patch of low grass near the tree line. In the middle stood a big slab of stone, high enough that Naruto could rest his elbows on it. It was carved with dozens of names, neatly arranged in a long list.

There were flowers in front of that one too.

“Is it another grave?” Sakura asked, circling the stone. It was set on a circular base that weed was slowly overtaking – the reason why they were here no doubt.

“Not exactly,” Kakashi said, sounding a little less joyful and careless than usual.

“It’s a memorial stone,” Sasuke piped, staring at the rows of names. “For shinobis who died serving the village.”

“You’ve been here before?” the teacher asked, curious.

“…Both my mother and father have friends here. Shisui and Itachi too.”

Naruto scanned the stone rapidly. He thought he could make out the characters of the Uchiha name. He didn’t find the Uzumaki one again, but there was a different monument up the cliff above the Hokage Tower dedicated to the victims of the Nine-tails.

He would check it later. Maybe the woman would be there too. He was scared to find out he had misread the name, or simply imagined the whole thing. But if he found it again…

“There’s so many of them,” Sakura commented, strangely solemn.

“What’s the point of dying for that place.”

The heavy silent dropping on them like lead and the three pairs of shocked stare aimed at Naruto informed him that he had voiced aloud a thought he should have kept to himself.

“They died to protect it,” Sasuke said, puzzled and a little patronizing, like he didn’t get why this even needed explaining. “And everyone in it.”

“Surely not everyone,” Naruto deadpanned.

“That’s not the point!”

“What is so great about “the village” that you all want to die for it? What’s so great about dying?”

How was it glorious, how was it worthy of praise. How could they all live with themselves knowing others had to die so that they could have what they had.
Naruto couldn’t imagine anyone dying for him. Couldn’t accept it.

“Everyone has the urge to protect their home and the people they love,” Kakashi said with a measured tone. Naruto couldn’t decide if the tightness in his voice hid anger, grief or something else. He didn’t know why the topic made him so angry, why he felt the urge to argue about it.

He wondered if the woman in the grave had died like this – because she had fought instead of fleeing, because she had tried to protect something.

Wondered if people of his family had died to protect him. Him.

“A fine job they’re doing now that they’re fucking dead.”

“Naruto!”

That was Sakura’s warning tone. Her “be careful what you’re going to say next” tone. Whatever. He didn’t expect he would understand where they were coming from.

He had no love for that village.

“Naruto,” Kakashi said, patient. “When you throw yourself in front of a sword meant at your friend, or when you push your teammate out of the way of falling rocks, or when you keep your mouth shut as you’re being tortured for information that will put the rest of your team and your home in danger, do you understand that it’s not ideology that drives you?”

“So what you’re saying is that loyalty isn’t a real thing.”

“What I’m saying is that you can’t always keep up the emotionless front. Believe me, I’ve tried.”

Damn that headband and that mask, it was impossible to read the man’s face.

“Wouldn’t it be easier if we didn’t love other people then.”

“Probably. There are even some who manage it. You can as long as you don’t mind being alone.”

Naruto grimaced, annoyed at the smug tone of the man who wasn’t supposed to know how much Naruto actually minded that. Or maybe it was just generally speaking.

“No one wants to die, Naruto. But sometimes the alternative just seems worse.”

It was a bold assumption from the man, Naruto thought, that no one wanted to die. That one he didn’t voice aloud though.

“I won’t ever let anyone die for me.”

“That’s not for you to decide,” Sasuke retorted. They exchanged heated glares, Sasuke getting as pissed as Naruto felt.

“Don’t you ever dare.”

Neither wanted to look away, and it could have lasted a while, if Sakura hadn’t stepped in with a sigh, pushing both of them toward the stone.

“How about no one dies, you idiots. Come on, get to work, I want to go get lunch, I’m starving.”

Just like that, the tension was broken, the moment was over. The three of them kneeled by the
stone to get rid of the weed. The silence was still awkward, but mostly because they were all lost in their own thoughts. Kakashi was reading a few feet away, face hidden by his book. Naruto kept sneaking glances at the names, wondering who among them were the man’s friends, or Shisui’s, who still had people crying over them, bringing flowers here. Were they angry these people, at the sacrifices made, or were they proud, were they accepting, or revengeful.

He wondered who would come to put flowers on his grave when he was gone.

They ate their bento there, near the memorial, chatting up about inconsequential things like the previous conversation had never happened. Naruto was upset at Sasuke’s words, because throwing himself in front of upcoming danger was exactly the kind of stupid shit that stupid Uchiha would do. Naruto hated the idea of them caring enough that they would think of putting themselves at risk for him. He decided it didn’t matter though, because if he was strong enough, no one would ever need to save or protect him. If anything, he would be the one to keep them from harm.

Contrary to all of them, it didn’t matter if he died.

They went to collect their money at the Assignment desk, and instead of giving them their next mission order, the chunin in charge told them that the Hokage wanted to talk to them.

Sasuke’s father was there in the Hokage office, as well as Shikamaru’s. The old Hokage looked like he was in a good mood. Naruto couldn’t help but think of the spot between the second and the fourth Hokage’s grave.

Naruto wasn’t paying attention to what they were saying – they were talking about the missions team 7 had completed and their accomplishments, or maybe something else entirely. His attention was caught again by a newcomer entering the office and exclaiming loudly, “you mean it’s those babies who are going to escort me?”

Naruto startled, forgot to be offended as he tuned back into what was being said. “trained genins are more than equipped for C-rank missions of that nature,” one of the adults said. The stranger only shrugged. It was an old man, with a straw hat, glasses and a big grey mustache. Naruto was certain he had never seen him in the village.

“This is Tazuna,” the Hokage said. “He’s your next mission. He requested an escort to go back to his own village.”

Naruto’s eyes widened. What did it mean, “his own village”? Surely it couldn’t be…

Kakashi turned around to face them, smiling under his mask.

“Pack your bag kids. We’re off to Wave Country.”

Chapter End Notes

I feel kinda bad you know, ’cause they’re all trying and they’re actually doing better but… Ha. The Wave Arc’s gonna be tough, people. So that was kind of a transitory chapter to launch off the next arc. You’d think that would mean a shorter one but… yeah. I messed up my files and deleted an earlier version of this that went a bit differently, and I had the cemetery idea only after that. So I guess mistakes aren’t always bad. Isn't that beautiful heh.
Naruto's so freaking gloomy here T-T I swear I'm trying but he doesn't want any help! He doesn't want to believe people truly care! He's too damn stubborn :/
Anyway, I'm off to suffer my way through fight scenes and angst. See you soon!
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Off to Wave Country.

Chapter Notes

That chapter kicked me in the ass. I'm not gonna lie. It's so hard to balance because on one hand I don't want to do a retelling of events we're all familiar with, but on the other hand I want this story to stand on its own a minimum so I can't just skim over things. Urg. Anyway, I didn't like writing it and I didn't like it period for a while, but I think I'm at peace now, so you can have it!

Part of the reason why it was so frustrating is because next chapter is coming a scene that I wrote ages ago, in the early days of this AU taking form, and I can't believe I'm so close to give it to you and I just want to get on with it. I'll give you three guesses as to what scene it could possibly be x)

Once again thank you all, your support means the world to me. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was a bit surreal. To be packing a bag.

Naruto felt silly for being mystified by such a mundane thing, but there was something new and exciting about the process of selecting the most useful items and packing them neatly, one after the other, into his backpack.

It was actually Shisui’s backpack – the man had lent it to Naruto, claiming that the only one he owned, old and battered, wouldn’t make the cut. In fact, Shisui had more or less gifted it to Naruto, because “it’s not like I’m going anywhere nowadays”.

Naruto still couldn’t believe it was happening. He had never left the village to go to a hot spring on a family vacation, or to visit relatives, he hadn’t even gone with the class to the few field trips they had taken to the nearest towns, for a flimsy reason or another that he hadn’t questioned at the time. And now he was going out on a real mission. Beyond the village’s borders. Beyond the country borders even, just a bridge over it, but still. He was going to travel with his friends, see new places, meet new people. Strangers. Strangers to him as he would be stranger to them. He couldn’t think of a better thing.

The only black spot on the whole affair was that he would have to come back. And he didn’t even know where exactly. He had decided now was as good a time as any to get out of Shisui’s hair – he had tidied up his room neatly, put his things in order. When they were back from Wave Country, he would move into his own place.

He said as much to Shisui over breakfast.
“Did you find a place?” the Uchiha asked, skeptical.

“Yes,” Naruto half lied. He had put in a formal request to the administration – surely there would be something by the time they returned.

“I see.”

Naruto didn’t know what to do of the heavy tension in the air, didn’t know why Shisui looked upset all of the sudden. Should he have moved before leaving? He had half the mind to apologize about it, but Shisui spoke first.

“I don’t know why it’s always so hard for people to follow their own advice,” he said with a dramatic sigh, to Naruto’s puzzlement.

“What?”

“I’m always telling you, and Itachi and Sasuke, and the kids in class, how important it is to voice out your feelings and speak your mind clearly, and here I am, doing exactly not that.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You don’t have to leave this place.”

Naruto frowned, suddenly miffed. Were they going back on their words? He had done nothing bad that he still needed to be watched over.

“I can’t leave?”

“That’s not what I say. I mean you don’t have to. As in you can stay, if you’d like.”

Shisui stared at Naruto for a second, as if to judge the impact of his words, and it probably wasn’t to his liking, because he went on.

“As in I’d like you to stay.”

Naruto’s eyes widened, but he was no closer to knowing what to say to that. What was Shisui talking about? It made no sense.

“You are allowed to get your own place, if that’s what you want. You’re free to choose. But know that would you want to, I’d be more than happy to have you stay here, with me.”

“Wh-why?”

Naruto hated how his voice was trembling, how his fists were closing and opening on empty air, how he didn’t know what to do with himself. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Shisui shrugged, sheepish.

“I like to have you around. That’s all.”

Naruto looked desperately for a ploy, for a sign that this was a lie, that Shisui was just trying to keep him here out of obligations or because he didn’t trust Naruto on his own after all. But there was nothing of that on Shisui’s face.

From that very first day, Shisui had never lied to him.

“I wasn’t going to say anything,” the man went on, mistaking Naruto’s major freak out for
confusion. “I didn’t want you to think that I wanted to chain you here, and I figured it was rich coming from me, since you were placed here against your will. But, well… Things changed. And I wanted it to be clear. In case you… Just so that you’d know.”

Shisui couldn’t know about his doubts and regrets, about how deep down he had wished for those exact words. He couldn’t. Naruto didn’t know himself.

“Plus Izumi said she would kick my ass if I didn’t spell it out for you so…”

“Izumi?”

Shisui got up to retrieve a letter on a shelf near the entrance. He handed it to Naruto, who did his best to decipher at least its general meaning. He got enough to redden and look away.

“I don’t… that’s not… I mean, I wasn’t…”

“I know you weren’t going to ask. That’s why I’m the one who’s offering.”

Naruto was distressed, panicking. He didn’t like that one bit. He didn’t like his feelings being so transparent to the ones around him. Besides, it made no sense, it wasn’t possible. Why, why would Shisui choose to let him stay if he could get rid of him? What did he gain from this, what was the point?

“Naruto, calm down. You don’t need to decide just now. You have the few upcoming days to think about it, alright? Just… I’m serious about this. Try not to doubt me too much. If you can.”

Naruto didn’t understand how Shisui was doing that. Anyone else would have been disappointed and hurt by his lack of trust, by how much he questioned their every move. But Shisui just looked genuine, hopeful. Truly, honestly wishing for Naruto to believe him.

Naruto had no idea if he could.

At a loss for words, he simply stood up from the kitchen table and grabbed his backpack, mumbling a vague “I have to go or I’ll be late” that had him wince at his own lack of conviction. Shisui nodded, indulgent. Always so understanding, so patient.

He spoke only when Naruto was past the threshold.

“Naruto!”

The boy turned around, to look at Shisui framed by the open door, struck by a sense of deja-vu so strong it made him a bit dizzy.

He had seen that exact same scene play out many times. One leaving, the other staying. Parents saying goodbye to children, wife to husband, friend to that other friend that had come to visit, that was welcome here.

“Have a safe trip. And know that whatever you decide, my door will always be open to you. This is your home too. You will always be welcome here.”

Naruto felt himself choke up on an onslaught of unfamiliar emotions, threatening to swallow him all. Panicking at his shortening breath and the traitorous tears that wanted to spill out of his eyes, he spun around and bolted.

He ran all the way to the meeting point.
Shisui, my incredibly stupid friend, Naruto most certainly believes you’ve been waiting with bated breath to kick him out of your house from day one. He’s a fucking twelve-year-old you dumbass he doesn’t WANT to live alone!

Tell him he can do whatever he wants, including staying with you, and if you want him to stay, tell him that too. Tell him in that many words, asshole. Don’t fuck it up. Sage. So stupid.

Love you.

Izumi.

“You have everything you need?”

“I think so, yes. I’m all set.”

“Do you want me to accompany you?”

His mother laughed at his horrified expression – she had probably done it on purpose. Sasuke pouted and readjusted his backpack, eager to get going.

“Wait a minute, let me look at you. Fugaku, Itachi! Come say bye to Sasuke!”

The boy rolled his eyes but stayed still and bore the attention. Both men came to join them in front of the house. Itachi poked Sasuke’s forehead with a soft smile as their father looked him up and down before giving a subtle nod of approval.

“Be careful out there, Sasuke. And take care of your friends.”

Caught off guard by the odd advice and sudden seriousness, Sasuke could only nod dumbly before leaving with a final goodbye. He didn’t know why they made such a big deal out of it, it’s not like he was leaving the village for the first time, and there was nothing exciting or prestigious about accompanying an old man home. He guessed it was symbolic – first C-rank, and first mission that had a slightly more impactful goal than pleasing random citizens.

Long-practiced in the art of Not Asking, Sasuke didn’t question Naruto about his gloomy and slightly panicked expression when he met him at the meeting point near the North Gate. Sakura joined them a few minutes later and only got an unconvincing “yeah yeah” to her “are you alright” question, since she hadn’t learned that lesson yet. Between his father and his brother, Sasuke had the management of that frustration down to an art form even before meeting Naruto.

Kakashi was the last one to arrive, with the old man, Tazuna. Sakura kept her scolding at Kakashi for being late to a minimum, probably for the sake of the stranger, and because the sun was barely out and she was still half-asleep. They promptly departed.

After a few feet though, Sasuke realized Naruto wasn’t following them. Turning around, he saw the other boy still standing at the gate, just behind the line that symbolized the limit of the village. Naruto took a deep breath, and slowly, with deliberate movements, crossed the line to find himself standing on the other side.

Sasuke had never seen that expression on his face.
He was smiling, not a full-blown smile, it barely showed on his mouth, but his eyes were shining so bright, an expression of awe, of wonderment.

Somehow, Sasuke didn’t like it.

To make matters worse, Naruto’s mood kept improving with each step they took away from the village. He was walking at the front, peering curiously at the forest around them. It was the same old boring forest they had in Konoha, but Naruto stared at it like there were snacks growing on the trees.

Sasuke knew Naruto had never left the village before, but he couldn’t remember being that excited about his own first trip outside the walls. Granted, he couldn’t remember it period. They were visiting his father, who was staying on a long observation mission in a small town near the border. His mother liked to embarrass him recalling how he had cried the entire way there, from the moment they had stepped out of the village to the moment they had reached his father. And again on the way back.

Sasuke was quite the weeper as a toddler, to his everlasting mortification.

“So why were you in Konoha, mister?” Sakura asked. She seemed to be in a talkative mood now that she was more awake. She often was, and maybe for once she wouldn’t be the only one.

“Believe me, if I could have spared the trip, I would have.”

Sasuke didn’t like that man very much.

“I needed to sort some administrative shit. You know we’re building a bridge right? To connect my country to the mainland. Well the mainland is the Fire Country in this case, so we had to ask permission very nicely.”

It looked like Sakura had decided to be diplomatic today, because she didn’t take offense at the snappy, dismissive tone. She was curious enough to look past it.

“Isn’t it something to take to the Fire Lord?”

“We did. I was here about the border control issue. There will be a frontier post, and it’s your shinobis that will control it.”

“You don’t seem too happy about that,” Kakashi remarked lightly, proving once again that his book was merely a prop for him to look uninterested in his surroundings. No doubt that a lot of people had been fooled by his careless attitude. Sasuke recognized it was a good tactic, but did it have to be such bad literature? Shisui had a few volumes in his library, that Sasuke had made the mistake of skimming through one day.

Grown-ups were disgusting.

“No offense guys, but I’m not super fond of shinobis.”

Sasuke and Naruto reacted at the exact same time. Yes offense, Sasuke let out a displeased “What?”, just as Naruto exclaimed, joyful, “Haha, me neither!”

Sasuke glared at him, incredulous.

“What?” the other said, provocative, as he put his hands behind his head, the picture of carelessness. Sasuke felt the urge to deck him.
“What do you mean you don’t like shinobis?”

“I mean that I don’t like them?”

“Why?”

Naruto lost a bit of his carefully crafted disinterest. Something passed on his face, far darker, but it was gone in an instant. He just shrugged. Sasuke was halfway through closing the distance between them, still figuring out if he was going to shake him like a tree or get in his face to demand an answer, when Kakashi interrupted, stepping deftly in his path as he resumed their conversation with the old man.

“And what about you?”

The man looked between them before shrugging, deciding he didn’t care.

“I don’t know what shinobis do around here…”

“Protect and serve,” Sasuke answered automatically. The man scoffed.

“Is that so? Well, that may be true, for you. But where I come from, when we see this,” he said, tapping at Sasuke’s headband on his forehead, “we don’t expect anyone to do any serving and protecting.”

Sasuke clicked his tongue and moved away, annoyed at the proximity, the touch, and the words. He really didn’t like that man.

“Wave Country is remote, and weak,” the man went on. “That always brings in the same kind of crowd.”


“Not only.”

The accusation in his voice wasn’t nice to hear, and they quickly moved to other topics. The man only lost his sour, biting demeanor when he talked about his bridge – he had great hopes in it, for the future of his country. Sakura asked him questions about the work and technique with her usual ability to be interested in literally any subject, as they kept walking the hard-packed road, less and less sheltered by trees as they got closer to the sea. They ate a light lunch by the road before they resumed walking – they would reach the coast by the end of the afternoon, if everything went without a hitch.

It didn’t.

Sasuke was walking by Naruto’s side, arguing with him over the merits of team formations versus solo missions. Unsurprisingly, Uzumaki I-don’t-need-nobody Naruto thought that shinobis working on their own would both lower their death rate and the amount of time they had to grieve for other people. Sasuke didn’t know how to explain to him that people didn’t just choose not to get attached to others. Everyone he knew had lost friends and teammates time and time again, and it didn’t stop them from still being part of it all.

“Maybe it’s just worth the pain!” he exclaimed, fed-up with Naruto’s stubborn disagreement. “Would you rather… I don’t know, would you rather we had never become friends?”

Naruto looked at him with wide, panicked eyes. But he didn’t answer. Sasuke waited, a little
desperate, for the other boy to deny it. It never came.

He was going to storm off – to the other side of the road – or protest or maybe even curse a little, but he was cut off by the abrupt change in Naruto’s demeanor. His face hardened in concern as he stopped dead in his track. Sasuke didn’t have time to ask what was wrong.

“Someone’s coming!”

The next moment, wires were wrapping around their teacher’s body. There was a sickening noise.

He was shredded to pieces.

It felt like Sasuke stopped thinking altogether. They weren’t in any defense or combat formation, there were two assailants, and they were heading straight for the old man Tazuna. Sakura was the closest, she moved in front of him, kunai in hand. They were so far away… Sasuke threw a shuriken that pinned down the enemies’ deadly chains to a nearby tree. It gave him just enough time to regroup with Sakura.

That’s when the two strangers decided to change strategy.

“The kids first then,” one of them said. They let go of the chains and flickered away, reappearing a second later behind Naruto. Murder in their eyes. Ready to strike.

Naruto was so small, compared to them. His hands were empty – no weapon, no scroll, nothing. He barely had the time to turn around to face his opponents before their blades were coming down on him, and there was no way, no way Sasuke would reach him in time.

Naruto raised both his hands.

“Fuinjutsu. Heartbreaker Seal.”

The two men collapsed on the floor, just as Kakashi popped up by Naruto’s side. It was useless though. They weren’t moving. The fight was over.

Kakashi crouched down to check on them.

“Dead.”

It was a risky bet. Naruto had seldom trained on that seal since he had first used it, unable, despite his better judgment, to test it on the forest animals that were so inexplicably fond of him. He mostly trained deep in the woods where no one would bother him, and he always crossed path with deer, rabbits and nesting birds that just looked at him with disinterest before carrying on with their business, when they weren’t straight out approaching him, curious and unworried.

The foxes, in particular, always hung out around his spot.

It would have been easy to get his hands on one of them to test the seal. He had thought about it often, especially when staring at a red fox that was staring right back, so alike the one that plagued his dreams. His nightmares. But he couldn’t do it.

He couldn’t pretend using the seal was a conscious, thought-out move. It felt almost like a reflex. The weapons bearing down on him, no chance of escape… His mind had just gone to the most immediate solution, the one it was familiar with. The one that had worked before.
And now he had killed again.

He felt very little toward the fact itself. Ninjas fought and if they lost, they died. That’s how it worked.

But he really didn’t want to face his friends now. Kakashi got up to stare at him, incredulous.

“Naruto, how did you…”

“Sensei, are you alright?” Sakura exclaimed, joining them in an instant, concern written all over her face.

“Ha, yeah, don’t worry Sakura. I knew they were coming – I was prepared.”

Sakura’s face did a curious thing then – it looked like a smile, but her eyes spelled fury.

“What do you mean you knew?”

“I noticed puddles of water on the road a little while ago. Seeing that it didn’t rain in days…”

“And why the HELL didn’t you say anything!” she exploded, cutting him off mid-sentence. Naruto had not heard her scream so loud since that time where she had caught a man trying peer into the changing rooms at the clothes store. Kakashi was taken aback by her sudden rage.

"I needed to know who they were after," he said after a pause. That didn't calm her in the slightest.

“And you couldn’t have just… make a sign or… or… use code? Instead of just… keeping it to yourself! What the hell! We could have… we… you…”

Anger and worry overflowing, Sakura burst into tears.

She ostensibly turned her back on their stunned teacher to face Naruto. Her eyes were spilling big, ugly tears, her face all scrunched up as she sniffled.

“Naruto… Are you… are you okay?”

He had to avert his gaze, he just couldn’t bear to see it. See her like this, scared and worried, see her in tears, in distress and in pain, as she checked him for injuries.

“That— that was very scary. Are you okay?” she asked again. He shrugged, trying to shake her off, but she didn’t budge. She was cradling his bleeding hand gently – he had cut himself on one of the men’s armor plate. She took out antiseptic and bandages from her pouch to tend to the cut.

“You can look away,” she said when she was done and his head was still turned to the side, eyes far off in the distance, “but just because you can’t see it, doesn’t mean I won’t be there worrying about you all the same.”

“I wish you wouldn’t.”

“That’s not up to you.”

She let go of his hand and wiped off her face, looking like she had regained a bit of her composure – as much as she could with a snotty nose and wet eyelashes.

“What do we do now?” she asked Kakashi with a biting tone, still pissed at him it seemed. Recognizing a lost cause when he saw one, the man bypassed the apologies and focused on the old
man instead.

“I think you owe us an explanation, Tazuna. These men were after you.”

“Who else,” Sakura mumbled. Kakashi’s eyes met Naruto’s ever so briefly. Naruto promptly looked away, message received loud and clear.

Kakashi had to know if it was him they were after.

“They were,” Tazuna confirmed. The brief struggle had made him lose a bit of his confidence. He looked grave now, and worried. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner. But…”

"An escort with threats of foreign nins attack is B-ranked, with a vastly different price on it,” Kakashi declared simply. The man frowned, displeased, but he didn’t deny it.

“They are a lot of people who don’t want that bridge to be completed,” Tazuna confessed, cornered. “Powerful people too.”

“Like who?”

“Have you heard of Gato?”

Naruto listened with only half an ear their story of gangster-run islands and political conflicts. That country was dominated by crime and fear – the bridge, a hope, a way out. Important enough to the old man that he would risk his life traveling back and forth between Fire and Wave country, but not enough that he would pay the price of his safety.

Or well, maybe he simply didn’t have that money. And what did ninja do for people who couldn’t pay? Naruto wasn’t sure, but Tazuna had been sure enough that he had said nothing. Better an outnumbered guard that no guard at all.

“I’m not sure it’s safe for us to keep going.”

That brought Naruto right back in.

“What? We can’t turn around!”

“Naruto, this team is not equipped to deal with this kind of threat. We can’t just…”

“We did fine, didn’t we? We dealt with it!”

"There's no telling what kind of forces will be sent our way next time." 

“We’ll deal with that too!”

“Naruto…”

They couldn’t go back. Not yet. It had been less than a day. Who knew when they would be sent out again? Who knew when he would be able to leave the village again? Wouldn’t they be blamed for the mission failing? Wouldn’t they be punished?

“Come on, please. We’re… we’re close, right? It makes no sense to go back now.”

He didn’t want to beg, didn’t want to make a scene, but above all, he didn’t want to turn around.

“Whatever you decide, I’m moving forward. My country needs me,” the old man said, with a
strangely disinterested tone for such a loaded declaration. “I don’t know if I’ll make it or not but…
Ah, that doesn’t concern you anyway.”

“We can’t just let that old guy alone right?” Naruto said, jumping on the man’s guilt-trip strategy. The other two stayed silent, indecisive. Kakashi turned toward them next.

“What do you think, Sakura, Sasuke?”

They didn’t expect to be consulted, and Naruto huffed in annoyance. If he hadn’t protested, Kakashi would have never asked for their opinion.

“I’m not sure it’s a good idea…” Sakura said hesitantly, clearly torn. It was her turn to avoid Naruto’s accusing glare. “Who’s to say if we’ll be good enough next time?”

“And who’s to say if there’ll even be a next time?” Naruto countered. “Come on, guys…”

“Sasuke?” Kakashi asked. Sasuke pondered it for a little while.

“I don’t think we should let Tazuna go alone.”

Kakashi let out a heavy sigh, shoulders sagging like he was receiving the weight of the world on it. He quickly recovered though.

“Alright. We’ll keep going. On one condition. Naruto.”

“What?”

“Tell me how you killed these two men.”

Naruto recoiled at the fact being exposed so bluntly, out there in the open. There was no emotion attached to the statement, nothing like reproach or pride, just the cold hard truth of Naruto taking a life again. Two.

“Does it matter?”

He didn’t want to talk about it with Kakashi, or anyone. He didn’t want the village to get involved in this.

“It matters to me. And it matters to you, if you don’t want to go back to Konoha immediately.”

The man drove a hard bargain. Naruto thought he would have broken the authority card a lot sooner, seeing how insufferable Naruto had been sure to be with him. He was hard to rile up though, nothing seemed to faze him, he didn’t care.

He was serious now, despite the light tone. He wasn’t going to let go.

“I sealed their heart.”

There was no better way of putting it. Not sealed in the sense of putting it away in a scroll, but the other main attribute of sealing was the restriction of movements in the broadest sense of the term. The Heartbreaker was a cage.

A cage around the heart.

“How?”
“With a seal.”

Kakashi huffed, patience dwindling. Naruto wasn’t going to make it easy for him.

“Where did you learn to do that?”

“In a scroll.”

It was better to go back to the village now than to admit he had stolen a forbidden scroll from the Hokage’s library. As for the others he had, acquired over the years by Ino and Sai, he wasn’t sure where they came from, but he could guess it wasn’t the bookstore. He wouldn’t say anything that would get them in trouble.

“You never showed that one to us,” Sasuke remarked.

“Yeah, can’t imagine why.”

Sasuke’s face scrunched up in a displeased frown. Lately, Naruto often found himself regretting his own words right after they left his mouth. But he never took them back.

Kakashi sighed again, dramatic and defeated, to little effect. Naruto wasn’t about to feel bad for him.

“Very well, we’ll sort that out later. The mission is still on then.”

“Hum, sensei… What are we going to do with…”

Sakura didn’t finish her sentence, just pointed at the two dead shinobis still lying in the dirt a few feet away. Naruto had kind of forgotten about them.

“Ah, you’re right. One moment.”

Naruto tried to look uninterested as Kakashi unrolled a storage scroll on the ground next to the corpses. It was the standard one they could get at the armory. Naruto didn’t like those, they were ugly, unrefined, and he much preferred his own. Still, he observed Kakashi’s hand seals, how he performed the sealing. Those scrolls were chakra infused, so as not to deplete too much of the user’s reserve – another thing to dislike about them. Naruto didn’t need to put chakra in his seals in advance. He had plenty to go on the spot.

“See, boy?” Tazuna said to Sasuke, pointing at the stranger’s faces. “Shinobis.”

Naruto hadn’t even noticed the headbands.

“Chunins from Kiri,” Kakashi said matter-of-factly before completing the seal. The two bodies disappeared in a puff of smoke.

It made sense in a way. People hired shinobis to protect them, because other people hired other shinobis to kill them.

Huh. Maybe it didn’t make sense at all.

Sour and upset, Sasuke didn’t say a word.

Kakashi wrote something in a blank space near the seal before rolling back the scroll. Instead of putting it away though, he got another one out. Naruto looked at Sakura – she didn’t need him to ask. “Summoning,” she told him, as Kakashi bit at his finger, drawing blood, and before slamming
his hand on the paper. When the smoke cleared, there was a dog sitting there, with a Konoha headband.

It was one of the funniest things Naruto had ever seen.

“Bring that back to the village,” Kakashi told the dog, giving it the scroll. The animal promptly took off – they watched it run between the trees until it was out of sight.

“We’re all set,” Kakashi declared. “Let’s go.”

Not in the mood for discussion, they resumed walking in silence.

Unwilling to delay the group any further or worse, to have them stop and change their mind, Naruto said nothing. But his hand was burning. And he wasn’t feeling so good.

The boat was waiting as promised at a small deck near the main road. Tazuna seemed to know the man handling it, a certain Kaji – Kakashi decided to go with it. Small mercy, none of the kids seemed prone to seasickness, even if Naruto looked a bit nauseous. The fog made it hard to see where they were going – it made the apparition of the bridge even more spectacular.

“Look, look!” Sakura exclaimed, immediately quieted sharply by the sailor.

Kakashi had seen his fair share of the world at large, and even he was impressed. He had never seen a bridge so big, and never one that jumped across the sea. Tazuna smiled proudly, explaining in a low voice where they were at in the construction and what they would do next.

All this trouble, for that bridge. People could really find any possible excuse to go to war.

The man sailing the boat was nervous and jumpy. He couldn’t wait to get rid of them. Tazuna seemed to find it normal, expected even, which said a lot about the state of that place. The weather wasn’t much better on the island, foggy and humid, less than ideal given the situation, but they were almost there, surely nothing would…

Oh, for fuck’s sake.

“Get down!”

He had to give it to his kids, they had amazing reflexes. Even Naruto, who still looked out of it, dropped to the ground in an instant. Kakashi kicked Tazuna in the knee and crouched down himself to avoid the flying sword coming to cut them in half.

And as the owner of that sword made his grand entrance, Kakashi wondered, not for the first time, what he had done in a past life to deserve such luck. The man looked exactly like his picture in the Bingo Book – the bottom of his face bandaged, the top wrapped in his headband… Kakashi couldn’t help but notice that despite being known as a deserter, the Kiri symbol on it wasn’t crossed out as was the tradition. But Kiri shinobis always had a strange definition of loyalty.

Kakashi moved to stand in front of the kids, warning them with one look that now wasn’t the time to play hero.

“Momochi Zabuza.”

"No wonder those worms couldn't manage to kill off that old fuck. Escorted by Hatake Kakashi
himself, huh?”

“It seems both our reputations precede us.”

Being famous was really a hindrance when it came to missions, Kakashi though wearily.

“Let’s put them to the test,” the man said, gleeful.

Kakashi didn’t have it in him to panic. No matter the situation, staying cool and levelheaded could make the difference between life and death. The freak-out came later. When he had made it back home, when he knew his team – or what was left of it – was as safe as could be, when there was nothing more he could do to help and fix things, that’s when he lost all composure, that’s when he allowed himself a short break down. Even that was controlled though, almost timed-up – there was always something more important to focus on.

Right now, all that mattered was to protect his team.

As he reached for his headband, Kakashi just then remembered that he hadn’t warned the kids about that. Yet another problem to deal with. Later.

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Something was wrong, very wrong. Naruto was hot, so hot, sweating profusely under his clothes, and there was a dull ache slowly spreading from his injured hand to his entire body. His vision was a bit blurry. He heard a laugh.

*You’re lucky such a pesky thing can’t kill us. But this should be fun.*

Naruto shook his head. He had been getting increasingly confused as the boat made its way across the sea, and now he couldn’t make sense of anything anymore. He had to focus though. The murder intent pouring out of the newcomer in waves spelled big trouble, as did Kakashi looking more serious than they had ever seen him.

Their teacher also had… A Sharingan? Apparently? But it wasn’t the time for that either. Naruto had to…

*It’s true you’ve never been seriously injured before. Or sick. Or well, poisoned…*

“What’s happening?” he asked weakly, disoriented.

“We’re under attack is what is happening,” Sasuke hissed between his teeth. He was tensed as a bowstring, keeping a white-knuckled grip on the kunai he had in hands. Sakura looked scared out of her mind, but she had her guard up too, even if she was shaking.

But Naruto… Naruto was seeing a cage.

“Why am I here… What…”

The fox sported the widest grin. Its claws were jutting out of the bars, just a hair away from Naruto’s still form.

It looked like they were edging closer.

*Let me out. Come on. Let me out.*

Naruto really didn’t feel good.
He was jolted back to the present by Sasuke throwing him to the ground as Kakashi blocked the enemy’s sword, the men now standing right there somehow.

“What are you doing you moron! Snap out of it!” Sasuke yelled in his face, howling Naruto back to his feet. That’s right, they were under attack. Someone very strong. They had to fight. Or they would die.

*I could help. There’s nothing you can do on your own.*

He couldn’t tune it out, no matter how hard he tried. He had gotten good at closing off that part of his mind over the years, but right now it just wouldn’t go away. His thoughts were too blurry, weak and confused. He was exhausted.

*If you are weakened, the fox said, joy obvious in its thunderous voice, then so is what keeps us apart, you and I.*

The claws were now taking up the whole space in front of the cell. Red, thick chakra was pouring out in strands. Naruto couldn’t contain it.

He got a flash of Kakashi imprisoned in water, Sasuke coughing up blood and Sakura standing in front of him and Tazuna, holding on a kunai like a lifeline, trembling all over.

*I need to help them, he thought, they’re in trouble, I need to…*

“Naruto! Don’t just stand there!”

*Let me help. Let me out.*

*Shut up, shut up!*

*They’re going to die if you don’t do something.*

“NARUTO!”

Sakura had moved, the enemy chasing after her. Or was it a clone? The other one was holding Kakashi in that water prison. The clone hit her, hard, she cried out, and Naruto couldn’t move, his body didn’t respond to him.

“Katon! Fireball Jutsu!”

Sasuke had really ranked up that jutsu.

The enemy had no choice but to let go of Kakashi’s prison if he didn’t want to be burnt to a crisp. They came face to face. The fog still made it hard to see what was happening. The fog, and the red chakra that seemed to flood Naruto’s vision from inside.

*Let me out. Let me out. Let me out. Let me out.*

He felt like he was drowning. Or maybe it was just the sudden stream of water that swept over the field out of nowhere. It had the merit of pulling Naruto out of his trance a little – and to put their enemy out of commission, as Naruto noticed when he could somewhat focus on what was happening right in front of him.

Before Kakashi could deal him the final blow, someone else took care of it.

Naruto raised an incredulous gaze at the newcomer standing on a branch nearby, and not because
he sounded as young as they were, and not because of the disinterest with which he had ended that man’s life.

But because he felt…

Naruto spaces out again, and they were both gone. The next moment, Sasuke was on him, looking pissed.

“What was that Naruto? What were you doing?”

Anger flared up inside of him. He didn’t know why, didn’t know where from – it was unjustified, unneeded. Sasuke was right to be mad at him. And yet, when he grabbed the front of his hoodie, Naruto’s hand closed around his wrist with way more force than necessary.

But he was just so angry. Properly enraged, mad with fury.

*I wish I could kill them all.*

He barely registered Sasuke flinching in pain, vaguely heard Sakura call him out. He was just so damn *angry*. The cage was overflowing and he wanted to…

A hand slammed down on his shoulders.

“Naruto. Calm down.”

It was Kakashi’s voice, right next to his ear. Naruto snapped back to himself. He let go of Sasuke’s arm – they both took a step back, confused. Naruto felt something in his hand – glancing down, he saw his nails lose the sharp edges of…claws? Sasuke’s arm was bleeding, five punctures wounds aligned neatly on his pale skin.

He looked very confused. And hurt.

Naruto was very close to throwing up.

Kakashi’s hand was still firm on his shoulder. Naruto remembered the sealing tag to put him under – he forced a shuddering breath inside of his body. Forced the chakra to retreat. He was more lucid now. The fox laughed, even if it looked pissed. The claws retreated, both in his mind and on his body.

Naruto wanted to say something, but his throat was closed tightly around his voice, his mind blank of what he could possibly say. He was doing his hardest to keep his growing panic at bay – he was scared of losing grip again.

What was that? What had just happened? Those emotions, this anger… they weren’t his. He had never known the fox could get so close to the surface. Could wrestle with Naruto for the control of his body. Could he actually do it? Could Naruto lose his will to the fox? Knowing he had to stay calm at all cost didn’t help actually staying calm, at all.

Kakashi suddenly collapsing didn’t help either.

"Ah, sorry. I might have overdone it," the man said casually while lying face down on the ground. Tazuna grumbled but took it upon himself to see the man safely to his house, and they decided without concertation that questions and explanations would come later.

They followed the man through the trees, the patch of swampy waters, and as they got closer to the
town, the rickety wooden houses scattered around the shabby streets. No one paid them any mind, except for the occasional half-smile at Tazuna and wary looks at the people accompanying him. The silence was heavy on the group and Naruto could feel the weight of his two friends’ gaze scrutinizing him, full of questions and reproach. Naruto’s eyes stayed firmly trained on the ground, trying not to see Sakura limping and the blood on Sasuke’s face and clothes.

The fox was quiet once more, but Naruto could almost feel its satisfaction.

“What is wrong with you? You just… You froze! What’s your problem, Naruto?”

“I didn’t freeze! I was…”

Naruto’s mouth clicked shut as he swallowed back whatever it was that he wanted to say. Kakashi honestly thought they would get to the screaming match sooner, but as good shinobis they had waited until they were relatively safe and set under Tazuna’s roof with their wounds tended to before going for it.

Commendable, but still annoying.

“Oh yeah? What happened then?”

Naruto pinched his lips, torn between telling Sasuke off and admitting something he didn’t want to admit.

“You froze! You didn’t help!” Sasuke accused again. “You didn’t… we could have...”

Died. They could have died. They were all very aware of that. Kakashi didn’t intervene. He had to know too, what had happened with Naruto, why he had been unable to join the fight. It couldn’t be out of fear – he didn’t seem to have much, and he had done just fine against their first attackers.

It had been a long, long day.

Sakura, who had been silent until now, noticed something then.

“What is it with your hand?”

The bandage she had tied around the boy’s palm earlier was mostly gone. Naruto held it out in front of him. The cut had been fairly deep a few hours ago, but it was gone now, vanished.

His hand was still red and swollen as if it was infected.

He didn’t look overly surprised by it, and would have even dismissed it without Sakura’s pointed look. He failed to hide his discomfort as he attempted a careless shrug.

“I think there was poison.”

Kakashi was getting tired of the whiplash.

“What?” Sakura shrieked. “Why didn’t you say something?”

“I just didn’t notice.”

Kakashi stopped listening then, busy praying for the sweet release of unconsciousness, so that he wouldn’t have to deal with any of that.
The Kiri nins’ weapons had been dripping with poison, and ninja poison wasn’t something one could just walk off. Had Naruto touched it by accident? Kakashi should have checked. No wonder the boy had looked so out of it on the boat and after.

Well, he hadn’t done so bad, considering he should have been fucking dead.

Kakashi needed to sleep for a year.

“And you’re good now?” Sasuke asked, incredulous, having a hard time processing the conversation and deciding which emotion he could focus on. Kakashi could relate.

“I guess.”

They could only be grateful then. For what gave Naruto his resistance.

What a fucked up day it was.

Robbed of the outlet for his turmoil and anger, Sasuke huffed and went to sit in a corner of the room, Naruto going the opposite way, putting as much distance as they could between them without leaving the room altogether. Sakura stayed in the middle, at a loss too, gaze bouncing worriedly between her two friends.

“Was he that dangerous? That man,” she asked, as much out of a need to know as to change the subject. She had cried again on the way to the house, but she was calmer now. She would need to toughen up fast.

“The ninjas of Kiri are known to be ruthless and terribly resilient,” Kakashi answered, sitting up on the futon despite Tazuna’s daughter’s protest, “and they’re the ones who dubbed him the Demon of the Hidden Mist. Had I known it was the kind of opponents we were going to face, I would have made us turn back immediately.”

He needed to convey to them the gravity of the situation. He doubted Gato had more soldiers of that caliber under his thumb, but there was no way to know for sure.

“What do we do then?” she asked. No doubt that her answer would be “let’s go home immediately”. She would be right.

“In my current state, I wouldn’t be able to fight anyone. It’s too risky to take the road right now. So we’ll stay here for a few days. Even if Zabuza is dead…”

“Is he though?” Naruto piped from his corner. “That boy… the one that took the man’s body. He wasn’t… He had no intention of killing anyone.”

Naruto was looking out the window, even if with the thick fog, there was little to be seen of the outside world. He was ostensibly avoiding their eyes, as he often did.

Kakashi sighed. He had been worrying about that too – he didn’t want to think about how little sense it made that the hunter had taken the body away instead of burning it to ashes right there and then, and how needles like his could have easily simulated death without actually causing it. The boy was dangerous, dangerous enough that in their state the team wouldn’t have been able to fight him off. It’s not like they had any choice but to let him go. Still, Kakashi had been careless.

“What makes you say that?” he asked. Naruto just shrugged. Weirdly enough, the two kids didn’t ask their friend further questions, seemingly taking his words at faith value. Yet another thing Kakashi was left out of. Naruto had also been able to sense their very first enemies coming.
Sensor? Or something else entirely?

A question for another time. Speaking of which…

“You have a Sharingan,” Sasuke said, failing to keep the accusation from his voice. He had no doubt been mulling over that discovery. In his corner, Naruto tensed up, but kept gazing at the fogged up sky.

“I do.”

“How?”

Kakashi had heard that same outrage before in the voice of the boy’s fellow clan members. A lot of them still resented him for it, but he could hardly bring himself to care. He had plenty of hatred for it himself that others’ just felt irrelevant.

“It was gifted to me. By a teammate.”

“Why would he…”

“He was dying.”

Sasuke swallowed back his words, and most of his anger was snuffed out as he took the measure of what that implied.

“I’m sorry,” he muttered, self-conscious of his own indignation.

“Is that the reason why you got assigned to our team?” Naruto asked next. He sounded lost, not exactly there with them. They would have to discuss what had happened earlier at some point. Kakashi wasn’t looking forward to it.

“No. It’s not.”

Whether he believed him or not, Naruto didn’t insist.

“We have to be prepared for the eventuality of Zabuza being very much alive.”

Kakashi stayed silent for a moment, letting them digest that information. They had been shaken up by the fight, for various reasons. They had found themselves in the position of having to rescue him, of carrying the fate of their group on their shoulders. They had experienced what it felt like to have their decisions meaning life or death for them and their friends. Even if he knew it was inevitable, Kakashi would have wanted to spare them that lesson for a little while longer. So much for the easy and mundane first mission.

“What are we going to do?” Sakura asked once more. It was her default coping strategy – she needed to know there was something to be done, some kind of plan. She looked at him and she needed to be reassured that he knew what he was doing.

A good thing then, that he was so good at bullshitting his way through this kind of situation.

“You need to train. And we need to talk strategy.”

Said confidently enough, any suggestion could be well-received, no matter how wobbly.

“I’m also sending a message to the village. They’ll send back up our way, alright?”
She nodded decisively, looking more like her usual brash self. He couldn’t summon one of his nin-dogs or a messenger bird in his state – it would have to be the old fashion way. Kakashi turned to Tazuna, who had been listening quietly to the exchanges, arms crossed and face closed off, but before he could ask him, they were interrupted by the front door opening on a small boy that was greeted with three very on edge genins kunais in hand. The boy scowled in distaste.

“Inari! Where have you been! Everyone, this is my grandson Inari. Inari, these are the ninjas that escorted me here. Say hi.”

The boy didn’t share his grandfather’s good mood, and he cast them the exact same mistrustful look they had received from the few villagers they had passed in the streets.

“Tazuna,” Kakashi said before they got distracted by other matters, “can you arrange to have a letter sent to Konoha?”

The man was patting his grandson’s head with a smile, but his expression lost its warmth when he addressed Kakashi.

“I can. However…”

Their eyes met. Kakashi sighed.

“If reinforcement comes, it will only be in the interest of our own extraction. They won’t interfere in your country’s business. You have my words.”

Sasuke chose that moment to join back in.

“Why not?” he asked, puzzled. “Why couldn’t we help?”

“We can’t just barge in here Sasuke, not if the Wave Lord didn’t ask us too. This is not our country.”

“But those people need help, don’t they? We can't just…”

“And who would pay for that?” Inari suddenly exploded. Sasuke frowned, annoyed, but the boy kept going. “We have no money! Gato has it all! So no one will help us!”

Sasuke obviously wanted to argue with that. He looked at Kakashi, like he expected him to say something, to rebuff it.

Kakashi could do no such thing. The state of the country couldn’t be a secret to the neighboring nations. Gato had the whole island under his control, but he was still maintaining trades with the rest of the world, and their government had made no call for help.

Without a substantial reward, there was no reason for any third party to get involved here.

However, Kakashi had seen Sasuke’s burst of righteous anger and his inflexible sense of justice at play more than once by now, and he knew there was no way he could make the boy understand that, let alone accept it.

“Why don’t you just kill that man?”

Sometimes Kakashi was convinced Naruto did it on purpose.

“No one can kill Gato!” the child exclaimed, getting worked up over an issue that probably plagued everyone in this place.
“Why not? He’s just a man.”

“He’s… he’s got power, and money! He controls everything around here!”

“That won’t matter if he’s dead.”

It was hard to tell if Naruto was being genuine, or just a little shit – it was always hard to tell with him. Inari choked up on frustrated tears, too upset to articulate an answer. Overwhelmed, he just stormed off and disappeared upstairs.

“You really are kids,” Tazuna deadpanned in a way that clearly didn’t mean to convey a compliment. Sasuke huffed. Sakura rolled her eyes. Naruto just shrugged, unconcerned. That about summed it up.

Dinner was a quiet, stilted affair, followed by an uneventful but restless night. The kids turned and tossed all night, scared awake by the slightest noise, and Kakashi himself had the hardest time putting in some rest despite his exhaustion, harassed by the certitude that they weren’t safe here. He assumed Gato wouldn’t try anything against Tazuna in his own house, if he had any interest in maintaining the illusion of legality over the whole affair, but that wouldn’t hold him back forever. They were in over their head – the kids couldn’t be caught up in this. This country was a drop of blood away from civil war, and Kakashi had a very personal opinion of the age at which people had to discover the horrors of open conflicts, which was never years old. They needed to get the hell out of this mess.

In the meantime though, all he could do was keep preparing them as best as he could.

He found himself facing three tired but determined kids the next day in a clearing not far from Tazuna’s house. They didn’t complain about the lack of sleep – or food, which was scarce around there, and even more for a family unexpectedly hosting four guests. Tsunami, Tazuna’s daughter, had said nothing of it, grateful that they hadn’t abandoned her father on the road and willing to repay them for it, but that didn’t make it any better.

They really needed to get out.

“Alright then, team 7, we’re now gonna go back on some basics. Today’s lesson in on chakra control. The refined sort.”

He made a quick demonstration of climbing a tree up and down, chakra sticking his feet to the wood.

“Until now you’ve only learned to mould chakra for specific techniques, but you need a better understanding of your own reserve and limitation. It will help you both perform the jutsu you already know more efficiently and with less chakra waste, but also learn new ones quicker. Come on, give it a try. If you do good on tree climbing I’ll show you how to walk on water.”

They nodded, full of determination.

He expected Sasuke to be the best at it, being the one with the most training and, as far as he could tell, the one who could actually perform decent ninjutsu. The boy got up a few steps, higher than the average first try, while Naruto was unsurprisingly lower. His disregard for ninjutsu was as much a cause as a consequence of his lack of chakra control, Kakashi supposed. If he was getting proficient with seals, he had probably all but ditched the subject.

As for Sakura…
“Well. That wasn’t so hard.”

Kakashi was a little ashamed of the moment of confusion that followed, where he didn’t even think of looking up. But sure enough, there she was, sitting casually on a high branch, smiling proudly.

“How come you’re always the best at this?” Naruto said without bite.

“Maybe I’m just better than you,” she retorted before going back down.

“We’ll see about that,” Sasuke mumbled, face set in a determined scowl. Sakura chuckled.

Kakashi expected all three of them to compete against each other, to be upset at their lack of success, for Sakura to ditch them, for the boys to be jealous. “Alright then, come here, I’ll show you,” Sakura said instead. Sasuke and Naruto came to stand in front of her obediently and listened with rapt interest at her explanations. Kakashi was completely forgotten.

He had to fight against memories trying to superpose themselves to that scene, of a laughing girl, a competitive Uchiha and a broody, damaged kid inexplicably getting along despite that kid’s best efforts at keeping his distance. But it wasn’t them. They weren’t at war now, they wouldn’t know the same fate.

He wouldn’t let any harm come to them.

“Can I leave you to it then? I’m going to check on Tazuna,” Kakashi suggested, as much because he was useless here as because he had an urge to get away, to clear his head. He wasn’t prepared for that feeling of crushing responsibility that came with overseeing a genin team. They relied on him to tell them what to do, to keep them safe. Damn, he had to get that message to the village.

“Sensei, wait.”

Looking back, he saw Naruto jogging to catch up with him, his two friends still busy with training but keeping an eye on him all the same.

“What is…”

“If I die,” Naruto cut bluntly, “will the demon die too?”

Kakashi hesitated, caught off guard by that line of questioning.

“Yes.”

Kakashi wasn’t going to volunteer information on the matter, but he couldn’t lie to him either. Shisui had made it very clear, with the underlying threat his tone always carried nowadays when he talked about Naruto. Shisui had made which side he was on pretty clear – he would show no mercy to those who hurt Naruto, voluntarily or not, be they his friends or not. Kakashi was convinced neither Shisui nor Naruto were aware of it.

“He said… He said it wouldn’t kill me. The poison.”

Kakashi found it wiser not to answer to that, instead of opening a whole new world of complication that was implied here. Since when were they in contact? And to what extent?

“Is it possible that it… that it takes control of me? That it escapes my grip?”

“…Yes.”
For a second Naruto looked like he had been punched in the guts and this, this was the exact reason
why Kakashi would have preferred to lie about it. But Naruto had to know, he had to be aware of
that possibility. They were in the dark as to what could trigger it, they just knew now that him
being weakened seemed to be part of it at least. It was honestly an issue Kakashi had hoped they
wouldn’t have to deal with. No such luck.

“A- alright.”

There was more to discuss, but Naruto and that sixth sense that had him feel serious conversations
coming from a mile away wasted no time to bolt, regrouping with his friends in record time.
Kakashi was dead on his feet and done with the world at large – he decided that this could wait at
least for the length of a power nap.

“Another message for Konoha?” Kaji asked, skeptical. Tazuna waved off his concern with a laugh.

“Just more boring administrative details. Can you arrange to have it delivered?”

“What of course. You can count on me!”

It had always been Kaji’s role, transporting the village’s people and messages from land to island
and island to land. It was also his father’s duty, and his father before him. They had never failed it.

He stopped his boat midway, far enough from both shores that no one would see him. He reached
into his bag and started to sort through the messages and letters. He made two piles – the ones that
carried inconsequential, boring news, and the rest.

The ones that asked for help, money, or that just tried to give a faithful account of what was going
on in his country. The ones addressed to the ninja of Konoha, requesting immediate backup.

He dumped that pile into the sea, as he always did, since Gato’s men had visited his house with
bats and knives one day and asked to speak to the one who was responsible for most of the
communication with the land, now that the Gato Company had seized control of the Aviary.

They had come back the day before and made it very clear they knew who had smuggled Tazuna
back in the country. His body hurt all over. The only reason why they hadn’t killed him was that
they didn’t want to raise suspicions about Gato being very much aware of all that happened on the
island.

Kaji wouldn’t risk the slightest disobedience ever again.

He sailed away without looking back, as the letters disappeared into the sea.

“Okay I’d rank this one… eighth. No, no. Seventh. Because the waitress is cute.”

Anko had been sure to say within hearing range of said waitress. The girl blushed. Anko let out a
boisterous laugh and popped another dango in her mouth while scribbling on her list, where she
was in the process of ranking all the dango shops they had visited since the beginning of their
journey.

They found distractions where they could.
Izumi was busy writing to her mother. They only sent out words on their whereabouts once or twice a month, so instead of back and forth letters, Izumi wrote a few words daily, to be sent to her family and friends back home when she had the chance.

Anko never wrote anything, except a few taunts at some other jounins from the village that she trusted the ones in charge of the messages to pass down. “Tell Guy I saw a woman today who had even thicker eyebrows than he does” or “tell Kakashi he’s a nerd”. She had no family left that Izumi knew of. She was tight-lipped about herself as a rule, seldom sharing anything personal. It made Izumi a little self-conscious about how much of her life she constantly spilled to the other woman, but Anko always seemed to find her retelling of young Uchihas mischief hilarious, so it wasn’t so bad.

After almost three months though, Izumi was running out of things to say.

She was grateful and proud to have been chosen for this mission, and she had enjoyed immensely discovering so many different cities and people, and getting to know her senpai a little better. But she could admit to herself that the trip was starting to wear her down. She still had only a vague idea of whom they were looking for – “an important woman” – and she didn’t even know if they were making any progress on that. Their itinerary looked pretty random to her, Anko following some instructions she wasn’t aware of, from hot springs to party towns to animal sanctuaries. All she knew was that they needed to convince that woman to go back to Konoha with them, and that they were the ones assigned to this mission because one, they were women, and two, Anko had something that would sway her somehow. When Izumi had asked about herself, Anko had trapped her in a headlock and ruffled her hair mercilessly, saying “well, you, it’s because you’re my favorite chunin!”

It was nice to hear, but now Izumi knew why Sasuke hated that so much.

She couldn’t help but hope they would find their mysterious woman soon. She missed her home and her people. She wanted to know how Sasuke and his friends were doing – Shisui’s call for help wasn’t to reassure her. It was frustrating not to be there to help and support them, but she had her duty to fulfill. She hoped, but she wouldn’t complain.

“Let’s go, Izumi,” Anko called as she popped the last dango into her mouth. She winked heavily at the blushing waitress, but they left without another word. Despite her flirting and how much she liked to eat and drink, Anko always stayed very goal-oriented, never indulging too much despite how little they had to do at times. They had visited many drinking parlors and gambling houses – the mystery woman natural habitat, apparently – but Anko had never gotten lost into it. Her reputation of an impulsive, wild woman without restraint or respect was pretty unjustified. Izumi knew that before, but it was different to see it at play when they were so far away from home and where most shinobis would have jumped on the opportunity to be a little less serious than they ought to be. When Izumi had clumsily questioned her about it, Anko had only said “I can’t afford the luxury of being less than exemplary”. Izumi had no idea what that meant. “I think you’re pretty great,” she had answered. Anko had looked surprised, but pleased enough that Izumi believed it had been the right thing to say.

They were heading to yet another gambling house. If they didn’t find anything, they would move to the next town over, just behind the border with Wind Country. Izumi was busy revising the inventory of their supply in her mind, wondering if they needed to take a last trip to the market before they left, when Anko slammed a hand on her chest to make her back out into a narrow alley, suddenly on high alert.

Anko brought a finger to her lips, so Izumi stayed quiet. She could hear voices from the main street
getting closer and closer, two women if she had to guess, one significantly younger than the other, and one significantly drunker.

Anko walked out of the alleyway just as the voices were about to pass them up, Izumi on her heels.

They found themselves facing the two talking women. Izumi’s eyes barely flicked toward the youngest one, glued as they were to the other. Even with her gaze clouded and cheeks reddened by alcohol, she cut an impressive figure, charismatic and powerful.

And above all, well known.

Izumi was frozen in surprise, dumbstruck, as she was hit hard in the face by the startling realization that the “important woman” they had been chasing after was none other than…

“Tsunade-hime,” Anko said respectfully. “We’ve been looking for you.”

Chapter End Notes

DUN DUN DUN.

I know I kinda skimmed over the fights in this, but I have Reasons. One, I think thoughts and feelings are more important than action, Two, we'll get plenty of proper fighting next time, and Three, writing fights Sucks Balls. We'll get the emotional mess of Zabuza and Haku's story though don't worry ^^ also I feel like a lot happened here and not all was properly resolved or addressed, but if I'm in over my head, so are they, so it works. Right? You know if I was listening to myself I would ramble about the entirety of my writing, about my thought process and how I break my own heart at times. Like I'd be putting author's note in brackets 2007-ff.net-style. I have a Lot of Feels people.

Also I've been rereading the first few volumes of Naruto to write this and I had forgotten how the manga was much more violent and bloody than the anime. Like for a shonen it's really not glossing over shit in the first few arcs... And yeah I'm bringing in my gal Tsunade early because I love her and I want to. Also because I'm gonna fuck around with the chunin exam very soon :p The kids are breaking my heart a little, communication is dead or what... I'd be lying if I said it's going to get better. Anyway, come say hi on tumblr and tell me what you think! I love you all. Bye.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Wave Country sucks balls.

Chapter Notes

So, the previous chapter got less feedback than usual, which sent me to my usual freakouts of "FUCK THIS IS IT THEY HATE IT NOW" and I had half a mind to ask like "tell me if you don't enjoy" or what and then about seven seconds later I remembered that I wasn't actually much into hearing that x) I think I'd take no feedback over negative ones, we're all here to have a good time. Honestly I consider myself lucky, I never thought I would get so much amazing response to this story. Besides, some of you are The Shit and make me want to keep writing this forever. I have to give a special shoutout to Goshikku, because they gave birth to several plot points and scenes for this already.

Thank you very much, all of you! Now, enough with the mushy feelings, and back to the angst x)

WARNING - We get a bit more into fighting in this chapter, so there will be some blood, pain, gore and injuries. I'm not one for super graphic descriptions, but well, it's there.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Anko warned her in a hushed tone – “whatever you hear in there, try not to act too surprised.”

Izumi didn’t think she could look anymore dumbstruck that she already was, so with some luck the two women would think it was her resting expression. They had made their way to Tsunade’s – freaking Tsunade oh sage and paths – inn, and they sat at a small table in the common room. Tsunade ordered sake to the reception, despite her already inebriated state and the disapproving look of the young woman who was with her – Shizune, she had said.

“I supposed you know why we’re here,” Anko said once they had their glasses full. Izumi had declined, knowing her mother would skin her alive is she knew she was drinking – and she would know, one way or another. Shizune refused too. They were facing each other, clearly byproducts of whatever it was that was happening here. Izumi couldn’t think of a better place to be though. She was shaking with excitement.

“I would have heard of it if the old man had kicked the bucket,” Tsunade slurried. There was anger simmering right below her disinterested façade, like she resented them for even being here.

“You’re right, he’s not dead. But as soon as suitable replacement comes forward, the Sandaime will cede his place.”
So that’s what Anko’s warning had been about. Izumi did her best to hide her shock, even if with how little attention was paid to her, it didn’t matter all that much.

Was that the reason why they were here? To bring back Tsunade so that… So that she could take the Hokage’s seat?

It was true that the Sandaime was getting old. Technically, he had already been replaced once. Izumi had vague, faded images of the Yondaime in her mind, of his bright smile and bright hair, running around the village and waving at kids in the street. She had a lot more memories of the old Sandaime and his friendly demeanor, but she was aware his position was... precarious now. This wasn't a bad idea, she thought. She tried to imagine the blonde woman in his place, sitting at his office, wearing his hat. It was hard right now because she wasn’t… really presentable, but it was Tsunade. Legendary Sanin Tsunade, the best kunoichi the village had ever seen, the best medic-nin, the strongest woman in the world. Every little girl aspiring to become ninjas looked up to her, the one that had risen above all – and specifically, above all men. Izumi could see her, commanding the village, being carved into the mountain, giving them a new direction, new goals. She could imagine…

“Good luck with finding someone foolish enough to take his place.”

The fantasy came crashing down.

She was defying Anko, making it clear that she knew that’s why they had come to her – and that she wouldn’t do it. Izumi refrained from opening her mouth, even if she was burning with questions. Why not? Why not come back? Why had she even left in the first place? The details were more than hazy. Frankly, Izumi hadn’t even been convinced she was alive until just an hour ago.

“Konoha needs you,” Anko said with a measured tone. Izumi could hear the anger in her voice though, could see it in her frown, in the weird, feral smile she had when she was truly mad.

Tsunade downed her glass in one gulp, filled it and downed it again. She wiped her mouth with her sleeve.

“Little girl,” she said, staring Anko down with all the force coiled inside of her. “Konoha can go to hell.”

Both Shizune and Izumi reacted with the same speed and precision – they sprung to their feet and threw an arm in front of their mentor to keep them from jumping at each other’s throat. Izumi hoped Anko wouldn’t be too mad at her – she hated when Izumi stepped in to stop her. She tended to pick fights with everyone and their mother, never letting the slightest disrespect fly. She especially liked to beat up shitty men.

Izumi had rarely seen her like this though – truly angry, on a very deep, personal level. And not only angry. She looked…

Izumi would have said that she looked hurt.

“Now that we’ve got you, you’re not going anywhere,” she spat in Tsunade’s face. “I will take you back to the village, whatever it takes.”

“Do your worse, little girl,” Tsunade shot back.

Anko snarled at her before storming out of the inn. Izumi made hasty goodbyes, bowing several times at the two women – Shizune was the only one to bow back, equally flustered. Izumi had to
run to catch up with Anko’s long strides.

Her mentor broke her own rule for the first time that night, and drunk her weight in alcohol at the bar of their own inn. It was far from being a party though. She got increasingly somber and withdrawn as the night went on, snapping aggressively at everyone who so much as breathed in her direction, and when Izumi dragged her to their room, she looked more defeated than Izumi thought she would ever see her. Anko didn’t do despair and self-pity. She was a force of nature, always going forward, always motivated. But in the end, no one could be cheerful all the time.

“The great Sanins,” she was mumbling. “Great Sanins my ass. Great cowards is what they are. Fucking assholes. But we’ll get ‘em. You’ll seeee.”

“Just a few steps further, Anko…”

“You know what? They don’t deserve the village. They don’t deserve us.”

Izumi wrestled with the woman’s clothes and managed to make her drink some water before putting her to bed. She kept repeating that – “they don’t deserve the village and they don’t deserve us”, like a mantra.

It changed only once, as she was on the brink of sleep.

“He doesn’t deserve me.”

Izumi thought Anko was out of it, but she suddenly grabbed her wrist, lighting fast and way too strong for someone so drunk. Izumi yelped as Anko stared at her, unblinking, her eyes glowing in the moonlight.

“He didn’t deserve me. I’m awesome. I am.”

Izumi was confident Anko wasn’t really aware of what she was saying, and that she wouldn’t remember any of that came morning. She put her hand on top of the vice grip Anko had on her wrist.

“You are. You really are. Even more than Tsunade.”

Anko scoffed, but she let go, and finally passed out.

Izumi lied down on her own futon, but she had a hard time falling asleep. 

Dear everyone, she wrote in her head, you won’t believe what fuckery happened here.

It was among those things that you kind of knew, in theory, but it did nothing to alleviate the shock of actually witnessing it.

Sakura was aware on some abstract, intellectual level, that the Fire Country was a prosperous nation, and that Konoha was too. She was aware that it wasn’t the case for every country and village. She was aware that not everybody lived like she did. She had had history lessons, they had studied wars and crisis, famines, invasions, darker times and darker places. She had heard about all that.

But Sakura was also twelve years old and it was already hard for her to picture how her orphan friend lived, it was hard to relate to his constant (illegal) quest for money, and so it was safe to say she had never wasted much thoughts on what was happening even further away from her, in the
rest of the world.

So no amount of hard facts and figures she knew – and she knew plenty – could have prepared her to the experience of walking the streets of the main town of Wave Country.

It wasn’t the occasional beggar, it wasn’t nice and less nice neighborhoods – it was everything, everywhere. The stores were empty, sad looking vegetables rotting away at the bottom of lone boxes, clothing racks holding one or two items maximum, if any at all. Everyone looked tired, grim. The women didn’t wear make-up, the kids didn’t wear shoes. It was misery, plain and simple, everywhere she turned her gaze.

She couldn’t help but look. Sasuke had opted for the other option – he kept his eyes firmly trained on the ground. His shoulders were tensed, his face folded in an angry scowl. She swore she could feel his anger steaming out of him. They were following Tazuna around town, having volunteered to help with grocery shopping. Some help did the man need – there wasn’t enough to buy in town that he would need an extra pair of hand to carry it.

There was nothing she could say to comfort her friend. It was weird, because Sasuke was the second heir of the Uchiha clan, he had to know about political struggles and diplomacy, far more than she did. But maybe that was the issue. He had seen it at play many times, and had expressed his frustration at these machinations more than once. Because he was left out of it, sure, but also because he simply didn’t understand them.

She wouldn’t have thought that he would be so affected though. It’s true he was always one to help out, be it his friends, classmates, or the people from his clan. The Uchiha had a strong sense of community. As far as she could tell though, they didn’t extend it to the rest of the village like he did. And most importantly, where they were known to be cunning and moves by ulterior motives. Maybe this was just old prejudice speaking, but the fact remained that he was at odds with his clan most of the times.

He had told them once, very seriously, that he was considered a sociable one among them. The way he had said it, she couldn’t have told if it was supposed to be an insult or a compliment.

It was so funny to her – Sasuke, sociable. Well, it was always a question of perspective. Compared to his relatives, or even to Naruto, he could indeed qualify. That probably made her the friendliest person in the entire world.

Speaking of their least sociable friend, she wondered what he was doing right now. He had refused to come to town with them, claiming he needed to train some more, to catch up with them. He probably just wanted to spend some time alone. She expected it to come sooner, actually – he always retreated to his own company after a while, worn down quickly by interpersonal interactions.

She couldn’t deny they hadn’t insisted as much as they could have, and she had an inkling as to why that was.

“Hey, Sasuke…”

She was interrupted by a hand on her thigh.

If warding off creepy men counted as fighting, she had practiced her skills more in these situations than in an actual ninja context. As it was, her reflexes were on point – she spun around and kicked the man blindly, not bothering to find out who he was and what he was trying to do. He kissed the ground with a painful thud.
Several wallets and wandering bills spilled out of his vest. Somehow, knowing that he was after her money rather than herself didn’t make anything better.

“Let’s move,” Sasuke growled. No one had batted an eye. This was commonplace around here.

A few kids came up to them, hands open, begging for some spare. They tended to gravitate around her, deeming her a safer bet than her scary looking friend, but Sasuke was the one to drop sweets and coins into their waiting hands. They scattered the next instant without a thank you, as if they were afraid he would take back his offerings.

They told Tazuna they would stay out a little while longer, when he suggested going back to his house. He narrowed his eyes at them, suspicious – they couldn’t really make a convincing case of wanting to see more of that awful town. He didn’t ask though.

They half-heartedly looked for a decent-looking café or food court, but in the end they settled for eating their own snacks under a tree, just on the outskirt of the village. It took them a while to get to talking – she always had a hard time addressing him. She still carried that lingering awkwardness when he was concerned, because he was still that cool, better-than-the-rest guy, and she still wasn’t sure, exactly, what he thought of her.

But they needed to talk about this.

“What do you think it was?” he said eventually, once they were out of food and the sun was starting to set, warning them that they would have to head back soon. He lifted his arm, showcasing the five round wounds on his pale skin, made by five sharp claws, a couple of days earlier.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. She was at a loss. Naruto had seemed so strange, so unlike himself. He was often moody and even rude, but he had never, ever tried to hurt any of them. His anger was often directionless – he took it out on training post or laps around the village. This wasn’t like him at all.

And the claws? Damn, what was that about.

“He didn’t look like himself,” Sasuke said. She hummed.

They hadn’t asked Kakashi, knowing full well he would say nothing, as nothing was ever said on that particular matter.

“I was thinking maybe it has to do with… You know. All that stuff. With Naruto,” she said clumsily. They had never broached that subject so broadly. It was something they were both aware of but didn’t discuss, because there wasn’t much to say. There was something with Naruto. They didn’t know what. It didn’t go much further than that.

He cast her an assessing look like he was debating whether or not to ask his next question.

“Doesn’t… Doesn’t Ino know something? About that?”

She couldn’t help but chuckle as his pouting expression. He didn’t like asking things to Ino, and he liked it even less than in their little world, asking things to Ino was inevitable. Everyone knew it. Not many liked it, but not many could escape it either.

Her smile melted with a sigh.

“No. The adults talk about him a lot, but she could never make out why exactly. He’s just…
special.”
And probably not in the way Sakura or Sasuke thought he was.

“Could it be a jutsu?” Sasuke asked.

"I've never heard of anything like that but... well. There is weirder stuff out there.”

“Maybe he’s like... half-cat or something.”

“What? That makes no sense!”

“Why not? It would explain the whiskers!”

They snickered, relaxing a little. It felt nice, after the tension of the past few days.

“We’ll have to investigate,” he said, very serious. She nodded. It felt important somehow that they knew what was going on with Naruto, if only so that they could be prepared.

“I wish he would just... tell us,” she sighed, wistful. They wouldn’t be where they were now if Naruto could just trust them with this.

“Hm.”

He got up and lent her a hand to help her back to her feet as well. They marched back to Tazuna’s house with renewed determination – they would find out what was going on, and they would help their friend.

Whether he liked it or not.

“...The boy. It’s Naruto, right? Uzumaki Naruto?” Tazuna asked.

Kakashi was so surprised at being addressed by the man, for a moment he didn’t realize the question was for him. Tazuna had been working in silence, mood darkening as workers came to announce him that they had to quit, that they couldn’t handle the pressure anymore, bailing out one by one. The first day, there were at least twenty men working on the bridge. Now they were less than ten.

“Yes.”

Tazuna hummed to himself as he kept methodically hammering in the nails that held the handrail in place. For a man his age, his strength and endurance were remarkable. He was a force of nature.

“You know, there used to be shinobis around here. Good ones, I mean. In my father’s youth, Wave Country was under the protection of a hidden village.”

“Really?” Kakashi asked, curious. It wasn’t Konoha for sure. “Kiri?”

“Uzushio.”

Tazuna stopped his work so that he could look straight at Kakashi, maybe to gauge his reaction.

“We don’t talk about it much anymore. There’s no need to dwell on the past. But the boy’s name rung a bell. They were from there, weren't they? That clan.”
Sadly enough, Kakashi probably didn’t know a lot more than the old man about it. The story wasn’t taught much, he didn’t really know why. He had seen Kushina get sad or angry more than once about how her clan and their destroyed homeland had been forgotten so easily by the world in general and by Konoha in particular, with which they were supposed to be close allies.

“He doesn’t know about it,” Kakashi said, as much a diversion as a warning.

“Why not?”

Kakashi didn’t have an answer to that. He had been wondering at it lately. The identity of his parents had been kept a secret for his own safety, but he had still been gifted with his mother’s name. Kakashi was grateful for it, but if he was allowed to be an Uzumaki, what difference did it make to know from which one he descended exactly? He understood why it had to be hidden from the rest of the world.

But why from him?

“You know what,” Kakashi said with a dry laugh. “I have no idea.”

Tazuna frowned but didn’t insist, probably thinking he was being mocked. He didn’t let go of the subject though.

“What about his parents?”

“Dead. Both of them.”

“They were good people, those Uzumakis, or so my father said. We flourished under their protection. Maybe knowing that would do good to that brat. He’s an awful child.”

Kakashi resisted the urge to jump to Naruto’s defense – in a strange way, Tazuna was looking after the boy. Besides, Naruto was kind of terrible, especially to strangers. Especially if one didn’t know him.

Maybe Tazuna was right. Maybe Kakashi could tell him. About his parents, his inheritance, about where he came from. Every day the silence he kept over Minato and Kushina and what they had meant to him weighed heavier and heavier on his mind. It felt like betrayal, to have them ignored like this, like they had never been in his life, like they had never existed. Kakashi had loads of memory to share, and their son could only benefit from them. They could do good for once, these memories, instead of being painful.

“Maybe you’re right.”

.

This forest was very different from the ones he was used too. The trees and plants weren’t the same, but above all it was the whole atmosphere that was unfamiliar. Wave country was very humid, swampy and clouded, and that forest felt more like a jungle than anything.

Naruto was walking aimlessly through the tall trees. The canopy was thick, and seeing how the sun was already shy around there, it felt like the forest was constantly on the brink of darkness, stuck in a surreal twilight, or dawn. It was alive with the sounds of insect, birds and small animals wandering around the bushes – Naruto felt both alone and surrounded, at ease.

He had been in thorough need of some solitude.
The rift that had always existed between him and the others felt more palpable than ever. It was due partly to Sasuke and Sakura’s sudden unwillingness to ignore it any longer – it permeated all of their interactions, this sensation of them always being on the verge of asking, of trying to jump the gap.

Sometimes Naruto thought he would reach out to help them cross. Sometimes he thought he would push them back. He couldn’t make up his mind, and it scared him that their relationship could be redefined just depending on what mood he was in when they would finally crack and speak up. He had hoped to clear his mind a little, but it was proving difficult now that there was nothing to distract him from his spiraling thoughts.

That is, until he stumbled upon someone else.

There was a girl kneeling in the middle of a clearing, picking up herbs and flowers to fill a basket. He wasn’t being stealthy – she raised her head at his approach and gave him a small smile before going back to her task.

He could have kept going, ignore her. But he felt a weird pull toward the stranger, curiosity and attraction making him hesitate at the edge of the clearing.

“Are you lost?”

He startled. Her voice was deeper than he would have guessed. She looked at him expectantly, waiting for an answer.

“No. I’m just wandering around.”

He took a few steps, deciding to give it a go now that she had made the decision for him. He sat down on the ground, not too close, but enough that he could follow the precise movements of her hands, could study her face. Soft, gentle. She was kind of pretty.

“What is that for?” he asked, unnerved by the silence.

“Medicine.”

“Do you make them yourself?”

“Hm. Healing creams, mostly. My friend was hurt. I need to tend to him.”

Naruto was welcome for the distraction of that mysterious stranger, and he grappled at something to say to keep them going a while longer.

“Isn’t it dangerous for a girl to be out there on her own?”

Her eyes widened before she laughed, low and subdued.

"I can't defend myself just fine. Besides, I'm not a girl."

Naruto blushed, embarrassed. The other didn’t look offended though.

“Sorry.”

“I don’t mind. I’m Haku.”

“Naruto.”
“Aren’t you a shinobi, Naruto?”

Haku was pointing at the Konoha headband resting around his neck. Naruto tended to flatten it under the collar of his hoodie, so that it wasn’t so ostentatious. He was, but he didn’t like people identifying him as such at first glance.

It beat being recognized as the Demon Fox on sight, but not by much.

“Yeah.”

“So you must know girls that are very strong too.”

“They’re not girls. Or boys. They’re shinobis,” he said without thinking. Haku seemed startled by his biting tone.

“Is that a bad thing?”

Naruto wondered if that’s how he had made it sound. At a loss, he just shrugged.

“Do you want to help me out?” Haku asked, electing to change the course of the encounter entirely.

“Why not,” Naruto agreed without thinking. It’s not like he had better things to do anyway.

They worked in silence for a while, Naruto following Haku’s instructions, trying to emulate the delicate movements of the other teen. He wasn’t so bad with plants – he had a few of them, and he was the one to tend to Shisui’s small garden, even if they grew nothing more than a few flowers and aromatic plants. Thinking about Shisui brought back their last conversation to the forefront of his mind. He hadn’t really had the opportunity to go back on it, with the chaos of the last few days. There was too much going on right now.

“Are you alright?” Haku asked when they took a break, sharing some water.

“I’m just… thinking.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Sitting there between the flowers, under the protection of the trees, Naruto felt strangely sheltered, at peace. Reasonably certain that there was no threat around for now. There was something about that Haku, Naruto couldn’t explain it. He felt close to that complete stranger, like they were linked somehow. The other didn’t know him, had no expectations over Naruto and what he would choose to share, and Naruto didn’t have much to lose there, wouldn’t care about Haku’s judgment. He was overwhelmed by the turmoil of his emotions, feeling isolated from the world at large, and he needed to talk about it somehow, to let it out.

"I don't know why I'm alive."

He was seized with panic in an instant, mortified at having let that drop so bluntly. Haku didn't look taken aback though, not even a little. Didn’t laugh, or looked at him weirdly, shrugged it off. Instead, that stranger, about whom Naruto knew nothing about, answered with a wistful tone, full of sorrow and compassion, “ah. I understand.”

Somehow Naruto had no doubt that it was true.

“By all means, it would make more sense if I was dead, and yet…”
“Do you think we need a reason? Maybe we’re just alive, and that’s it.”

Haku didn’t look any more convinced by this than Naruto did.

“No. If we’re alive, it’s just because the ones who have power over us haven’t killed us yet.”

“Maybe they just couldn’t do it,” Haku said. Naruto perceived sadness in that quiet voice, and maybe longing. “Or maybe they just love you.”

Naruto scoffed at that, and Haku smiled too, knowing that it was unlikely. They wouldn’t be wondering, if that was the case, they would be doubting like this.

“Maybe they need you.”

Naruto folded his knees up to rest his chin on top, wrapping his arms around his legs, a parody of comfort against that unpleasant truth.

“It’s nice,” Haku went on, “being needed by someone.”

“Is it though?”

“You don’t think so?”

“I don’t want to help them.”

They were both being as vague as could be, and yet there was an understanding between them. Haku was about his age and it looked like they didn’t lead the same kind of life at all, Naruto would usually have trouble connecting with people like this, and yet….

“Do you?” he asked.

“What?”

“Do you want to help them?”

Haku reflected on it for a while.

“Yes. I’m grateful for the life they’ve given me.”

“I’m not.”

Maybe there laid the heart of the issue.

“Isn’t there someone? Someone you’re grateful for?”

Naruto’s mind jumped to Shisui framed by the door – “you will always be welcome here” – to Sakura – “you’re not alone. You’ll never be” – to Sasuke – “I’m not going away”. He was grateful, but he was also bitter, because he had no proof whatsoever, that his life wouldn’t be easier if they were just… not there. Colder and lonelier, yes, but easier.

He was tired of his feelings. He was tired of feeling period.

“Maybe. But they don’t need me.”

They had their families, their lifelong friends, emotional support, love. Naruto didn’t bring much to the table beside troubles and worries.
“If only I was stronger, then I could be free.”

“But you would be alone.”

“I’d rather be alone than chained.”

“Really?”

The tone suggested Haku disagreed.

“You get used to it,” Naruto said, even if he wasn’t sure it was true. Haku smiled.

“Do you? I guess you’re stronger than me then.”

Naruto unfolded and straightened up to look at Haku, who was just staring at him now, indulgent, compassionate. The other teen shifted closer until their knees were touching, raised a hand slowly, up, up, until it rested lightly on Naruto’s face, cupping his cheek.

“I’m sure you’ll find it. The reason.”

The quiet moment stretched into infinity as they stared at each other. Even if the feelings they shared were so grim, their understanding so depressing, Naruto still felt content, satisfied. He wasn’t looking for comfort or a solution – this was enough.

Haku took the hand back eventually and got back up.

“I should get going.”

Naruto nodded dumbly, still a little mystified by the whole encounter.

“I… hope your friend will be alright,” he said, for lack of a better idea. A strange, strained smile passed on Haku’s face.

"Don’t worry. He will. Goodbye then, Naruto. I’m sure we’ll meet again.”

“That… would be nice,” Naruto said without thinking. Haku gave him the same weird, pained smile, but didn’t add anything, and soon disappeared between the trees.

Naruto didn’t move for a while, trying to wrap himself in the lingering feelings of that weird meeting, wondering at some point if he hadn’t just imagined the whole thing. It left a bittersweet taste in his mouth. He wondered why living had to be so damn hard.

Just before dinner, Kakashi told them, “we leave tomorrow night.”

It would be their fifth and last day on the island, and honestly Sakura couldn’t wait for it to be over and done with. She wanted to go home, she wanted to leave that gloomy town with its gloomy people, she wanted to be back to safety, relieved of the fear that wouldn’t let her rest since they had been attacked on the road. She wanted things to go back to normal.

Kakashi had said nothing of the fact that they hadn’t heard from Konoha at all. If not backups, they should at least have received an answer of some sort by now. She tried to reassure herself with the idea that he would tell them if there was cause for worry, even if experience had proven that he maybe wouldn’t.
“We’re just going to leave? Just like this?” Sasuke accused. Kakashi answered with a firm “yes”. It wasn’t up for debate. They couldn’t help these people.

They had dinner again with Tazuna and his family. Each meal Sakura felt more and more guilty for the food they wolfed down, exhausted and famished by their intensive training. Tsunami assured them it was fine, and it was true that her family was better off than most of the others, but having money didn’t mean a thing when there was simply no food to buy.

If the woman was agreeable, it wasn’t the case of her son, who glared daggers at Naruto and Sasuke filling their bowls again. They had seen very little of him in the last few days – he avoided being in the same room as them if he could help it. Tazuna had told them about the boy’s adoptive father, about his brutal death and how it had killed how little the island had of courage left. What could they do, if the best of them was eliminated so easily? They had all stopped trying after that.

Except the ones working on the bridge.

“Come on, hurry up, I want to train some more,” Naruto said, mouth full. Sakura clicked her tongue at him and his terrible manners and got a cheeky grin in answer. He was hopeless.

“Why do you even train so much?”

They all turned toward Inari, surprised to hear him talk when he had spent all the other meals locked into obstinate silence. He looked upset.

“To get stronger,” Naruto deadpanned, disdainful. He didn’t like the kid, that much was obvious.

“Why? It won’t change a thing! You can’t beat these men, you can’t…”

“Don’t you dare tell me what I can and cannot do! What do you think I care about this place?”

The boy’s eyes widened as the others gasped. Sasuke looked on the verge of saying something, Kakashi too, but Naruto went on, relentless.

“I want to get stronger, and I will. I’ll get stronger so that no one can stop me, be it these assholes or anyone else. And so that I won’t die, you moron. Who would want to stay weak and helpless all their life?”

“You say that like it’s… like it’s so easy! Weak people can’t just become strong!”

“Well not if they sit on their ass whining all day long they can’t!”

“You don’t know what happened here! You know nothing about us!” Inari yelled.

“I don’t care! What does it have to do with anything? Suffering doesn’t mean you get a pass. Do you think it’s over? Do you think you were hurt enough that you can know just wallow in self-pity? Because it’s never over. Your life will continue to suck and you will keep getting shit. And if you do nothing about it you can shut your mouth and stop complaining!”

“Naruto!” Sakura exclaimed, shocked by the venom in his voice.

“What? The old man and his friends, they’re building his bridge, they’re not doing nothing. And what does this one does besides crying? Kids don't get a pass, no one does!”

He was so worked up over this, completely beside himself with anger. Inari was struck silent, looking small and helpless in face of Naruto’s wrath.
“That’s enough, Naruto,” Kakashi said firmly. Naruto huffed, disdainful, before leaving the table without another word. Inari did the same, albeit in the opposite direction.

“Well, that went well,” Tazuna commented to the bottom of his sake glass. Tsunami rolled her eyes and went to comfort her son. Sakura wanted to join Naruto, to provide comfort too, but he would no doubt reject her attempts at reaching out. He didn’t like to have his feelings on display, preferring to hide altogether when he couldn’t hide them inside of him. She exchanged a look with Sasuke and saw that they were on the same page. They would try to reach out later, when he was calmer. Even if it was doomed to fail, they couldn’t just not try at all.

They scattered around after that to get ready for bed, and as she was changing into her night clothes in the bathroom, Sakura discovered that this mission had decided to suck all the way to the end. There was blood in her underwear.

It was a minor inconvenience, in the grand scheme of things, and yet it almost brought her to tears. At least, since she had started having her periods only a few months ago and it was still pretty erratic, her mother had made sure to pack her some products “just in case”. But still, she felt terribly alone suddenly – she didn’t want to have to deal with this on top of everything.

Especially seeing that she wasn’t at home. Her mother wasn’t here, or her aunt, or Ino. Instead, she was stuck with her boy friends and her boy teacher, and Sakura wasn’t among the lucky women who could get her periods go unnoticed. She didn’t get that many mood swings – no more than usual anyway – but every time her first day had been plagued with mild to terrible period cramps, and seeing how karma was acting lately, she was almost certain her body wouldn’t choose that month to be complacent.

The idea of having to say it aloud to her team filled her with dread. As if on cue, it was the moment Tsunami chose to knock on the bathroom door, asking if she needed anything. Sakura slid the door open just enough that she could talk to the other woman, even if she couldn’t meet her eyes.

"I-I need you to tell something to my sensei. Please."

She finished getting ready for bed, trying not to think about the woman announcing her predicament to the jounin. This was so embarrassing – she would probably be bed-ridden the next day, and Naruto and Sasuke would go watch the bridge without her. Would they think she was lazing around? That she was being a huge baby? She had suffered through training with bruised bones and upset stomach, but period cramps were something else entirely, especially without medicine to get her through it. She shuddered just thinking about it.

All wasn’t lost though, because when she went back to the room they shared, careful to ignore Kakashi’s pointed gaze, Tsunami had a cup of herbal tea ready for her. She said it would help, and that she would give her some more in the morning. Sakura was already feeling sick, but it could have been solely from anticipation, as far as she knew.

When morning came and she couldn’t unfold from her fetal position without whining like a kicked puppy, that wasn’t anticipation for sure.

“Sakura? Are you alright?” Naruto called from above, curious to see her still rolled up in her blankets while they were all bustling around getting ready.

“Sakura isn’t feeling well,” Kakashi said from the other side of the room. “She’ll stay here this morning, she’ll join us later.”

“Really? What is it? Did you eat something bad?”
He sounded concerned.

“We all ate the same stuff,” Sasuke remarked, joining in the guessing game. Sakura groaned, both from pain and embarrassment. Why did boys have to be like that.

“Let’s go,” Kakashi ordered firmly. Just when she thought she had escaped the worst of it, she heard Sasuke whisper to Naruto, “I think it's that girl thing”. And Naruto to let out an “oooooh” of great revelation. They kept ushering between themselves, too low for her to hear, mercifully. She had no wish to know what they thought “that girl thing” was exactly.

“We'll see you later then, Sakura. Get well soon,” Kakashi said awkwardly. Silence soon fell back on the house, to her relief. She just wanted to sleep until it was over, but she had to at least go to the bathroom and drink something.

She stayed bundled up in her blankets all morning as Tsunami went about her chores around the house. Her tea did wonders – the pain was manageable, and even the nausea was kept at bay. Sakura would have to ask her what was in there. The woman had also given her a heating pad filled with rice to press to her stomach, and after a few hours, Sakura was confident that she would be able to regroup with her team soon. She didn’t like the feeling of being left behind, even if it made sense of course. She wanted to be with them.

Inari helped his mother around, while shunning Sakura as obviously as he could. Bored and restless, Sakura took it upon herself to sharpen her weapons, the soothing, repetitive task allowing her mind to wander.

She was lost in a complex fantasy where she traveled the world to rescue people in need and ended up breaking an unknown curse on Naruto that slowly turned him into a beast, when the wooden wall behind her exploded into pieces.

It was very weird – and frankly a bit scary – how fast their mind could change track. On the way to the bridge Sasuke had been arguing with Naruto over how much blood it was possible to lose before passing out and dying. The blonde’s estimations were way off tracks. Kakashi had assured them that Sakura would be better in no time, and Sasuke was boosted by the perspective of going back to Konoha soon. Everything suggested that this would be a boring, uneventful day.

It only took a moment, of seeing the workers lying down on the unfinished bridge, bloody and battered, of Tazuna rushing toward one of them, of hearing the poor man try to force a warning passed his throat. Every mundane thought left Sasuke’s mind – gone the trip back home, gone the plans for the day, gone his friends’ troubles. Only one thing remained – they were under attack. They were going to fight.

Sasuke couldn’t separate fear from excitement, worry from anticipation. The rush had been so spectacular, right after the masked man had taken Zabuza’s body away, Sasuke had felt light-headed for a while. Now they were going to fight again, and they would win for good this time.

Speaking of which, he was there, the one with the mask, standing by Zabuza’s side. Kakashi had been right about that. He had deceived them indeed.

Sasuke itched to fight him.

It was Naruto who took the lead though.

“I’ll take that one,” he said, stepping forward, kunai in hand. His face was set in stone,
undecipherable, and there was an intensity to him that Sasuke had never seen before. He had half a mind to protest, but Kakashi stopped him.

“We’ll have more than enough to do with that one, Sasuke,” his teacher said with a smile that didn’t really had its place here. “Don’t let your emotions got to your head. This isn’t personal.”

Sasuke nodded wordlessly, a bit ashamed of his eagerness. Kakashi was right, this wasn’t training, they weren’t here to have a good time. He had to focus.

“You’re very confident, considering the brat froze like a deer in front of a hunter the last time we met,” Zabuza taunted as Naruto and the other teen seized each other up. The mask was the one to initiate – Naruto blocked a powerful blow, retaliated, only to be blocked in return, and the pair move further down the bridge as they kept exchanging hits and kicks without either one managing to take the upper hand.

“We’ll see,” Kakashi said lightly. Sasuke could only assume his careless attitude was a mean to throw the enemy off, to irritate them. It worked on him anyway – seeing his teacher joke and smile in this situation was jarring. But they had fought Zabuza before and Sasuke had seen then that for all his act, Kakashi was well-deserving of his reputation. He would take this fight as seriously as the last.

“Are you ready, Sasuke? We need to protect Tazuna, and to beat the Demon of the Hidden Mist for good. Good?”

Sasuke took out a kunai and put his guard up, fully focused now on their adversary.

“Good.”

.

Sakura was thrown to the ground, and she didn’t get up. Laying as still as a dead body, she tried to assess what was happening and who had barged into the house like this. She hadn’t let go of the kunai she was sharpening – she had nicked herself on the arm with it and was bleeding steadily on the old wooden floor. She felt an absurd pang of guilt for it, as Tsunami had cleaned it up just a few hours ago.

There were two men. They talked about taking the woman with them, as a hostage. Probably Gato’s men – she would be a good mean of pressure against Tazuna. It looked like Gato had decided to up the ante, and it would no doubt result in all these people being killed.

Sakura had to do something.

She heard Inari tumble into the room, Tsunami threatened to kill herself if they touched him.

“And what about this one?”

Sakura kept a death grip on her instinct to bolt out of there right then. They had no reason to take her alive. She focused all she had on what was happening around her. She heard the tell-tale sound of a sword sliding out of its sheath, and footsteps approach her carefully. She stayed still. Another step, another one…

The man above her was even nice enough to let out a loud “that’ll be one kill at least!” before bringing down his sword.

Sakura rolled on her back and kicked his legs from under his body. Taken completely off guard,
the man staggered forward.

She caught him with her own blade.

She had to let go of the kunai buried deep in his stomach, and, unable to locate the rest of her weapons, she fell back on the first thing that came into her sight – his sword.

The second man was already on her, but he was slow, compared to her, and she was small, compared to him. She ducked a sweep of his sword that would have cut her head clean off her body. He was too close for her to wield the sword properly – she wasn’t used to fighting with blades this long.

But at least samurai blades were only sharp on one side, and the man was bare-chested – which was pretty stupid, now that she thought about it. She put the sword horizontally in front of her, the tip against her open palm, and jumped straight toward the man’s stomach.

This sword was a terrible one, and it didn’t go far when it connected with the unprotected skin, but then she pulled it to the side as hard as she could, and that more efficiently cut it open. The men fell to his knees, both hands trying to hold the wound closed with little success. His height was easier to deal with like this – Sakura kicked him in the head.

It clearly wasn’t her own blood that would be the hardest to clean up, she thought distantly.

She needed to make sure both men were out of commission, and if there weren’t any other coming their way, but she felt dizzy all of the sudden. She doubled over as her cramps came back full force now that there wasn’t enough adrenaline running in her body to keep them at bay. Her arm was hurting too, the cut stretch open by the fight. Most of the blood on her hand wasn’t her own though. She retched a few times.

“Sakura, are you alright?”

Kneeling on the floor, folded in half, her forehead resting on the wood, Sakura took a few deep breaths, wrestling her body back under her control. Others would surely come, here or for Tazuna. She needed to bring these people to safety and to join her team. She couldn’t stay here.

“I’m okay, I’m okay. I’m sorry, I’m gonna… I’m gonna need more of that tea, ma’am,” she said weakly, her voice breaking on a strangled sob. Sage, this hurt so bad. She didn’t want to move at all.

But she had to.

When she felt confident enough that she wasn’t going to throw up her entire stomach, she sat back on her heels, teeth grinding together to keep a pained groaned in. Tsunami shuffled back in with the tea, that Sakura gulped down in record time. Just the heat soothed her a little, and her mind cleared ever so slightly.

“I need to tend to that,” she said, pointing to her bleeding arm. Tsunami had already brought first aid supplies back from the kitchen. She was crying silently without any sob or hiccup, and she set to task with steady hands. Inari was sitting balled up in a corner, sniffling.

“Are you both okay?” Sakura enquired after a while, as Tsunami finished wrapping her arm tightly.

“We are. Thanks to you.”

“You need to warn the rest of the village. Regroup. You’ll be less vulnerable together. I need to
go.”

“What?” Inari shrieked from his corned. “Where?”

“My friends are most likely in trouble. I have to help them.”

“But… but you’re hurt! And… and these guys… They’re strong. And there will be more of them. And…”

“I can’t just stay here. I need to be with my friends. It’s not… it has nothing to do with… with being strong enough, or not. I want us to be together, and to go back home at the end of the day, and know that we did our best, that we had each other’s back, and that we made it. I can’t leave them on their own.”

*And I don’t want to be left behind,* she thought. She needed to be where they were. That’s where her place was.

“You’ll be alright?” she asked Tsunami. The woman wiped her face and nodded firmly.

“Be careful.”

“I will.”

The first few steps were the worst. After that, it was just a matter of keeping the momentum on. She took the direction of the bridge.

She still had the sword.

One of those annoying needles pierced through Naruto wrist, hindering on the movements of his left hand. He was covered in small cuts from the ones that the masked teen kept waving around, determined to, slowly but surely, ruin Naruto's clothes (and skin).

And still, still Naruto couldn’t bring himself to get fully into the fight.

It was the same as before – that man didn’t want to kill him. He didn’t even want to fight. Naruto didn’t understand how he could be so devoid of murder intent while attempting to literally murder him. Or was he, really? He was strong, stronger probably than Naruto was, but he wasn’t fully in it either.

Naruto couldn’t help but wonder why they were even fighting.

It wasn’t their problem if Tazuna died, it wasn’t their problem what happened to this place, right? So why? Naruto didn’t want to fight this one, and he certainly didn’t want to kill him.

Time to try another seal.

Sasuke notoriously hated that one, but he hated every seal anyway. He found them supremely unfair. Naruto maintained he was just sour that the couldn't master any.

Naruto blocked a kunai with his weakened hand, his arm shuddering and almost giving in under the force of the impact. He grabbed the teen's arm with his other hand, just above his elbow, fingers digging into pale, tender skin.

"Fuinjutsu. Phantom Limb Seal."
When he let go, his opponent's right arm fell to the side, as if paralyzed.

He had gotten better at controlling the range of its effect, since the very first time where they had lived an hour of intense panic during which Sasuke had lost the use of his right leg completely. Naruto had kept assuring him it would wear off, while having a major freak out over the possibility that it wouldn't. Sasuke had regained control of his leg eventually, and Naruto had developed a counterseal.

Not that he needed that one here. The masked man was one arm down. That put a huge advantage on Naruto's side.

Or so he thought, until the guy started making hand seals with only one hand.

Dammit.

The water that covered the ground suddenly rose into deadly ice needles that rushed toward Naruto. He cursed, jumped out of the way. Some needles followed him, scratching his skin and adding a dozen more tiny wounds to his body. At this rate, he would soon have the practical answer to his debate with Sasuke over blood loss and unconsciousness.

Having only one arm of use was still a hindrance to the other boy, even if he was as dexterous with his non-dominant hand. Naruto managed to get a good punch in, but he was the one to hurt himself on the mask, which was far harder and sturdier than he would have thought. Still, his opponent stumbled backward, and Naruto took the opportunity to kick him hard in the stomach, sending him to the ground a few meters away.

The boy got up, but instead of charging back in, he stepped back even further and raised his valid hand to form seals.

Naruto ran, intent on stopping him before he could complete it, but he was stopped dead in his track by the masked teen speaking up for the first time since the beginning of their fight.

"I'm sorry, Naruto."

It made so obvious sense suddenly, Naruto wondered how he hadn't get it before.

He knew that voice.

“Ice Release, Crystal Ice Mirrors!”

This very moment, a hand gripped his shoulder.

It occurred to Sasuke, as he deviated yet another shower of shuriken coming his way, that he had never had a real fight until now.

He had fought plenty of course. He had fought all the members of his family, he had fought all his friends, he had fought most of his classmates. But it was training. No matter how brutal it was, no matter how willing they were to create real mission conditions, they were still his family, his friends, his classmates. He knew that they wouldn’t seriously try to kill him, as they knew he wouldn’t seriously try to kill them.

That string of shuriken was one he had dodged a hundred times, but they hadn’t been thrown with the intention of teaching him how to escape them. This time, they had been thrown fully intended
to embed themselves into his body.

It made a world of difference. His emotions were running high, and he felt simultaneously more stressed out and more focused than ever before in his life. The man, Zabuza, had fallen silent since he had made that mist descend over them, and if Kakashi couldn't use his Sharingan in these conditions, it was worse for Sasuke, who had been told more than once that he relied too heavily on his sight, dojutsu or not. The Sharingan allowed him to react fast enough to things piercing the mist barely a meter away from his face, but he knew that it was possible to do that even without sight. Proof enough, Zabuza had his eyes closed, and he was dominating the fight completely. To make matters worse, Sasuke could barely hear Naruto's fight anymore, and it worried him. He wanted to go help him, to do something, but he had to protect Tazuna. Kakashi had said he had a way to find Zabuza in the mist, and Sasuke hadn't seen him since.

The tension and the unknown were driving him crazy. What was happening out there?

His ears picked on a new, foreign sound. Another pair of feet hitting the damp ground, coming toward him. Reinforcement? They seemed to be headed straight toward him. A few meters more…

Sasuke spun around on one leg, ready to strike.

Sakura shrieked and blocked his kunai with a bloody sword.

“Sakura! What the… I could have killed you!”

“I didn’t see you!”

He put down his arm and took a shaky breath. They were lucky she had good reflexes – and a freaking sword of all things.

“Where did you find this? What happened to you?” he asked, noticing the bandages and blood on her arms.

“Some men came to the house. Your family is fine,” she added to Tazuna.

“And you?”

“I’ll live,” she said, stubborn. She was swaying on her feet, obviously exhausted, but in that instant Sasuke was convinced she wouldn’t fall, no matter what happened.

“I need to go help Naruto. Can you stay here?”

“I’ll watch over him. Go.”

“Kids…” Tazuna tried to intercede weakly. Sasuke didn’t even wait for him to utter another sound. He ran through the fog toward where Naruto and the masked teen had disappeared, trying to make as little sound as he could while listening for the rumor of their fight. The fog quickly unraveled the further he got from Zabuza, and soon enough he was able to make out Naruto’s silhouette on the bridge. His opponent was staying a few meters away, far enough that Sasuke could approach safely. He was about to call out Naruto’s name, a hand on his shoulder, when…

“Ice Release, Crystal Ice Mirrors!”

“What the… what are you doing here?”

“I came to help!”
"I don’t need your…"

"Now really isn’t the time for you to fight."

In a few seconds, they found themselves trapped in a prison of… ice? Ice panels, on all sides. The masked man was outside the structure – Sasuke thought he was going to step in, but instead he disappeared in one of the ice blocks, only to reappear, multiplied, on each one of them.

Huh.

“What the hell is that,” Naruto mumbled, clearly not expecting an answer. The purpose of the techniques became clear soon enough – they were at their opponent’s mercy, as he crossed the space at inhumane speed, needles deadly set on skinning them alive one piece at a time.

Sasuke tried a fireball, with no success – his fire wasn’t strong enough against such a powerful jutsu. They were effectively trapped in there.

Sasuke turned the full force of his Sharingan into trying to piece out the man’s movement. He needed to see.

Naruto, for his part, wasn’t being of much use – he kept trying to punch the glass or pass through the cracks between the panel. Each time the enemy was there to kick him back in. After a particularly violent punch, Sasuke heard a sickening crack. Naruto had broken his hand on the ice.

“Naruto, stop that! Obviously it’s not going to work!”

He wasn’t listening. Sasuke didn’t understand why he was acting so stupidly all of the sudden. He wasn’t the most brilliant strategist, but he usually fought smarter than that. Sasuke marched toward him, determined to stop this nonsense. He grabbed Naruto’s shoulder, forced him to turn around.

Whatever he was expecting, it certainly wasn’t this. He would have been hard pressed to say which one was more shocking between the two – that the blue of his eyes had given way to blood red, or that he was crying.

“Let me out.”

He wasn’t looking at Sasuke. He wasn’t looking at anything.

“Let me out.”

Tears were spilling out of his eyes, rolling onto his cheeks, but he didn’t look like he had noticed. He didn’t look like he was there at all.

“I’m sorry, Naruto,” came the voice of their enemy. “I can’t do that.”

“Let me out, let me out!”

Naruto was getting increasingly agitated, edging closer and closer to properly enraged. Sasuke was at a loss as is friend kept screaming and begging, breaking down right in front of him.

“Naruto…”

Focused solely on the other boy, Sasuke noticed too late the masked man charging Naruto, needle ready to strike. Without thinking, he shoved Naruto out of the way, receiving the full weight of the other man’s body. The air was punched out of his lung – he rolled away on the ground, disoriented, and for a moment he lost reign over his body, lying limply on the cold ground, as he tried to regain
a sense of what was happening around him, blinded by pain and confusion. There was a needle in
his neck. He struggled to take a breath in, trying to fight off panic when his vision began to sway,
his limbs refused to move. The man would come back any second. He had to get up, had to…

Something exploded.

The Demon’s chakra ripped through the air, tinting the world a bright, bloody red.

Chapter End Notes

D'you people want me to warn you when chapters end in cliffhangers? Then again I
feel like they all do... But if you're interested I'll warn about very mean one. Even if I
wouldn't really know what qualifies or not... Okay I'm useless sorry x)

Remember that scene I said I wrote ages ago? Well it's not here XD it got pushed back
one chapter in favor of wandering around wave country... What can I do. But it'll def
be next chapter! And we'll be going back to Konoha then. We'll need some rest after
all that fun.

Tsunade is going to be difficult about this, even more than in canon haha. I checked
out a Naruto timeline for the first time and like... the mess?? I wanted to know when
Tsunade and Orochimaru left Konoha. I did not find out x)

I'm sorry for what I put the babies through :/ ninja life sucks. I hope you enjoyed this,
don't forget to let me know, bye!
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

And after all that, there is nothing. Just going back home, and grieving.

Chapter Notes

There's chapters that are very straightforward, that pretty much write themselves and that I barely touch past the first draft, and then there's the ones I agonize over for days. This one was the later. I changed and added and removed scene and POVs, and I'm still not 100% good with it, but I don't want to read it yet again x)

Damn, that fight against Haku was such a high. When I watched the anime the first time I was FLOORED. Sasuke motherfucking dying for Naruto? Naruto bursting Kyuubi's chakra for the first time? The chills, the feels. Those were simpler, better times... Followed immediately by the chunin exam, which managed to top even higher somehow? Seriously, Naruto pre-Shippuden was The Shit.

And I can't wait for us to get into that :p

WARNING - We're probably reaching a new high in the angst department here, as well as the biggest amount of blood, injuries, tears, and death (yet). So, that's this about that. Enjoy haha.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Naruto opened his eyes, and he saw a cage.

He saw bars cutting the world in uneven shreds, a world he could no longer be part of. It was on one side of the bars, and he was on the other. He would always be. He couldn’t get out. He was trapped.

Naruto woke up in the middle of the night and felt the walls close around him, Naruto heard the sound of a key turning into a lock and he forgot how to breathe.

Naruto tried to escape the ice, and he couldn’t. He was trapped, again. Caged, again.

“Let me out.”

*Let me out.*

“Let me out!”

*Let me out!*

*No!*
I can help. Let me out. I’ll help you.

No, no!

We’ll stay trapped here if you don’t let me!

Naruto punched the ice again. A bone broke. He didn’t feel it.

He had to get out, or it would be the fox who did. The demon was howling and shaking its cage, screaming inside his mind, and Naruto’s grip on his own sanity was so tenuous, and he was so mad, and scared, and desperate. He had to get out, he had to get out before…

Sasuke pushed him. Haku – because it was Haku, Haku from the forest, so nice and sweet, so familiar somehow, without a face but still the same – slammed into Sasuke, stabbing a needle in his throat. Sasuke crashed on the ground.

For a split second, Sasuke didn’t move.

A split second was all it took.

He didn’t want to say that he had underestimated Zabuza, but he definitely had.

Kakashi had been warned before that his confidence would cause him trouble someday, and he wished the prophecy had chosen a fight with lower stakes to manifest itself. He still had his dog summons, and he had spilled enough blood onto Zabuza’s blades that they would be able to locate the man, but he couldn’t say the tactic was refined, or even sound. Because there was actually a lot of blood involved, and the longer this fight ran, the more disadvantaged he was.

His hearing was far from being good enough to compensate for his lack of sight – another thing he had been warned he relied too much upon. He had made the same remark to Sasuke, and really, were teachers fated to give advice they failed to follow?

“This is becoming quite boring, Kakashi,” Zabuza’s voice said through the fog. “Why don’t we get this over with?”

Kakashi heard something, somewhere in his back and…

Shit. The other two.

Sasuke could handle himself, but he wouldn’t hold long against the man. Kakashi rushed back blindly. That damn fog was such a pain.

He spotted the tall silhouette of Tazuna, and next to him was…

It wasn’t Sasuke. It was Sakura.

She was making too much noise, asking what was going on, where was everyone. Kakashi picked up the pace, but Zabuza had a length on him. He was already on them.

Kakashi wouldn’t reach them in time. \textit{He wouldn’t reach them in time.}

Zabuza raised his sword above his head, brought it down right on Sakura’s frozen form, set to split her skull in half.
The sword went through her head.

It went through her body. It planted itself in the ground, making concrete fly.

She was unharmed. She hadn’t moved.

Her image wavered.

The next second she and Tazuna were standing just a few steps back, far enough that the sword had missed them completely, but close enough that Sakura could take advantage of Zabuza’s surprise to jump him.

He avoided her blade, but not without having to let go of his own sword still embedded into the concrete. Kakashi didn’t leave him enough time to disappear back into the mist. He smeared blood on his scroll, slammed it to the ground.

“Summoning! Doton, Tracking Fang Technique!”

His dogs made quick work of immobilizing the man.

Damn, Kakashi was getting too old for this.

“Are you alright, Sakura?” he asked when he reached the girl. She was shaking, but her grip was firm on the sword she had in hand. Where did it come from and what was she doing here, he would find out later.

“Y-yeah. Yeah, I’m good.”

“That genjutsu was very good, Sakura.”

“I just… I can make it just on a very short distance but…”

“But it was enough. You did well.”

Later too the lecture on how she could have spared a heart attack to her old, weary professor. He couldn’t believe she had pulled off such a neat trick – the mist had helped to reinforce her illusion while hiding the real persons standing behind. She had added sound to the mix to make sure Zabuza would fall for it, and he had.

“I’ll take care of it from here. Go assist Sasuke and Naruto, will you?”

She nodded and disappeared into the fog, Tazuna on her heels.

“Looks like the kids aren’t that bad, don’t you think?” he asked Zabuza, who was covered in ninden. The fact that the man was even standing was amazing. They were both pretty banged up, but Zabuza was the one who could no longer move.

"I guess, yeah. For cannon fodder."

Kakashi frowned. He didn’t want to drag this longer than it needed to. Zabuza needed to be put down – because he was a major threat to several villages, but also because as long as he was alive, Kakashi couldn’t take his team safely back home, and right now, it was his only priority.

“This won’t be their fate,” he declared, as he concentrated chakra into his palm.

“You’re way too attached to these kids of yours, Kakashi. It will cost you one day.”
“I don’t believe in a heart of stone.”

“That’s why Konoha shinobi are so fucking weak. Always running after their friends. Ruled by their feelings.”

“Aren’t you attached to your kid?”

Zabuza scoffed.

“Haku served me well, but I’ll find another one, if I have too.”

“You won’t have the chance.”

He wouldn’t be able to use the technique more than once, but once was all it took.

Just when he was about to complete the jutsu, a wave of malevolent chakra washed over them.

Kakashi recognized it immediately. For a wild second of blind panic, he thought the seal had failed. But it wasn’t broken. Just… loosened, somehow.

It lasted only a few seconds. Calm fell back on the bridge, but it wasn’t reassuring in the least. Zabuza raised his head, listening.

Whatever he heard, it brought a drastic change in his demeanor. He seemed to grow bigger all of the sudden, possessed by renewed strength.

“You know what, Kakashi? I think I lied.”

He ducked and leaped forward, shaking the dogs off him, their hold weakened by the change of chakra in the air. He bypassed Kakashi to get to his sword.

He was going after the kids.

“Fucking shit.”

Kakashi dashed after him.

.

This wasn’t Naruto.

Sasuke was sure of it. That boy with growing fangs and sharp claws, with red eyes and the slit pupils of a cat, with red chakra pouring out his body, it couldn’t be Naruto. Not the Naruto he knew, his friend, moody and brash and so endearing to him, who tried so hard not to care and did anyway, he wasn’t there, in the inhumane cry that tore itself out of his lungs, in the brute, devastating strength that blew the ice panels to pieces where nothing had been able to so much as scratch them before.

This couldn’t be Naruto, because Naruto didn’t scare Sasuke.

Their enemy was as taken aback as he was, and there was nothing he could do against that kind of power. The thing that had taken Naruto’s shape and form punched him hard enough to send him flying, and by the time the teen had gotten back to his feet, not-Naruto was already on him, readying a fist, and…

There was a sound.
Sasuke registered the sound before the images. The sound was easier to piece out, conveyed with much more clarity what had just happened. A sickening, wet crunch, skin tearing, bones breaking, flesh being torn apart.

He heard footsteps in his back, heard Sakura calling out his name. He got back on his feet despite his dizziness and intercepted her before she could get closer.

“Where’s Naruto?” she asked, distressed. Wordlessly, Sasuke turned toward their friend.

The red chakra was receding. Naruto seemed to come back to himself. He stared at the man in front of him, incredulous. They had the time to exchange a few words, before he withdrew his arm – the other dropped to the ground. Naruto looked around him, disoriented and confused, eyeing with increasing panic the blood covering his arm and chest, the still body on the ground.

He finally spotted Sasuke and Sakura where they were standing a few meters away, staring at him with disbelief. Sakura was in Sasuke’s back, and Sasuke felt the urge to thrust his arm out to stop her from moving, from approaching the other boy. Naruto’s eyes were blue again – they were wide and unfocused, shining with upcoming tears. He opened his mouth, probably to ask what was going on, but he didn’t manage to let out a sound. He took step toward them.

And then, something happened. Or well, Sasuke did something. It wasn’t conscious, purely a reflex, out of shock, and fear, and confusion, but he did it nonetheless, something so small and so terrible, something he would come to regret bitterly.

Naruto took a step forward. And Sasuke, Sasuke took a step back.

The smallest step, but Naruto noticed. Sasuke knew he noticed, because he stopped dead in his tracks. His eyes widened even more, and for a second he wore his broken heart on his face and Sasuke received the full force of his pain, of his life-old sorrow and misery.

The next moment, it was gone. As was everything else. The shock and puzzlement were wiped out of his face. He stood up straight, his face closed off entirely. His eyes devoid of any feelings.

Sasuke couldn’t tear his eyes away, he couldn’t move at all. He needed to though. He needed to comfort his friend, reassure him, to tell him it was fine, it was okay, everything was fine. He didn’t. He stayed rooted to the spot.

Eventually, Naruto looked away. Turned away, from them both.

.

When Naruto woke up, it was to the beautiful face of Haku, ashy and deformed by agony, coughing up blood in his face.

The next thing he saw, looking down, was his own arm buried above the elbow into Haku’s chest.

He wished he could go back to sleep then, wished he could close his eyes and wake up in another place, at another time. But grief and sorrow didn’t bring out the fox like anger did. It was nowhere to be found, locked back in its prison, leaving Naruto on his own to face what they had done.

“Why are you… Why is it you? Why are you here?”

Haku smiled, fucking smiled, all bloody and dying.

“What would you do… Naruto… what would you do, for the first… the first one that didn’t think
you were a monster?”

Naruto choked up on a strangled sob, tears burning his eyes, blurring his vision. He blinked furiously. He wanted to see Haku’s face.

“I’m sure...”

It was difficult for Haku to speak, because there was a hole down there were a heart should have been.

“I’m sure you’ll find it. The reason.”

And then, easily and without any more of a fuss, Haku died.

Naruto had to push with his other hand to get his arm out. The body dropped to the ground, lifeless and still. Blood and flesh clung to Naruto’s clothes and skin, and he felt sick, his stomach turning on him, gripped by nausea. He was panting, unable to bring air into his lungs, his throat knotted around a sob that wouldn’t come out. Terrified, Naruto looked around him frantically, trying to make sense of where he was, of what was happening.

He finally noticed Sasuke and Sakura standing there, staring at him.

Right, they could help. They would know what was going on and what to do. Naruto was so lost, he just needed to know, for them to tell him, he needed to make sense of these things that weren’t making sense at all.

Naruto took a step forward.

And then, he saw. The fear, on their face, in their eyes, in the step Sasuke took backward, away from him.

Away. From him.

It all came crashing down.

Of course, of course. It was clear now. How could he forget? Naruto was a monster. And now, his two friends knew. Sasuke had seen him. They knew.

Naruto turned their back on them, so that he wouldn’t see their face, so that they wouldn’t see his.

How foolish he had been, to think he could hide forever. How terrible of him not to tell them, not to warn them, of what they were getting into, of the danger he represented. He had been wrong. And this is what he got for it.

Fear in their eyes. Fear, of him.

There was a scream.

Animal, chilling, full of wrath and sorrow, and then fast, heavy footsteps on the bridge, flying right toward Naruto. After a moment he realized the scream was saying Haku’s name.

Zabuza broke through the mist, wild eyes set on his prey. Naruto thought about ducking, about stepping back or lifting a kunai to stand between his head and the sword swinging fast in his direction.

He didn’t move.
It all happened in a blur. Suddenly Kakashi was here, between Naruto and Zabuza. The world was illuminated with blinding white light, filled with the chirping of a thousand birds.

“Chidori!”

The lightning was coming from Kakashi’s own hand – it opened a gaping hole in Zabuza’s chest.

Silence fell back on the bridge.

Zabuza was staring right at Naruto, eyes alive with a storm of emotions that made Naruto dizzy. “I’m grateful,” Haku had said, “for the life they have given me.”

He wondered if he would have been that devoted to someone, for giving him a purpose in life. Was it love? It had to be, for them to die for one another like this. Zabuza stared at him and Naruto couldn’t look away. Here was another monster, right before his eyes, an abomination, that everybody wanted dead.

He looked very sad.

“Ha,” he exhaled, what would have been a laugh if he wasn’t on the verge of dying. “I see why Haku was so fond of you.”

Naruto suffered a horrible sense of déjà vu as Kakashi drew his arm back and the man sagged to the floor, right by his companion’s side.

“Ninjas don’t have emotion, they say…” Zabuza muttered, managing to move his arm just enough to brush Haku’s hand. They would have been looking at each other, if their eyes could still see anything. “No emotion my ass. Damn, we’re such… such fools. Such…”

The man fell silent. He was dead.

They were dead. Life had deserted both their bodies, never to return. Gone from this world, forever silent and still.

This was all so absurd.

Why. Why were they dead. What was the point, what had it accomplished. Why did people fight. What were they doing here.

“Are you okay, Naruto?”

Kakashi’s voice seemed to be coming from far, far away. Naruto didn’t want to hear it again, so he forced himself to look away from the two corpses and to his teacher’s face, drab with concern and exhaustion.

“You know what your problem is, sensei? You’re always either too early or too late.”

Kakashi would never know for sure, would never have the absolute certitude, that Naruto wasn’t going to move.

The boy looked away like he couldn’t bear to look at Kakashi anymore. Or couldn’t bear to be looked at. He avoided his friends’ gaze too, looked down at the ground.

Until he spotted it.
A few steps away, Naruto crouched down to pick up the mask worn by Zabuza’s companion, shaken off during the fight. Kakashi could only speculate about what had happened, based on how much blood covered Naruto’s body and the chakra that had burst out back then, heavy and dark and unmistakable. For whatever reason, Naruto had lost control. He had killed the other teen.

And Sasuke and Sakura had most likely been there.

Naruto stood back up and lifted the mask to his face. He tied the red ribbons behind his head. When he turned back to them, his face was gone from sight.

“Naruto…” Sakura pleaded, taking a step forward. She crossed the distance between them, but when she raised her hands to reach out, to check for her teammate’s injury, Naruto stepped back. He didn’t go as far as to swat her hands away, but he avoided her touch neatly. She let out a wounded sound, distressed.

The day wasn’t over though.

There was a commotion from each side of the bridge. On one side, a group of mercenaries armed to the teeth, led by a short man in a suit. On the other side, dozens of villagers, armed too, with what they were able to find, farm tools and kitchen knives. Tazuna’s daughter and grandson were among them.

They all looked ready to fight it out.

“I see you’ve gotten rid of the Demon,” the man in the suit said with a satisfied smile. “That’s one problem that took care of itself it seems. Thank you for that.”

Kakashi assumed this was the infamous Gato – the way the villagers were looking at him sure suggested it. Disaster was coming to them fast. It would be a bloodbath if this devolved into a fight, but they couldn’t just leave this place to its fate, not after all that had happened. The kids wouldn’t stand for it.

If Naruto fought again in his state though, there was no telling what would happen. Kakashi was far from being in top form, and if he couldn’t stop the boy…

“There, there, there, people. I would advise against trying to defy me. No one will blame me for crushing down a mutinous rebellion. I’ll have you all killed,” Gato continued. It was hard to say if he was as confident as he sounded – the villagers were poorly armed, but there was a number of them, and they didn’t look like they were going to step back.

A conclusion Gato seemed to reach too, because he turned to the Konoha ninja then.

“Hey, you? What would you say about working for me? I’ll pay you. I’ll even put in some extra for killing these two?” he said confidently, pointing at the Kiri ninjas on the ground. “What do you…”

From behind Kakashi, a kunai flew through the air, a shimmer in the dim light he barely registered before it was buried into Gato’s neck.

Kakashi didn’t waste time watching the outcome of that particular hit – the man was already dead. He spun around to face his team, the three fucking children that were getting sick over an eating contest the day before and embarrassed over periods this morning, and were now avoiding his gaze, looking down or to the side, faces closed off, unreadable.

“Who…”
Kakashi didn’t bother to finish the question. The message was clear in their rigid posture, in their fleeting gaze. He would never get an answer.

He was so unbelievably tired all of the sudden.

Gato’s men hesitated, but they didn’t look like they would leave without a push. Kakashi had enough chakra to burst out a few dozen clones. Added to the angry villagers screaming at their face, the mercenaries, who were nothing but worthless criminals, beat a hasty retreat, leaving their dead leader behind, abandoning the fight.

Just like that, it was all over.

Kakashi felt depleted, completely dried out of any force and will. He had a hard time wrapping his head around how spectacularly bad things had turned out. It was barely conceivable, it didn’t make sense.

He didn’t think he still had it in him to be angry at how unfair the world could be sometimes.

“Kakashi…” Tazuna began when he reached the ninja, but he didn’t go any further, didn’t find anything to say.

“Your people will be fine now, I hope. We will rest a bit, and we will be on our way.”

The old man nodded, somber.

“We will bury them,” he said, pointing at Kakashi’s back. Naruto was sitting near the boy – Haku? He was folded up tight, arms wrapped firmly around his knees. He had his back to Kakashi, but the red ribbons were a stark contrast against his blonde hair – he was still wearing the mask.

Kakashi hated that he knew exactly why.

He still missed his sometimes. Especially when his emotions were running high, when he couldn’t keep them as hidden as he would have wanted. Gai had always hated it – always asked him to remove it, it was the first thing he asked, when they met and Kakashi was fresh from duty, still in his Anbu gears, but most importantly, his Anbu mindset, this other person that had a much easier life than he did. Gai hated it – always he clicked his tongue and lifted the mask, gentle but suffering no protest. “Why do you need to take it off?” Kakashi had asked, once. “You know it’s me.”

Gai had looked sad then, like he did sometimes when they were alone and he saw something in Kakashi that he himself couldn’t decipher. “No,” he had answered. “No, I don’t.”

It made sense. Kakashi didn’t really know who he was either back then.

But who would do that for Naruto? Who would he trust enough to let the mask slip? He was so guarded, alone in the crowd. Had anyone ever seen him cry?

“Come on, Sakura, Sasuke, Naruto. We’re leaving.”

They glared at him, incredulous and hurt, wondering how he could set them back in motion so casually, when all they wanted to do was experience the full unraveling of their raging emotions in peace. But it was a luxury they didn’t have. It would have to wait until they were back home. Maybe shinobi couldn’t truly suppress their emotions, but they still had to keep them at bay, ignore them as long as the mission was not over, as long as they could still put them in danger.
They didn’t say a word as they went back to Tazuna’s house, or what was left of it. Kakashi would have had them departing immediately, if he believed the kids could take more than two steps without collapsing. They needed to rest.

They cleaned up as best as they could, tended to their many wounds, changed their bloody clothes to cleaner ones, even if it would take far more than that to wash off their reddened hands. The silence was like a physical force between them, thick and oppressive, as effective as if they were underwater, where they couldn’t have spoken even if they had wanted too. They ignored the hole in the living room and as they gathered their things, packed their bags. Kakashi sent them to rest in the room they occupied. They didn’t complain. They didn’t say a thing.

He knew he wouldn’t be able to sleep, and he wondered if they would.

He busied himself with helping Tazuna’s family cleaning up the house, once they were back from the village celebrating their newfound freedom. He spent the night on the dock, looking at the stars. Maybe he dozed off. He had unpleasant dreams.

The kids didn’t emerge until the next morning. They ate breakfast without much enthusiasm, quiet and grim.

Naruto was still wearing the mask.

Kakashi saw no reason to delay their departure. He made their goodbyes to the family – Sakura and Sasuke made the effort too. Inari planted his feet in front of Naruto, just as they were taking the way to the docks.

“I will fight,” he said firmly, voice and face set in determination. They stared at each other for a long while. The boy seemed unbothered by the mask – maybe he was too young to rely that much on expressions he didn’t understand anyway. Maybe it was even easier for him to talk to Naruto that way.

He didn’t get an answer, but he didn’t seem to be waiting for one. Freed from Gato’s oppression, the country would maybe rise from its ashes – as long as they didn’t fall under yet another wannabe dictator.

Selfishly, Kakashi realized he didn’t exactly care.

They took the boat again. The bridge was still a few weeks away from completion, but nothing would stop it now. The next time they came to this place, it would probably be very different from what it was now. If they ever came back. Tazuna told them to. Kakashi said maybe they would, but it felt like lying.

The kids held on all the way across the sea, and a few minutes into the road, once they were sure they were alone, that Wave Country was truly behind them.

It was Sakura who spoke first, as usual. She was quite possibly the bravest of the three.

“You have to tell us what it was. What happened.”

He almost denied, or played dumb, just in case she would let it go, in case she was unable to voice it properly. But there was a good chance she wouldn’t be, and he didn’t want to disappoint them even more. The trust they had in him was frayed enough, damaged enough.

He cast a look at Naruto, to see if he would stop him. The mask was still down, so Naruto looked at him, but it was impossible to tell what he thought. Kakashi understood his old friend’s
frustration now – that mask was infuriating. Kakashi needed to see Naruto’s face, he needed to see the damage, see how bad a shape he was in.

He needed to see the blue of his eyes.

He figured the boy would intervene if he didn’t want the story to be spilled. It was too late anyway, wasn’t it? Both Sakura and Sasuke had seen, first hand, what Naruto was, and what he was capable of.

Kakashi wouldn’t lie to them any further.

“The Nine-Tailed Fox was defeated on the night of his attack on Konoha, by the Fourth Hokage. Defeated, not killed. No man can kill such a Beast. So he was sealed away. In a child.”

A baby, barely a few hours old, and already the fate of their entire village on his shoulders – in his belly. A fate sealed as was sealed the Demon inside his tiny body. A fate that was exposed today for his friends to see.

“Wh-what?”

“This is what you saw. The manifestation of its will. Its chakra and power.”

Its ability to invade Naruto’s mind, take over his body. A terrible possibility they would need to look into.

Sasuke and Sakura stared at the back of their quiet friend, walking a few steps ahead like he didn’t have a care in the world for what they were saying. They didn’t ask anything else. There was so much more to discuss, to explain, but they stayed silent as they walked the way back home. It was just a week ago that Naruto had begged Kakashi on that very road to keep going, not to turn back, because he was so eager to see the outside world, to be free of the constraints of the village’s walls, even for just a little while. Had Kakashi made the wrong choice then? Should they have turned back? Naruto would have hated him, but that would have been better than where they were at now, right?

What if, what if.

Shisui opened his front door, intent on going to the store to stock up his worryingly empty shelves, and almost tripped on the dog standing right behind it.

“Pakkun? What the fuck are you… I almost stepped on you!”

It took only a few seconds for Shisui to catch on with the program and work out that Kakashi’s number one dog’s presence at his doorstep was more worrying than annoying.

“What is it?”

“Team 7 is on its way back. Kakashi sent me ahead. To warn you.”

“Is Naruto alright?”

Tenzo had been mocking him constantly for the past few days, for what he said was his “obvious mothering freak out”. Shisui had maintained he wasn’t that worried, until even Itachi had caught up on it and started to make fun of it too – and for Itachi to catch up on things, they had to be pretty
obvious indeed.

Fuck it all but yes, yes, he was worried, and it looked like he had had the right idea.

“Is he hurt?”

“Not physically.”

Shisui cursed.

He was left to wait out the hours in anxious anticipation, once the dog had summed up to him the events of Wave Country. He still had grocery shopping to do, maybe he should have warned someone else, or gone to meet the team on the way. But he didn’t want to move. He wouldn’t be able to put his mind into any task, and he certainly wasn’t the one who would report the mess of that mission to the Administration. He would leave that to Kakashi – hoping the man would be selective of what he was going to share.

Shisui could only wait. He had to wait for Naruto to come home. He couldn’t risk not being there when the boy was back. So he tidied up the kitchen and sorted out the laundry, trying to focus on chakra movement around him, even if he wasn’t that good at it.

Good or not, he immediately picked on Naruto’s presence outside the house.

He was standing in the street, a few steps away from the door, and, as Kakashi had warned him, he was wearing a mask.

White, oval, flat, with red swirls curling at the base, and with the Kiri symbol unmistakable on the forehead. He looked like a ghost, or an apparition, silent and motionless in the declining light of the day. A flickering presence that would vanish at the first misstep.

“Come on in then,” Shisui said simply, trying to sound more collected and confident than he felt. He was scared Naruto wouldn’t enter. That he would run away, disappear, become a spirit haunting these streets, impossible to catch. Shisui went to prepare some tea, both to busy his hands and to give out an impression of normalcy, even if this was anything but. He heard the front door creak open, footsteps inside the kitchen. He forced himself to stay focused on the task at hand.

When he turned back, here was Naruto, standing motionless in the middle of the room, the still face of his mask turned to Shisui, creepy and unsettling. Shisui took a deep breath, and a step forward.

Another, another, until he was standing in front of Naruto. Slowly, slowly, as careful as if he was trying to catch a bird or diffuse a trap, he lifted his hands to Naruto’s face, scared out of his mind that he was going to snap and run away. His left hand came to rest at the shin of the mask, the other reached back, to the red knot, tugging to loosen the ribbon.

Gently, gently, he lifted the mask away from Naruto’s face.

Naruto was staring at him, his blue eyes wide and shining, unblinking. For a moment they didn’t move, didn’t speak, didn’t even breathe it seemed, time stopped as they both waited to see what was going to happen, how this was going to play out. Shisui was the one to break the silence. He couldn’t bear it. He had to tell him.

“I’m so glad you’re back home, Naruto,” he said softly, trying to convey somehow how very serious he was, how relieved he was that the boy was here in front of him, more or less unharmed.
Naruto’s breath hitched. He opened his mouth.

“I…”

He had never looked so young, so vulnerable. Never looked the scared child he actually was in the end, that was always hidden away, buried under his armor.

“I’m…”

One choked sob, two.

Naruto dissolved into tears.

He was the one to close the distance between them, to mash his face into Shisui’s shirt and grip at the fabric with desperate strength, like he was holding onto the wall of a great pit, the ground gone beneath his feet, seconds away from the fall. He wasn’t silent, nor restrained – he was whining like a toddler, loud in the stilted air. He was bawling his eyes out.

It felt like he would never stop.

Shisui lost the battle against his own tears but managed to keep the sobs at bay, as he wrapped his arms around the small boy, as he hunched over to rest his face in his hair, to try and take him whole, shield him from the entire world. And Naruto just cried, and cried, and cried.

“Sasuke? Can I come in?”

The boy was lying face down on his futon. He emitted a grunt muffled by his pillow, letting his brother decide if it was a yes or a no. Itachi opted for a yes and went to kneel by his side.

“The parents got a sense that your mission in Wave Country went awry, but they couldn’t get much information. They asked me to collect data. Are you alright?”

Instead of answering, Sasuke rolled around to face Itachi. He buried his face in his thigh, curled on himself against him. Surprised, Itachi waited a little, to see if he was going to roll away just as fast, but he didn’t look like he wanted to move. Itachi rested a tentative hand in his brother’s hair, intent on providing comfort, even if he didn’t know how, or for what.

“Itachi… Did you know about Naruto? About what… what he is, for real?”

Now that was an uncomfortable question. Itachi sighed. He didn’t want to lie.

“I…yes. Yes, I knew.”

He expected it to be the reason Sasuke was upset, that maybe he was mad, now that he understood people around him – including his family – most likely knew and said nothing. Sasuke didn’t get angry though. He just curled up tighter.

“I did something. Something bad.”

All they knew was that their nice, walk-in-the-park C-ranked mission had turned into an A one really fast. Kakashi had refused to share anything about it with Fugaku, arguing that it was up to Sasuke to tell them. Kakashi was all for that letting kids make their own decision thing – especially when it could get him out of unpleasant situations.
“What happened?” Itachi nudged gently, running his hand in the dirty hair. Sasuke had face planted on his futon a few hours ago, right after coming back, and had not moved since.

“I’m not scared of him. I’m not. Who would be scared of stupid Naruto? I was just surprised. At that moment, maybe… I just didn’t understand. But I would never… I didn’t mean to be scared.”

“Sasuke, what…”

“I took a step back,” he said whispered, low and ashamed. “I took a step back. He needed help, and I… I…”

Itachi realized, a little bewildered, that Sasuke was crying.

He was trembling under his hand, silent tears spilling out of his eyes, sliding down onto the futon. He wasn’t trying to hold them back or wipe them away. Sasuke didn’t cry as much as he did as a kid, but tears were still a common side effect of his anger or frustration.

Itachi would have been hard pressed though, to name the last time he had seen Sasuke cry out of distress, out of sadness. He was more easily angry than sad, and he didn’t like to be shown comfort, as all Uchiha.

He was crying now though. And he was seeking comfort.

Itachi didn’t know what to do, much less what to say. He couldn’t think of anything that wouldn’t be a lie. He couldn’t say things like “things will be fine” or “you’ll be okay”, because what did he know? Naruto had been scared his friends would reject him, and even if it was only for a moment, that was exactly what had happened. Would he hear an apology, an explanation, now that he had been proven right, that he could justify to himself his hesitations, his determination to keep his distances?

“It’s not your fault,” he said lamely, trusting that this, at least, was not a lie.

“I don’t want him to hate me.”

“He won’t,” He didn’t dare to tell Sasuke that the more likely outcome was just Naruto hating himself even more. All the times Sasuke had asked and be denied an answer, all the times Kakashi and Shisui had discussed the merits of bypassing the village and Naruto’s wishes and just tell him anyway, to spare them exactly that kind of dramatic revelation, but had ultimately decided against it… Because they had managed to convince themselves somehow that it would stay under wrap, that there wouldn’t ever be a reason for Naruto’s friends to find out.

Once more, they had been wrong.

She had gotten as far as putting a hand on the door handle, before turning away.

She couldn’t imagine facing her parents now. She couldn’t fathom telling them what had happened, what they had done, her friends and herself. She couldn’t picture what they would say, how they would react, but she was sure it wouldn’t make her feel better in any way.

So Sakura turned away.

Sneaking into the Haruno house was far easier than sneaking into the Yamanaka’s. Ino had had to give her a crash course to show her how to climb onto the roof of the flower shop and use the
nearest tree to reach her bedroom window. She hoped the girl was actually at home. She didn’t want to go back.

She landed quietly on Ino’s small balcony, determined to sleep there if she didn’t get an answer. It wouldn’t come to that though – Ino opened her window only seconds after Sakura had tapped lightly on the glass.

Ino took one look at her, and she knew. That’s why Sakura had come, that’s what she wanted. Ino didn’t start to fret and panic, didn’t try to comfort her. She stepped away to let her in and guided her to sit on her bed, before going to rummage into her closet, to find her night clothes she handed over without a word. Sakura changed quickly, feeling calmer already, surrounded by the comforting presence of her friend.

“I take it the mission didn’t go so well,” Ino said lightly, picking up some nail care supply before settling next to Sakura. She took Sakura’s hand in hers and set to the task, removing chipped polish she had applied herself there just a week ago, filing the damaged nails. She didn’t comment the blood she had to scrap off of them.

The tears came easily, after a while. She didn’t comment that either. Sakura cried ugly tears that she couldn’t stop no matter how hard she tried, covering her face in snot and salty water. She tried to wipe it with her free hand, and when Ino needed that one they switched so that she could try to wipe it with the other. At some point Ino needed both, to massage some lotion into them, and so Sakura had to surrender them, and somehow that calmed her down, quieted her sobs as the flow dried out.

“It was awful,” she said after a while, where Ino was done with her ministrations, but still holding her hands firmly. “It was supposed to be easy but it… it wasn’t. It wasn’t easy at all.”

They had been attacked, they had almost died. She had killed two men. They had witnessed misery and hopelessness like she had never imagined, they had seen greed and cruelty, a bleak, terrible world of selfishness and death.

“It was supposed to be easy…”

She knew it was foolish to hold on to that. Being a ninja wasn’t easy, going on missions wasn’t easy. But she realized now how abysmal was the gap between knowing something and experiencing it. Would have things been different, had they known what they were in for? It felt like nothing could have prepared them for that.

And Naruto…

“I’m going to need your help.”

“For what?”

“We find out… something. It’s about Naruto. And I need to know more. I need to.”

She needed to understand what was going on, for it all to make sense. Because Naruto hosting a demon made sense, and at the same time it made no sense at all. It was supposed to explain things, but it just asked even more questions.

“I’ll help you. Don’t worry. But first, sleep.”

“I’m not…”
Her own body betrayed her before she could spew that lie – she let out a huge yawn, overcome suddenly by a bone-deep exhaustion that made her sway a little. Ino rolled her eyes with a smile and pushed Sakura down gently, so that they were both lying on the girl’s bed. It was still early, before dinnertime, but eating was a no-go right now, as was moving in fact.

She would feel better the next day, she knew. Her head would be clearer and she would have found back some control over her emotions. She could go home and reassure her parents, she could figure out what to do next.

For now she would just sleep, secure in the knowledge that Ino was right there by her side, that she had her back.

“Thank you.”

“Anything.”

She thought she would have trouble falling asleep, but barely a minute later, she was out.

“How is he?”

“What do you think?”

Ah. Anger it was. Kakashi was expecting it, but it was still an odd sight. Shisui rarely gave in to rage, it just wasn’t in his nature.

What a shitty achievement to add into Kakashi’s book.

“What the hell happened? What the fuck, Kakashi?”

“Please calm down, and I’ll tell you.”

“Calm down? Calm… Have you seen him? Have you seen… Fuck!”

Shisui paced the length of the small kitchen a few more times, before collapsing into the chair facing Kakashi.

“Shouldn’t we go elsewhere?”

“Don’t worry about that. He won’t come out of his room. Or his bed, for that matter.”

It had been two days since their return.

“You should have turned tail as soon as it started to go downhill,” Shisui said, accusing. “Why did you keep going?”

“Why do you think? Do I need to remind you that it was your idea to give Naruto a chance to get out of the village?”

“You really don’t!”

Shisui wasn’t only angry at Kakashi. He was also angry at himself.

“Dammit… why can’t things just… go well, just once? This was supposed to be good for them,” Shisui said, voice wavering.
“We couldn’t have known,” Kakashi said, not quite believing he was the one playing the “you’re not at fault” card. Shisui seemed equally mystified. “It was just…terrible luck.”

“With all the bad luck we’ve been accumulating, we should start shitting gold very soon.”

Kakashi snorted, a dry, joyless laugh. He would have loved to believe that these things evenlyed out, that they would indeed be repaid someday, somehow, for all the shit life threw at them.

He didn’t. Everything pointed at the more likely outcome that things would continue to be just that bad. He only dared to hope they wouldn’t get worse.

“I sent words for us to get back up,” Kakashi said, feeling the need to justify himself, to prove to Shisui that he hadn’t been careless, that he had tried. “It never came through.”

“Yeah, because why would anything go our way…” Shisui deadpanned. “I’m sorry,” he added, sheepish. “I don’t mean to blame you, it’s just…”

“I was responsible for this mission and this team. I’m responsible for how it turned out too.”

The commander had not failed to remind him of that. His decisions would be examined, his report too, but it was nothing he hadn’t shouldered before.

Maybe he ought to be grateful that this wasn’t even in the top 5 of the worst missions he had carried through. After all, no one in his team had died.

“What now then?”

“I managed to get us a week off duty, for the kids to recover.”

“Really?”

Kakashi knew what Shisui was asking. He wanted to know what had happened exactly, but mostly he wanted to know what of it Kakashi had told their superiors, what had made it into his report. What kind of repercussion they had to expect.

“Hm hm. I told them about our encounters with the ninjas of Kiri, how the kids had to fight… They didn’t suffer any major injuries, but they didn’t get out of there scratch free either.”

“And what about… what did they say about, you know…”

At a loss for words, Shisui made a ridiculous gesture of claws with his hands, like a bad imitation of an angry cat. Kakashi snorted – he really couldn’t help it. He was scared of what had happened and what could happen still, scared of what Naruto could do and what could be done to him, and here was Shisui, mimicking a freaking cat instead of just naming the Demon.

It was comforting to know that Naruto had him, at the very least.

“I didn’t tell them.”

“Really? Nothing?”

“I told them that the fights got heated, I told them about the death toll. But… We need to… understand this, before alerting the village. They… don’t need to know just yet.”

“Why?”
Shisui looked suspicious, and Kakashi couldn’t blame him. He had earned his reputation of always following orders, of his never waverering loyalty and devotion to his duty, to the completion of his mission. He had never lied on a report, never tried to sugarcoat, minimize or embellish his failures or his successes.

He had never disobeyed an order.

But this whole story had affected him too, more than he had let on.

Maybe because Zabuza was his age, and Haku was about Naruto’s, and Kakashi had seen himself in them, for the briefest moment. Zabuza who had fled the shortcomings of his village, vowing to come back and right its wrongs, and Haku, rejected and abandoned for the power he was born with and couldn’t escape. He wondered what pushed shinobis to betrayal, what order was too much to bear, when they decided to draw the line. What would have pushed him, to turn his back on it all, to take Naruto with him and go look for a better future for them both. Had he gotten close to him as he should have, had he witnessed his childhood and how the village treated him, would it have made him snap? Would he have made that choice?

And would it have been a good or a bad thing?

What did it take, for shinobis suddenly putting a single person above their duty. Kakashi thought about his father.

It wasn’t a conscious, thought-out decision he had made before going into the Hokage’s office for his report. He hadn’t decided outright that he would lie, at least by omission, to spare Naruto the scrutiny and added suspicion that the news of the Demon’s power spilling out would bring upon him. He hadn’t openly weighed in his mind the village’s will against the boy’s wellbeing.

But at the moment, he had made the choice anyway. He would never put Naruto in a cage again. He wouldn’t let him be treated like the monster he thought he was.

“I guess I chose to be on his side.”

Shisui pinched his lips and his eyebrow dipped low, making him look very angry, but meaning, from Kakashi’s experience, that he was just trying not to cry.

“You’re such an idiot,” he sighed fondly.

“Shuddup.”

“Sakura? You friend Sasuke is at the door. He came to see you.”

In her surprise, Sakura forgot to be annoyed at her mother for not knocking at her bedroom door. She hadn’t seen any of her teammates in three days, expect Kakashi, who had swung by to tell her that they had a week off, and that their next meeting would only be after the weekend. She had been worried about what he would tell her parents, but he had been exactly as vague as she wanted him to. Not without weighing a pointing look on her though, that had to mean something like “I won’t tell them, but you should”.

She knew she had to, but it was harder than it seemed. She wasn’t at ease with them trying to comfort her, and she didn’t want them to worry about her, to think she was in over her head. She knew what they would say – are you sure you want to continue? Do you think it’s wise you stay on that team? She didn’t want to hear it. She wasn’t giving up on anything, not the ninja way, and
certainly not her team.

She didn’t see them and what they could do or say bringing her any sort of comfort.

Sasuke was indeed waiting at the door, having probably refused to enter. A wise move – her mom would have grilled him with questions and made everything awkward, especially seeing that he was already pretty awkward himself. He wasn’t at ease with strangers, especially adults.

“Hi, Sasuke. What’s up?”

She cringed – it felt so weird to be this casual, seeing how things had gone the last time they were together. The team had parted with only stilted goodbyes as soon as they had crossed into the village’s ground, after hours of silent walking and heavy tension. A tension that was still alive and well.

“I need you to come with me,” he blurted out as an answer. “If…. You’re not busy?” he amended after a short pause. “It’s important.”

She nodded.

“Mom, I’m going out!”

“Will you be back for dinner?”

She cast a questioning look at the boy. He shrugged.

“Probably!”

Her mother grumbled something about “never knowing who ate where in this damn house,” but Sakura was already out the door.

“Let’s go then.”

She followed Sasuke through the village, quickly recognizing the way to the Uchiha district. He looked to be in an even less talkative mood than usual, if it was possible. She didn’t dare ask.

They were soon reaching his own house.

“My parents are not here,” he said as he was taking off his shoes in the entryway. She mimicked him and followed him in. They didn’t go to his room – he knocked on a door she had never crossed before.

“Come in.”

It was his brother’s room.

Uchiha Itachi was reading by the paper-rice door that led to the garden. Sakura bowed hastily with a shy “hello”, always intimidated by the stoic man. He greeted her with a soft expression – he never smiled.

“Can we do it now then?” Sasuke asked.

“Yes. We can.”

He gestured for them to sit on the floor side by side, as he settled in front of them.
“Huh, Sasuke, what…”

Only then did it occurred to Sasuke that he hadn’t told her what they were doing here exactly.

“I… I asked Itachi to tell me more. About Naruto. I figured you should be here too.”

He squirmed under her incredulous glare.

“What?” he asked, defensive.

“Nothing, that’s just… Th-thank you.”

She would probably never understand how he worked, but it wasn’t so bad, if they had each other’s back anyway.

They turned to Itachi in the same movement, ready for the show. He looked a little miffed, but he didn’t back out.

“Alright. Keep in mind that I’ll be telling you things that are… mostly known by the generation above yours, and some that are not so spread out. All in all, just… this is for your own understanding of this situation.”

“We won’t spill.” Sasuke said seriously, and a little impatient, as if to say “now get on with it.”

Itachi gave an indulgent nod, looking fond.

Sometimes Sakura regretted being an only child.

“Twelve years ago, the Nine-Tailed Fox attacked Konoha. We don't know why and to what purpose, but it wreaked great destruction on the village and killed many.”

That, they knew. It was taught at length in school and most of them had lost family members in the ordeal. There was a commemoration every year.

“The Fourth Hokage was the one who managed to defeat it, but he didn’t kill the Beast. You have to understand, the Kyuubi isn’t… just a large animal. It is infused with chakra, like…”

“Like a summon right?” Sakura said. “Some of them are considered royalties, or even minor deities.”

“Something like that, yes,” Itachi confirmed blankly. She fought off an embarrassed blush – she needed to stop interrupting. “But much more powerful. He couldn’t be killed, not even brought down. But…”

“He could be sealed,” Sasuke whispered. Itachi nodded.

“A good seal, if it’s powerful enough, can’t be fought off or broken, no matter the strength of who, or what, gets sealed into it. To be honest I don’t know… How it happened exactly, or why. But the Fourth Hokage had the chance to seal the Beast, and so, he did. It cost him his life – you can imagine how much chakra such a seal would require.”

“Why Naruto though? Why not an adult, anyone else?”

“I don’t know. But such a sealing technique is probably more efficient on a newborn, despite the toll it could have on their body.”

“Why?”
Itachi frowned, thinking his words over.

“I imagine a young child wouldn’t have… fight it off, like an adult might have.”

That was a terrible way of putting it.

“Why… why didn’t we know about this?” Sasuke asked, a hint of anger in his voice.

“It was agreed that it would be kept under wrap to protect him. You’ve seen that… the power of the demon could be used.”

Meaning Naruto could have been taken, for that chakra that lived inside of him. Sakura shuddered.

“And it was… there was a hope that if it wasn’t openly known, the prejudice Naruto faced wouldn’t be as… pronounced.”

“Wait.”

Sakura cast a look at Sasuke – he was tensed and tightly coiled, looking ready to snap. His face was folded into a complicated mix of confusion and anger.

“Wait. Is that… is that the reason why… is that why people have always been… like that? With him?”

Itachi looked surprised by the question.

“Well, yes. Yes, that’s the reason. People… People always saw the fox in him. And so…”

Itachi was cut off by Sasuke springing to his feet. He started pacing the room, agitated, brimming with restless energy.

“Wait. Wait. You mean that’s it? That’s why. That’s why he got all that… all that crap, all these years. That’s… Because people thought he was… What, a demon? Because they thought he was a monster?”

“Yes.”

Sasuke kept pacing, increasingly faster and louder, as Sakura sat very still on the tatami, trying to wrap her head around what they were hearing. She wasn’t having much more luck than Sasuke though.

“That’s… that’s…”

“That’s awful,” she stated in his place. He stopped moving to look at her, and they had an understanding here, she felt, as their eyes met across the room.

“That’s dumb.”

“That’s absurd.”

“That’s terrible.”

“That sucks .”

“I don’t understand.”
Sasuke nodded, and he came back to sit by her side, to face Itachi once again, because he was the only one who could make sense of it, who could explain.

“I don’t understand,” Sakura said again. “Before… the other day, the demon never made an appearance. Right? Naruto never did anything wrong. He’s not… he’s not dangerous. He’s not bad.”

"I guess there was a part of fear in it," Itachi said. "But it was mostly… resentment. A lot of people died by the fox's doing."

“But what does it have to do with Naruto?” Sasuke shot back, voice rising as he was losing his temper. Itachi was taken aback by their vindication and confusion.

“I don’t… People needed to lay the blame somewhere, I imagine.”

Sasuke snorted, full of disdain, like he did so well to shot down people being arrogant or hurtful at school, that expression of pure contempt he had for those he found distasteful and unpleasant. She should have been used by now to him being angry and outraged on other’s behalf – she hadn’t forgotten who had brought Kara and her parents apologizing to her front door. Sasuke had little tolerance for the excuse of emotions and feelings. Or for any excuse really. If people were wrong, they were wrong.

And in this case, people were very, very wrong.

Was it why her parents had been so against her befriending Naruto? Her uncle, her father’s brother, and his wife had died the night the Kyuubi attack. But Sasuke was right, what did it have to do with Naruto? He was a day old! He had done nothing wrong.

All the teachers’ scorn, all the parents’ contempt, all the whispers and dirty looks, and that was the reason? They had wondered for so long, had put together theories and possibilities, but they had never come close to the truth.

Because it couldn’t be so… So terribly stupid. People just couldn’t be so mean.

Except that they could, it seemed.

“Did he always knew? Naruto,” she asked.

“No. He found out only a couple of years ago.”

She couldn’t decide what was worse, being scorned without knowing why, or being scorned for such a meaningless reason.

“Why did he never want to tell us?” Sasuke asked. He was calmer now, but not really calm. Sakura had the impression that neither Itachi nor Sasuke – nor her, indeed – wanted the answer to that question.

She still said it.

“He believes them.”

She had done a good job at keeping the tears at bay until now, but she was on the verge of losing that particular battle.

“He thinks he’s… and he must have thought that we…”
He thought they would be the same. Scared, the same, hateful, the same. That they would act like all those who knew.

She hadn’t understood, back then on the bridge, why Naruto had stopped, why it was such a big deal, that they had been scared. Because surely, he had to know. He had to know they wouldn’t be like that, he had to know…

But he didn’t. He didn’t.

Sasuke took her hand, clumsy and awkward, as his sole tentative to comfort her, as she cried silently, cursing the weakness of her eyes that could never hold anything in.

“We’ll fix this,” he said firmly, suffering no argument. He squeezed her hand and she squeezed back. She wiped her face. She nodded.

Why did you do that?

He had found that if he concentrated hard enough, he could make the water disappear from the prison, so that he could sit on the floor without getting soaked through. It was absurd because he wasn’t really getting wet, but the sensation was there, and it was unpleasant.

Especially seeing how much time he passed in front of the fox’s cage.

He wasn’t sleeping – at least he didn’t think he was. He was on his futon in Shisui’s house – he couldn’t bring himself to get up.

We needed to get out. We needed to fight.

But why did you kill Haku?

We needed to beat them.

But why did they have to die?

The fox snarled. Naruto couldn’t look away from his hands – they were blood free, and yet it was like he could still feel it, the warm, thick blood running down his skin, soaking his clothes. The stains barely showed on his black undershirt and the dark red of his hoodie – he had thrown them out all the same.

Why are you so upset?

They could have lived. But because of us, they’re dead.

They were your enemies.

It doesn’t matter. And were they, anyway? We had no reason to fight. Beside other people wanting us to.

It was dawning on him that he would be ordered to kill again someday. And he wouldn’t have the right to ask why. There would be no reason for it. He understood killing in order not to be killed, but Haku didn’t want to kill him. Naruto was sure of that. It could have ended differently. They could have not fight.

They could have become friends, maybe. They were the same.
They wouldn’t be dead, have you not been there. This is your fault!

You would be dead instead.

Naruto shrugged. That didn’t move him much.

Your little friend would be dead too.

He shivered. That, he didn’t want. It was what had pushed him over the edge, what had driven him to call upon the fox after all. For a moment Sasuke hadn’t moved and Naruto had thought…

Why do you care so much. They were just people. There are plenty more of those.

The disgust was obvious in the fox’s voice.

Do you not know about love?

The fox was displeased with the question. It figured he wouldn’t know, he was a demon after all. Naruto didn’t know much about it either.

Maybe they would n’t have died, if you didn’t “love” your friends so much.

It was said with a snarl, almost like a laugh, mocking. But Naruto couldn’t help but think that the fox wasn’t wrong.

He had always been scared of getting hurt, if he let people in, but he had failed to imagine that he would be the one to hurt them, or others, because of it. People died on missions all the time. What if it went even worse next time? What if he lost it entirely? Would he lose control, would he lose his mind, would the fox take over? He couldn’t let that happen.

You know, there’s a simple solution.

What?

You could just let me go.

Naruto snorted.

No.

Why not?

If I free you from here, you will attack Konoha again. You will kill many people.

At least the fox didn’t have the gall to deny it.

What do you care? You hate this place.

That doesn’t mean I want it gone. Why do you want to destroy it anyway?

I hate this place too. It’s their fault, if I’m stuck here. I want revenge. Don’t you want that too? For what they did to you? We could get it together. We could make them pay.

Naruto shook his head.

I don’t care for revenge. I don’t understand it. What I want is to be free. Once I’m free of this place, what do I care what happens to it? I just have to be strong enough that they can’t hold me
They’ll kill you then, if you don’t destroy them first.

I’ll be stronger than that too. Strong enough that there is nothing they can do. This is my revenge. That they’ll be powerless to stop me.

The fox laughed, cutting and disdainful.

You think you can do that? You? On your own?

No. Not on my own.

Oh?

It was foolish of me to think I could keep you at bay. I won’t ever let you take over like this again. I will control your power. I know I will need it.

You sound awfully confident, brat.

Naruto shrugged again. It’s not like he had a choice. He wouldn’t ever be able to sleep at night again if he didn’t gain the certitude that he could wrestle the control of his body and mind from the fox if need be. He would never know peace, if he knew that he could open his eyes on dead bodies piled up around him, of unfathomable destruction brought down upon them because he wasn’t strong enough to fight off the demon. The next time he used that power, it would be on his own term.

We’ll see about that, little receptacle.

Naruto opened his eyes on his little room in Shisui’s house. In the end, this is where he had come back. He could admit, at least to himself, that he didn’t want to leave this place. Besides, it was probably better that he didn’t stay on his own. Just in case.

They had been right to want someone to watch him.

He got up, tidied up a bit. The mist clouding his thoughts was slowly dissipating. He couldn’t keep wallowing in self-pity. He had things to do.

He deliberately did not think about Sasuke and Sakura. He couldn’t afford to be distracted anymore. They couldn’t be his priority. He had to achieve control over the demon at all cost, and it’s not by letting them gain even more power over his emotions that that would happen.

They had to stay away from him. He wouldn’t be able to bear their proximity. How could he let them approach him? He could kill them in an instant, he could lose his mind completely, snap, and just kill them dead on the spot. Or everyone around them, if they were hurt, if they were in danger.

The fox was right. Love was bad for him.

Better to stand on his own. It would be easier, safer, and he was prepared for it. He would handle it. It would all be fine. He had been weak, but it wouldn’t happen again. He wouldn’t cry anymore.

He couldn’t quite register that they knew now, and he couldn’t remember why it had ever been hidden. Why hadn’t it been out from the start, since so many people seemed to know anyway? What had been the point of pretending? It would have spared him many turmoil, if it had just been
common knowledge. He wouldn’t have hoped that he could blend in, be like the rest. Not saying anything had been a mistake. He couldn’t escape this, couldn’t hide it.

Better to embrace it already.

Naruto grabbed Haku’s mask, got out his sharpest shuriken, and set to work.

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When Sakura arrived at the meeting point, Kakashi was already there. For a second she wondered if she had misunderstood the time and was several hours late, but Sasuke was making his way over there too. So it was just their teacher being on time – early, even.

Proof that things were not normal.

Sasuke looked angry, bitter – the exact same he had been when they had parted after hearing Itachi. Her parents had been confused over her sudden moodiness and quiet demeanor – she couldn’t just confront them about all this, but she couldn’t bring herself to act as if nothing was wrong either. She wondered if he was the same for him, or if he had, instead, had that fight with his parents.

Naruto joined them before she had a chance to ask.

“Hi guys. What’s up?”

The mundane, somewhat cheerful greeting took all three of them off guard.

“Nothing much,” Sakura said hesitantly, the first one to recover. “What about you?”

“You know me. I’m always fine.”

She had imagined several ways this would play out, but that one, she hadn’t seen it coming.

Naruto was going to act as if nothing had happened.

“Naruto,” Sasuke said, not on board with that plan at all, “I wanted to say…”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine.”

“No, it’s…”

“It’s fine. Come on, forget about that. I get it y’know. It doesn’t matter.”

Sasuke disagreed.

“We have to talk about it.”

“We certainly don’t,” Naruto said forcefully, losing calm and patience fast. Sakura wanted to shake him, to get into his face and force him to open up to them, to say something, anything.

“Don’t be like that,” she said, sounding more pleading than forceful. They just wanted to help. Why couldn’t he see that?

“I don’t want to talk about it.”
“Naruto…”

“No.”

“We can…”

Naruto turned away.

Sakura hadn’t noticed – the ribbon was hidden by the long strands of his hair, and the mask was tied flat against the side of his skull. He turned and they were faced with its blank, sinister expression.

“Naruto!” Sasuke growled, frustrated.

“Just let it go,” Naruto said, stubborn.

How could he say that? How could he dismiss the issue, while he was so obviously affected by it still, as they all were?

“Let’s move then,” Kakashi sighed. She rolled her eyes. Of course they couldn’t count on him to fight at least for two whole seconds. He said people couldn’t be forced to talk if they didn’t want to, but all she heard was that he couldn’t be bothered to insist.

Sakura marched up to Naruto, determined to confront him whether he liked it or not.

That’s when she noticed the mark.

She grabbed Sasuke’s arm and tapped her forehead, before pointing at their friend. He followed her gaze to the mask resting in Naruto’s hair.

The four waves of the Kiri symbol were gone. Or well, not gone, but they had been carved into another symbol, a clumsy pair of kanji engraved on the mask’s forehead.

It spelled “Monster”.

Her arm dropped back at her side, and Naruto kept walking. He was just there, a few steps ahead, but in that moment, he felt miles away.

Out of their reach.

Chapter End Notes

He had to look it up in a dictionary.

I feel the urge to end on a lighter note because urg. Even if actually what happens is that he know these kanjis because he used to find them scribbled or painted on his stuff at school and even on his door once. So let's just throw that "lighter note" out the window lol.

I'm sorry for those who had hopes that I would spare the Kiri nins maybe. Trust me, I wish. I stumbled on a tumblr post the other day about how we launch into fanfic to put in that one scene only to realize 40k words in that that scene no longer works with the
story. It kind of happened here, but it's not a bad change - I wrote Sasuke stepping away from Naruto a loooong time ago, but at this time the story was more focused on only the two of them. In the end I'm glad I let some other characters in too (most notably Sakura). I don't think it's such a bad thing that their whole life no longer revolve solely around each other... Besides, it still hurts just fine haha.

Next chapter, or the next, will see the launching of the chunin exam arc, probably my favourite out of all of this. Exciting or what. And believe it or not, things will actually get better for a while! The power of great emotional discussions.

Thank you so much for your support, I'm sorry I was a bit whiny last time, I just crave your comments people ^^ I hope you had a good time! (Well, "good"...
“Why do they want to get rid of the old man anyway.”

It was Tsunade who had cracked and spoken first. A meaningless victory, but a victory all the same – seeing how frustrating the last few days had been, Izumi would take it.

It was the third night in a row that she and Shizune sat on the side while Anko and Tsunade tried to drink each other under the table, or to simply kill each other in the most undignified way possible, who knew. Anko's strategy was to be wear the woman down by constantly being in her face. It was very efficient because Anko could be very intimidating when she wanted to be, and no one liked to go about their business in life with a crazy looking woman licking a kunai two feet behind at all times. They were drinking at the inn because no bar in town wanted to serve them anymore, and it looked like Tsunade had finally decided to at least hear them out.

Small steps.

"Shit happened,” Anko deadpanned, triumph badly hidden in her smug tone. “He lost the trust of the clans. It was their decision, but he agreed."

"When are the clan ever happy..."

"It was different this time."

"How so?"

"Shimura Danzo was arrested and tried for treason, conspiracy and murder. He was exiled."

For the first time since their arrival, Tsunade seemed to lose a bit of her composure, and Izumi was a bit ashamed of how satisfying it was. Shizune looked worried, but Izumi had found out it was a constant state of being for that woman. The name rung a bell to them both, at least.

Tsunade didn't let that move her for long though.

"About time. Is it supposed to be surprising?"
"We don't know to what extent the Hokage was aware of his doings. But it wasn't zero."

"No shit."

She seemed so unbothered by it, by the news that the Sandaime had turned a blind eye on off the books assassination, sometimes carried against their own people. It was as if...

"This is how it works. Always have been. I don't get why it's such a big deal."

Izumi supposed there was a measure of defiance in her words, of provocation, since she was just as intent as Anko at winning the obnoxious game. But she was certain her cynicism wasn't fake, not entirely.

She was older than all of them. She had lived longer, had seen much more. Did that mean she knew what she was talking about?

Did that mean she was right?

"It was different this time," Anko said through gritted teeth. Her temper rose easily and Tsunade had caught on that quickly. She was playing her.

"How so?"

Anko frowned, and she cast a furtive look at Izumi, who didn't even try to pretend she wasn't listening to their every word. Shizune was doing a better job of it, but only barely – if they weren't going to be sent away, they couldn't be blamed for eavesdropping.

She understood Anko's hesitations. She decided she would put an end to it herself.

"He was caught planning the removal of the Uchiha clan."

Three pairs of eyes focused on her and she fought not to squirm or blush. This was a serious conversation, and she didn't want to be dismissed.

Shizune spoke for the first time that evening.

"The removal as in..."

"Death, to all of them. At least, that's what I understood."

Izumi's eyes stayed trained on Anko.

"You knew?"

"I... Yes. Uchiha Mikoto told me about it. She's... she's Itachi's mother. I'm not supposed to be in the confidence so..."

She had talked a lot about her clan to Anko, these past few weeks, and she had had an inkling that Anko was aware of it too, in the bitterness she sported on her face sometimes, in the way she asked details like she couldn't quite believe what she heard. The prejudice against the clan ran deep, deeper than Izumi had thought. Deep enough that at some point, some people had deemed it safe enough to wipe them all out, because in all likelihood, no one would throw much of a fuss over their disappearance.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Tsunade asked, anger in her voice at being left out, at not having all the answers this time. Anko gestured for Izumi to go on.
"It is... a complicated matter. Years in the making. But the gist of it is that the Uchiha clan had grown... discontented, with the way they were treated. Believing the whole village against them, they started to plan a takeover. The clan had spies among them – the Hokage heard of it. And..."

She fought down a sudden onslaught of emotions, the exact ones that had gripped her all those months ago when Mikoto had finally agreed to tell her about what had happened. There was rage, and fear, resentment and sorrow. She still couldn't quite wrap her head around the future they had avoided, around what could have happened to them.

Around what Itachi could have done.

“There’s no way to be sure,” she said stubbornly. “We can’t know for sure. But Danzo had his solution to the problem.”

“This was five years ago,” Anko chimed in. “Everyone’s been busy dealing with the aftermath, and now, they want to move on for good.”

Izumi had heard about Danzo of course, the subject came up regularly, even years after the facts, because there were still repercussions rippling out to this day. Sometimes it was hard to believe he could have been responsible for so much, for so long. Izumi had never felt overly concerned by this story though – the man had been dealt with, his misdeed uncovered and fixed to the best of their abilities.

But her curiosity had gotten the best of her. She wanted to know.

She almost regretted asking, as, she was sure, Mikoto regretted telling her.

"The Third would have never stood for that," Tsunade said firmly, involved for the first time since they had met her.

“It’s not our understanding of that situation,” Anko shot back, smiling like a shark. She was taking some measure of joy in the confusion and shock of the older woman. She seemed to have a very personal grievance against her, which was weird, because Tsunade had left Konoha before she was even born or something.

“And you didn’t get a civil war out of that,” Tsunade said, not really a question, but disbeliefing still.

“People are adamant to avoid war at all cost these days. Go figure,” Anko said drily. She was old enough to have known the last days of the previous one – Izumi had heard enough about war to want to it gone too, and she had never been in one.

“Still you came after me, little Uchiha girl,” Tsunade said to Izumi. “Do you think I’ll be better? Do you still trust any of this?”

Now wasn’t the time to admit she had had no idea that was what they were doing until a few days ago. She had been a bit moody about it, but Anko had snapped her out of it quickly. She had apologized in a very roundabout way about hiding it to her, citing confidentiality and safety measures she didn’t seem to like very much. Getting worked up at regulation and orders wouldn’t get them anywhere – for now.

“I was… mad,” she admitted instead. “And bitter, and sad. But despite the problems we face and all the things I’m not happy with… It’s still our village. It’s the only one we got. Everyone I know and care about lives there. So I want to trust it. I want to trust that things can get better. Maybe you’ll do it, maybe you won’t. If you won’t, we'll try something else."
If they all geared up toward change, surely it would have to come, eventually. Things had already shifted in the Uchiha clan, small things, but they were there. And if her prideful clan could reflect upon their way, then the rest of the village could too. They could make it so that they could trust each other, everyone, and trust that there wasn’t a force within their own village working against them.

“What if they were all gone?”

“What?”

“These people you care about. What if they were no longer there?”

Izumi frowned, puzzled.

“Well the village wouldn’t be there anymore then.”

She had been told that she cared too much, too easily. She failed to see how it was such a bad thing. She had a lot of friends, and she loved her clan despite its flaws. The village, it was them. She would protect them all.

“How old are you, Uchiha girl?”

“I’m 16. And my name is Izumi. Ma’am.”

A good thing Tsunade didn’t seem to be overly attached to protocol and formalities. She stared at Izumi for a long, uncomfortable moment, before taking another swing from her bottle. She got up abruptly.

“I’m going to sleep. ‘Night.”

And just like that, she was gone. Anko spluttered in indignation and almost went after her, but she stormed off instead, barking about going out for a walk.

Izumi found herself alone with Shizune.

“I’m sorry about all the troubles we’re causing you,” the woman said after a short silence, with an embarrassed half-laugh. “It’s… not an easy situation.”

Izumi was starting to see that.

“Excuse me, maybe it’s too forward of me but… hum… If I asked you why… Why Tsunade-hime left the village… Would you tell me?”

The woman stared longingly at the corridor where her companion had disappeared into. Izumi couldn’t quite get a read on their relationship – Shizune seemed all at once a helper, a caretaker, a friend and an apprentice. The affection she had for the older woman was real, in any case.

“She used to be like you, I believe. Determined to fight for what she loved. But… It was taken from her. All of it.”

Izumi leaned forward above the table as Shizune’s voice dropped low, derailed by grief and sorrow.

“War raged for the majority of her life. Her parents died in battle when she was quite young, and she raised her brother alone. They were very close. But he was a ninja, and he died.”
It was more shocking somehow, with Shizune’s bland enunciation of the facts. It was an act though – her emotions were far from mild.

“She had a lover then, whom she loved very much, and who loved her. But he too was a ninja, and he, too, died of it.”

Shizune filled a small glass with sake to down it in one go, looking so dejected Izumi regretted to have asked at all. She went on though.

“You have to understand that for Tsunade… It’s not a foreign power, outsiders forces that were responsible for their death. You know about the Great Wars, right?”

“Yes, of course.”

“You must have learned who were the parties involved, how long it lasted. But do you know why it even started? Why it ended? Why they fought?”

“I… There are… reasons. Economic and political and… and we were attacked so…”

“Right. We were attacked, so we had to retaliate. If you asked the opposite side, they would give you the same answer.”

The bitterness in her voice contrasted starkly with her gentle demeanor.

“She could never get over the idea that… they didn’t have to die. It achieved nothing. It wasn’t heroic or meaningful. They weren’t protecting anyone, as you said. They were sent to war and war killed them. And that’s… that’s everybody’s fault. Everybody’s responsibility. The wars could have ended sooner. There could have been another way. You talked about what happened to your clan… You were lucky, that things turned out the way they did. They often don’t.”

One day when they were very young, Itachi had come back from a trip outside the village with his father. He looked exhausted and haunted, and he hadn’t spoken for three days. She was sitting with him on the pier when he had finally broken his silence.

“Let’s never go to war, Izumi.”

From what she understood, starting a war was never the problem. It was easy. It was so easy that it felt they were constantly on the verge of it, no matter what they did, that they had to actively fight against wars starting, at all times.

Ending them though…

Mikoto had been angry at the village, when she had told Izumi about that story, but she was angry at the clan too. “Why would they want to bring war to us,” she had lamented, to herself more than to Izumi. A coup would have certainly resulted in many deaths and chaos.

“I think she came to the conclusion that things would never change. That anyone she got attached to in the village was bound to disappear the same way her brother and lover did. That it was as meaningless as it was unavoidable.”

“But it’s not!”

Shizune startled at the outburst.

“It’s not!” Izumi went on. “It doesn’t have to be. We can find another way. We don’t have to
always fight. We can change things!"

“You said you wanted to protect your people, right? Don’t you think…”

“That doesn’t mean we have to fight. That doesn’t mean we have to kill each other. We can…
There are other ways! I don’t…. I don’t believe…”

She choked up on frustrated tears. She refused to believe open conflict was the only way to solve things. No matter the tension with the other countries, if everyone was on the same page, if everyone wanted peace, then surely they could achieve it. Who wanted to go to war? It made no sense to her.

“You’re really young,” came a drowsy voice by the door. They looked up to see Tsunade leaning against the wall, back from wherever she had disappeared to.

“You think you can pull this off? You think that’s how it works?”

“At least I’m willing to try!”

She gasped and put a hand on her mouth, shocked by her own vindication. She couldn’t go around talking to Tsunade like that. But it was so damn frustrating, all these people that always started by “it can’t be done”, and so didn’t do anything.

“That doesn’t mean you’ll make it.”

“If we try, maybe we’ll fail. But if we don’t, we surely will.”

She would let no one tell her that things couldn’t change. That they couldn’t improve, that it couldn’t be done. Not even Legendary Sanin Tsunade

“Is that so.”

The woman grabbed the bottle still sitting on the table, and disappeared again.

“I should probably go,” Izumi sighed. She felt both drained and hyped up by the conversation – she wanted to sleep, but doubted she would be able to.

Shizune rested a light hand on her arm, just as she was about to go. She caught her gaze and stared at her, and despite her soft face and soft voice, the determination and will that shone in her eyes just then proved she was far from passive.

“Don’t give up,” she whispered, a plea, a wish maybe.

“I-I won’t,” Izumi promised clumsily, even if there wasn’t much she could do in this case. She was just, after all, the 16-year-old tagalong chunin being very rude to someone much more important and higher ranked than her. That bit, she wouldn’t mention in her letters.

Anko was already there when she went back to their own room – they had moved into the same inn to keep an eye on Tsunade. Anko was smoking on the balcony, eyes lost on the star-filled sky. She came back inside when she heard Izumi.

“I had no idea you knew about this. You hid it well.”

It was hard to tell if it was a reproach.

“I’m sorry. I’m not supposed to know, I was told…”
"Don't sweat it. I hid things from you too – it's only fair."

Izumi accepted the settlement as it was.

“He doesn’t know, right? Your friend, Itachi. He doesn’t know you’ve heard the whole story.”

“No. No, he doesn’t. He made me understand bad things had happened, but he thinks that’s all I know, and I didn’t tell him otherwise.”

“Why not?”

Izumi took the time to change into her nightclothes and tidy up her things a bit, trying to decide how to answer that.

“If I… If he knew that I know, it would never be the same between us again. He would feel terrible, and I would too. I don’t… I would be angry. I would yell, I would shame him, and accuse him, and hurt him, and what would it accomplish? I wouldn’t feel better about it. He certainly wouldn’t either. It’s better like this. I want us to be able to move on. In the end he… didn’t do it. I can live with that.”

Maybe a time would come when they were both at peace enough with this story that she could open up to him about it. But it was still too raw, too fresh. Her rage was blind and aimless, too big to be expressed for now. And the air of despair and guilt Itachi carried with him constantly, she knew where they came from, and she had no interest in adding to it. She didn’t want him to think he was a monster in her eyes, the one he was in his own. Whether she believed it or not was irrelevant – what mattered was what he was aware of.

It was the same with Naruto, she pondered. No matter what people thought of him, they should have known to keep it under wrap, to hide it. It was worse in a way because Itachi had actual things to blame himself – and be blamed – for, albeit hypothetical. Naruto was stranger to the crimes he was accused of. And still no one had ever bothered to keep their feelings about it to themselves.

They didn’t believe in sparing others from pain, it seemed.

“What about the rest of the clan? They were at fault too.”

She didn’t get if Anko was trying to anger or hurt her, or if she was just playing devil’s advocate, as she often did. Izumi knew her fair share of people who hurt others when they hurt themselves – she could easily look past it.

“I don’t think about it. It's not like I could speak up against any of it. Not yet, anyway.”

All these old men holding the reins and making decisions, they wouldn’t be here forever. The Uchiha clan, the whole village, it would be theirs someday, her and her friends’.

Izumi could be patient.

“You’re such a good girl, Izumi. It’s kind of annoying,” Anko said, more fond than biting.

“You’re a good person too,” she answered, disliking the air of defeat in her mentor’s voice and posture.

“I’m really not.”
The thing was, Tsunade had no idea who she would fight for.

Konoha’s people deserved a leader that cared about them, right? And she didn’t know if she had that in her. At the end of the day, she simply wasn’t altruistic enough.

She was too selfish. She had been told many times.

She was always of a mind to say, “surely somebody else can take care of it”. But that girl, Izumi, she didn’t see that at all. Something had to be done, and so she believed she had to be the one to do it. She was right that it was the best way of seeing anything accomplished. But if she was alone in this, it was already lost, and if she wasn’t, then others could step up. She didn’t have to do it.

She didn’t have to get hurt.

Tsunade was like her, once, but putting herself in the first line every time had brought her nothing but pain and heartache. And had accomplished nothing in return. She had yet to see any proof that fighting for something ever worked out.

She had also stopped trying a long time ago.

“Alright, so the old man is out,” Tsunade summed up to the bottom of her glass. “I still don’t get what this has to do with me.”

Mitarashi Anko had a fiery temperament and very little patience in store – the efforts she put up to keep her cool were admirable. The woman and her little Uchiha shadow had ruined yet another gambling night for Tsunade – Anko scared every man she stared at long enough, and while Tsunade could respect that quality in a woman, right now she wasn’t enjoying it at all.

“There has to be someone else. Did Konoha spur nothing but average people since I've been gone? What about, let’s see… ah, Sakumo? He was a good one.”

Anko frowned deeply, something far darker than her earlier annoyance crossing her face.

“Hatake Sakumo committed suicide after his handling of a high-level mission brought him dishonor and shame.”

Tsunade should have stayed more in tune with Konoha’s news, like Shizune had always berated her to.

“I’m sorry to hear that. Mentioning the Sarutobi clan or the Uchiha would be bad taste in this situation, I suppose,” she went on. “How about…”

“You are one of the three legendary Sannin,” Anko said through gritted teeth, very obviously trying to keep a grip on her temper. “You’re one of the most powerful shinobi of the village, of the world. And you have legitimacy to the position, both political and historical.”

“Well, in case it has escaped you, in “three legendary Sanin,” there is “three”. Why don’t you ask Jiraiya? Don’t they all say that old perv’ was always stronger than me?”

“…Jiraiya-sama is a valuable spy to the village,” Anko answered, though she didn’t look so sure of herself. “And he doesn’t have your status.”

“Or talent.” Tsunade couldn’t help the jab, even if he wasn’t even here to hear it. He would refuse the offer point blank, that was for sure. Seemed like he had managed to make himself indispensable in something, so that he had a way out of the job. A better plan than just wandering
around hoping to be forgotten, she had to give it to him.

“What about Orochimaru?”

This time, both Shizune and the Uchiha girl completely failed to foresee, and prevent, Anko from jumping her. In an instant she had leaped across the table, knocking Tsunade’s chair back as she gipped the collar of her haori.

“How dare you? How dare you suggest that? Have you followed nothing of what happened in the village? Did you… Did you care so little?”

Tsunade grabbed the girl’s wrist, squeezing just enough to make her let go of her grip, but despite the pain, Anko didn’t budge. For a loaded moment Tsunade thought she was truly going to try to fight her. It was Izumi, laying a hand on her shoulder and pleading with her to let go, that eventually did it. Anko got up and went back to her chair, methodically shoving her anger back inside her body, locked where it couldn’t escape.

Tsunade got up too, picked up her chair. “What did he do now?” she asked, knowing she had failed to sound as disinterested as she wanted to. Anko’s temper flared again but she made an effort to reign it in, waving a hand at Izumi to dismiss her concern.

“Orochimaru has been a wanted missing-nin for almost ten years now.”

There was a sort of vindictive pleasure on her face at the shock that undoubtedly colored Tsunade’s face.

She really should have stayed more in tune with Konoha’s news.

“What happened,” she demanded with a growl, not interested in playing the girl anymore. Their roles were reversed now though. Anko had all the cards.

“I can’t believe you didn’t know,” she said. “He always looked so down when he talked about you. He missed you. And you didn’t give a shit.”


The girl’s frown deepened, but she wasn’t in the mood for games anymore either. She looked bitter and sad, full of resentment.

“He took his experimentations too far. There were orphan children involved, pretty gruesome, lots of deaths. The Sandaime confronted him when he found out, but he failed to stop him.”

At her side, Shizune gasped, but Tsunade didn’t react in any way. She didn’t know how to. Surprised didn’t begin to cover how she felt right now – Orochimaru was strange and he stood apart from the rest of them, but he wasn’t…

Was he?

“What’s it to you?” Tsunade asked as a diversion. Anko’s personal feelings in this were obvious. She pinched her lips, ready to deny it, but eventually changed course with a heavy sigh. She cast an unreadable look at Izumi before answering.

“Orochimaru was my mentor.”

There was bitterness, for sure, rage too. But mostly, she looked sad, defeated. Old feelings, but still
there, vivid, brought to the surface in no time.

“I never thought he would take a student,” Tsunade remarked, trying to imagine it, how Anko must have been as a child, what would have drawn Orochimaru to her.

“I’m special that way.”

Tsunade hadn’t seen Orochimaru in more than twenty years. Somewhere in her mind she imagined he was just where she had left him, carrying on his solo spying missions, working at the Research Centre and doing his nerd shit, but she had never thought about it further than that.

For all intent and purposes, she had stayed the exact same for two decades, never moving forward in any way, and she had just assumed they would be the same.

“How could this… Why did no one saw anything? Stopped him?”

“Like who? His friends?”

The jab made Tsunade flinch. Orochimaru had this in him, always had. It was as if he didn’t operate under the same rules as the rest of the world. He had a hard time understanding compassion and altruism, but he was willing to be taught. To be told what was right and what wasn’t, what was acceptable, why that girl had slapped him when he was just “telling the truth”, why this death made these people cry while they were indifferent to others. “You all need each other,” Hiruzen always said, and Tsunade would roll her eyes because surely they would do just fine on their own.

“It turned out that his researches were actually Danzo-sanctioned,” Anko went on. “Nothing is ever truly secret in the village, is it? There’s always someone in the known.”

Tsunade would always ask why. “Why do you study all the time, why all those researches, what are you looking for?” And Orochimaru would answer, ”I just want to know”. And in that pursuit, no one could stop him. He used to know though. If Tsunade told him it was wrong, he used to listen.

But Tsunade was long gone from the village. Jiraiya too, it seemed, and that left Orochimaru on this own. Free to do as he pleased, with no one to keep him in check.

Hiruzen had been there though. Their teacher knew him well. What was he doing? Leaving fucking Danzo to oversee him? How could this end in anything else than a huge disaster?

If she chose to go back to Konoha now, it would be with no friends left whatsoever, and with the duty to pursue and neutralize one of them.

A sweet deal indeed.

“Is that why they sent you?” she asked. “As his former student? Was that supposed to sway me somehow?”

Anko barked out a laugh.

"Don't be daft. They sent me because they didn’t mind sparing me for months on end, unlike many other jounins."

Tsunade could imagine being Orochimaru’s students bringing scrutiny and criticism upon the girl, even before his desertion. His mentorship must have made her lonely, or was it because she was lonely that he had taken her in?
At Anko’s side, Izumi frowned and pinched her lips, displeased with what she was hearing. This one wouldn’t care, probably, about who Anko’s mentor was, about what the village had against her. A good kid.

“Izumi, could you go get us some more sake?” Anko asked the chunin. She seemed to take the request as what it was – a cheap way of sending her away – but she obeyed without complaints. Anko waited for her to be out of hearing range before turning back to Tsunade.

“Listen. You don’t believe in anything, that’s fine. Frankly, I don’t either. But that kid” – she pointed a thumb at the bar where Izumi was arguing with the innkeeper – “she still has it in her. They don’t deserve to have it like the previous generations did. They don’t have to. We owe them… We owe them something better.”

“Sounds to me like you believe it alright,” Tsunade answered, aiming to tease, but just sounding fond. Sage, those people and their grand ideals. Why was hope so difficult to kill off of good.

“He talked about you, sometimes. I think he always hoped you’d come back. There weren’t many people he had a good opinion of.”

“Given what you’ve just told me, I don’t think Orochimaru’s seal of approval is such a good argument.”

Anko recoiled, hurt. Her animosity toward Tsunade made sense in the light of those events. Lonely kids didn’t have the luxury to choose to whom their affection held onto.

“You think it’s my fault, if he turned out this way. You think I could have stopped him.”

Anko’s expression hardened even more, but it only made her look more vulnerable, young and easily hurt still.

“I have no illusion, over the kind of person he is. And still I wish… I wish things had gone differently.”

“I’m sorry. For what you’ve been through.”

Very soon, the moment had passed. Anko shook her head, dismissing her regrets and melancholia, going back to business. Tsunade was starting to like that one.

“Forget about it. We’ll deal with him, in time. I won’t let him… I’ll deal with him.”

Was she angrier at being abandoned than at his terrible actions, Tsunade wondered. Konoha had a knack to raise kids with twisted morals. But still, Anko would do the right thing, she believed. Badly raised, and yet they still managed to turn out alright, somehow. Some of them at least.

“It’s now that we can do something,” Anko said, eyes shining with unshakable determination. “There’s no one else, Tsunade-hime. It has to be you.”

Now that wasn’t true. If she refused to come, they would find someone else, they would find a way. They would maybe do good, even.

Or they would fuck shit up even more.

Just like Tsunade could. But at the very least… If she didn’t go now, what would she learn, the next time they sought her out? That Jiraiya was dead, that Orochimaru had attacked the village, that clans had been eradicated for disagreeing with whoever was in charge?
These were things she could prevent.

But to go back to that place. To walk these streets again. To face the same bullshit hierarchy, the same hard headed fools, to fight her way through every decision again, to go through what both her grandfather, her great uncle and her mentor had gone through, a position she had never envied, not for one hot second.

And that she had never considered accessible to her anyway. Her name didn’t mean shit. As if they were ever going to carve a woman’s face into the mountain.

Orochimaru’s face wouldn’t have ever been an option either, now that she thought about it. He was too cold and calculating, too in favor of the end justifying the means, any means. Out of the three of them, Jiraiya would have been the first choice, despite being the one who least wanted it. He was still the first choice now, probably, except she somewhat appeared easier to convince.

That idiot would make a terrible Kage anyway.

Tsunade turned to the side to meet Shizune’s eyes. She didn’t need to ask her opinion on this – Shizune missed Konoha, and she believed in Tsunade, for some unfathomable reason. Her choice was obvious.

And yet she would follow. She would bend to Tsunade’s will.

“Here’s your drink,” Izumi said as seriously as if she was delivering a diplomatic letter, putting the bottle on the table. Tsunade grabbed it and took a long, long swig of it.

She couldn’t believe she was seriously considering this.

“Dammit all to hell,” she spat, slamming the bottle back on the table. Why did she still care? After all these years, she thought she was finally free of those pesky feelings, she thought she would be able to turn her back from it all for good, to finally stop caring.

She looked at Uchiha Izumi, who could very well have been dead by now, killed by her own village. How had they come to this? What was going on there?

Only one way to find out. But it was so daunting, so terribly scary. She wasn't the woman they thought she was, not anymore. Would she really help in any way, or would she only make things worse?

Time to make a choice.

“You must be happy, Izumi. We’re going back to Konoha,” Anko said on the way back to the inn.

Izumi hesitated. She was happy to go back home, to see her family and her friends again.

But it felt wrong to say that when Anko was so obviously not.

The first time Izumi had come home with the most exciting news of her life – that she had been selected by Mitarashi Anko herself to be a part of her special investigation squad – Izumi’s mother had been far less happy than she should have been. Izumi remembered her disapproving frown, her wary tone. “Really? You’re going to work with that woman?”

Izumi had always dismissed it as unfounded prejudices – Anko was outspoken and brash, rubbing
everyone the wrong way, unapologetic about who she was. Izumi knew it was more than enough for her to be disliked.

But this was something else entirely. The very few times Izumi had heard the name Orochimaru, it had never been followed by anything nice.

She remembered Anko’s bitter face. “I can’t afford the luxury of being less than exemplary”. The whispers that followed her around the village. That one girl from Izumi’s year that had refused to be part of her team.

She was trying to dig up all she had ever learned about the Sannin from her memory, but it wasn’t much. Were they supposed to be very close? When did they all leave, and why? Well, she knew a bit more on that now. It made sense that the village didn’t advertise the betrayal of one of their most powerful and renown shinobi. But people had to know.

Izumi was very familiar with Naruto’s struggles. It wasn’t that far-fetched to imagine his fate befalling some other people who were also guilty in the eyes of the crowd, no matter what they had actually done.

And just like with Naruto, Izumi couldn’t just ignore it.

“You are my favorite jounin,” she blurted out.

Anko stopped in her track, dumbfounded, and Izumi came to stand in front of her. She could barely make out her expression in the dim night light of the street.

“I’m proud you chose me for this, and I’m happy to be here, with you.”

She didn’t say “I’m happy still, despite this”, but she trusted Anko would know.

“You’re really too good, Izumi,” Anko chided, a little annoyed and a little awed.

“But you like me anyway?”

She didn’t mean to phrase that as a question. She blushed as Anko grinned wildly, before she dropped an arm on Izumi’s shoulder to mess with her hair.

“Of course I do. You’re my favorite chunin after all.”

“Next step after climbing trees is walking on water,” Kakashi declared when he arrived at the meeting point. It was a secluded part of the river, not as easily accessible as the most popular bathing spots, and surrounded by trees and rocks. Kakashi was an hour late – things were going back to normal, it seemed.

Ha. As if.

Kakashi had more or less let it transpire that Naruto skipping on team training or missions wasn’t an option, and since the last thing he wanted was to have the village even more on his back than it already was, Naruto had no choice but to obey.

Problem was, training had taken a nightmarish turn lately, but it’s not like he could explain that to Kakashi.

“The principle is the same, but the precision needed isn’t. Besides, the goal is to be able to carry on
a fight while changing grounds and environment, so you have to learn to maintain it with every part of your body and no matter the conditions. Alright, let’s begin.”

The three of them joined their hands, closed their eyes, and concentrated on their chakra flow before taking a tentative step on the flowing water. Or tried to, in Naruto’s case, because…

A sudden flare of foreign chakra made him lose the feeble grasp he had on his own.

He lost balance and crashed into the cold water.

_Oops._

That damn fox wouldn’t leave him in peace.

It was determined to hinder any and all of his progress. When the seal was stable and firmly closed, there was only so much chakra that could filter through it, but with Naruto’s poor control, it was enough to disrupt everything. Naruto had even been looking into the seal, into ways to tighten it, but it was way more advanced than anything he knew, and the scrolls he had were either useless on the matter or too complicated for him to decipher.

And the fox kept laughing.

“You’re alright, Naruto?”

“Fine,” he said through gritted teeth, ignoring the hand Sakura was thrusting his way. She huffed, displeased. He ignored her.

She was already standing perfectly fine on the water, of course, and she walked away with no trouble at all to practice taijutsu moves right there in the middle of the river.

Naruto cursed while he got back up. Sasuke already had the hang of it too, even if he looked far less steady on his feet that their third teammates. But he would manage it soon enough.

_He_ didn’t have a fox mocking him and poking at his chakra system.

“Stay focused, Naruto,” Kakashi advised from where he was sitting on the bank. He wasn’t reading his book or napping – his eyes were trained on the genins, attentive.

Keeping watch on Naruto, maybe.

He was right though – getting worked up would only give the fox more leeway. He had had no choice but to take up meditation, admittedly the most boring occupation in the world. It helped though, it couldn’t be denied. Shisui shared similar thoughts on the matter – dull but necessary – so they sat on the deck behind the house in the evening or early before breakfast, and they spent some times together in silence, trying to find calm and serenity, to balance things up. It never lasted long, but it still helped.

And Shisui spending time with him was always nice. Even when they said nothing.

Ignoring his soggy clothes and the cold sipping into his skin, he closed his eyes and tried to find it again, that peace and that level of control over himself that he so sorely needed. He fought to keep his grip firm over the chakra concentrating in his feet. The calmer he was, the easier it was to push the fox back down.

He tried again, several times, crushing down firmly any feelings of irritation. After a couple of
hours Sasuke and Sakura had moved on to spar on the surface of the water, while he exhaled a small sigh of relief as he managed to reach the middle of the river.

_You really have low standards._

_Shut the fuck up._

His concentration was tenuous at best, and any distraction would send it flying out the window.

Sakura jumped back to avoid an upcoming kick and tumbled into Naruto. He lost his grip immediately and sunk into the water.

It wasn’t deep, but it was _cold_, and the surprise and annoyance made his temper flare. He struggled to climb back up on the surface, spluttering and coughing.

“Dammit! Can’t you…”

_Oh, you called?_

Naruto shut down his rising anger immediately.

It was his lot in life now, to be scared of his own emotions. He raised his head once he felt enough in control of the laughing fox, only to see Kakashi had gotten up and was staring at him intently. Sakura looked guilty, hesitating by his side to help him up or not. Behind her, Sasuke was observing him too, face unreadable.

He knew he couldn’t afford to get angry, or excited or scared. Last time he had lashed out, Haku had died, while it had been the last thing he wanted. He knew the fox would make no difference, wouldn’t bother to spare those around him.

_Why do you do that?_

_You’ll either get strong enough to go against me. Or I’ll eventually wear you down enough to break free. It’s your deal, not mine._

Naruto should have kept his fucking mouth shut.

“I think that’s enough for today,” Kakashi called out. They walked back to solid ground, good mood forgotten. Naruto wanted to scream. Did the fox had to ruin everyone’s day.

“Same time here tomorrow, kids. Let’s get something to eat.”

“Actually,” Sakura cut in, hesitant, “there’s something I wanted to talk to you about, sensei. If it’s okay with you.”

“Oh? Yeah, go on.”

“Hum, well…”

She cast a pointed look at Naruto and Sasuke.

“We’re gone,” Naruto declared, when it appeared that Sasuke wasn’t taking the hint. He was spacing out, and was confused enough that he didn’t protest when Naruto dragged him away.

They went back to the main districts together, and Naruto only realized that he had followed Sasuke to the takoyaki stand when they were already in line. It was such a habit, they always went
for food after training, he hadn’t even thought about parting ways. He considered doing it now, but Sasuke would probably be sad, or mad, and Naruto didn’t want to make a scene. He could indulge, couldn’t he? Not getting closer didn’t have to mean completely pulling away. They were just having some food. No big deal.

Or so he thought, until it was their turn.

Of course he had noticed before, many times. It was impossible not to. It had always bothered him, but now that he knew why it was, it made him furious.

It was so obvious, blatant, so damn rude. The man handling the takoyaki stand raised his head to greet them, and as soon as he spotted Naruto, his smile vanished, his face hardened. His son, who was watching the grilling goods next to him, elbowed him in the ribs without discretion, and they shared a hushed, heated conversation, waving their spatulas around. Meanwhile, Naruto and Sasuke just stood there like idiots, as the people in line behind them started grumbling in low voices.

“Forget it,” Naruto said. He reached up.

He slid the mask on his face.

He was always wearing it, on the side, and he was always just a hair away from putting it on. To escape a conversation, to hide his face and emotions, to not be seen anymore. To defy, also, when he turned it to the passersby, the inscription on the forehead clear and bold, for everyone to see. It was impossible to know what he thought then, what he felt. Sasuke hated it.

Naruto walked away. The crowd parted to let him pass. From where Sasuke stood, watching his retreating back, it almost looked like it was out of respect. But Sasuke only had to see their faces.

He hated that too.

This anger, there was nothing he could do with it. He couldn’t yell at the shopkeeper, at these people, he couldn’t slam his fist in the wooden shack, he couldn’t express it in any way. It drove him crazy. He wanted to rage and rant, to tell them that this was not okay, to ask them why.

Instead he clenched his fists in his pockets and went home gritting his teeth.

Itachi had told him it would be better to keep this to himself for the time being – Kakashi had sort of hinted at it too in that way he had to say things while saying absolutely nothing at all. Sasuke had told his parents a very brief summary of their mission in Wave Country, unwilling to share the details of their failures and shortcomings. He had no doubt whatever had made it into Kakashi’s report, his father had to know, but he hadn’t asked, so Sasuke could only assume that particular detail wasn’t mentioned.

How ironic, to keep secret the fact that that secret wasn’t so secret anymore. Everybody knew – or at least, a lot of people did. The game was to pretend like they didn’t, while stating quite obviously that they did.

It was insane.

Sasuke carried his quiet outrage all the way through his training session with Itachi – who had the good taste not to ask – and into the evening. He sat quietly at the dinner table, pushing his vegetables around as his mother talked about her genin team and his father asked Itachi about what
he planned on doing now, again. So normal, so mundane. Familiar, familial. Happy.

Itachi had told him not to say anything, but he must have known Sasuke wouldn’t listen.

It was just too hard, to pretend like everything was the same, when nothing was. Wherever he looked, whoever he talked to, whatever he did, it was all he could think about.

The people around him were bullies and liars. Naruto was sad and bitter and angry at life, and when Sasuke looked around him, all he saw was people who were responsible for it.

"Is something wrong, Sasuke?" his mother asked, concerned by his silence and his sullen mood.

“It’s your fault,” he answered.

Itachi should have known Sasuke wouldn’t listen.

“Huh, what…”

“It’s your fault if Naruto is the way he is. If he’s unhappy and lonely. It’s your fault. You did this to him.”

“Sasuke,” his father called, firm and authoritative. “What are you talking about?”

“I know about the Demon Fox.”

Silence dropped onto the table at once, the scene freezing like time had stopped, as they stared at him in shock and disbelief.

“How?” his mother asked, distressed.

“He told me,” Sasuke lied. He didn’t leave them time to divert the conversation on that particular point. “It just came out. I can’t believe, all this time… I can’t believe that’s why. That’s why you didn’t want us to be friends. He’s… He’s… It’s all your fault.”

“Sasuke,” his father growled, a warning, but Sasuke was on the roll now and he wasn’t going to stop.

“No. No. After all you told me, after everything… How can you be fine with it? How is… how is it honorable, and just and right, to be so unfair? To treat him this way? I always thought… That there was something, some kind of reason but it’s…”

“It’s more complicated than you think, Sasuke.”

“Oh yeah? Tell me then, please. Absolutely no one has ever been kind to Naruto ever, and everyone thinks it’s normal. Tell me w-why.”

His voice broke off on an aborted sob. He struggled against angry tears, not wanting to show such blatant weakness. It just felt like his emotions were spilling out of him, too big to be contained. He was overwhelmed.

Naruto had been on the verge of bursting too, earlier on the river, but he had shoved it down hard. He always looked on edge now. Always looked scared.

It wasn’t fair.

His father stared him down with a stony face and Sasuke knew he wasn’t going to answer. He
turned towards his mother, hoping she would say something, anything, to soothe his anguish, to justify all this.

“It’s… It is complicated, Sasuke…”

He jumped on his feet and stormed out of the dining room. He heard his father call out his name, angrily telling him to come back, but for the first time, he didn’t listen. He marched on, until he could slam shut his bedroom door, and he didn’t come out again.

“He’s right,” Mikoto said through gritted teeth as Fugaku fumed by her side.

“He’s a child,” he answered.

“Only when what he says bothers you,” she shot back. For him of all people, to use that argument. Itachi excused himself with a slight bow, face sullen.

“I don’t want to discuss this,” Fugaku said, stubborn. She sighed as she piled up the plates, the clinking of the ceramics offensive in the heavy air.

“You won’t always be able to escape it.”

“Hey, Hayate, wait up, wait! I need a favor.”

“Aren’t you guys tired of always owing me things?”

“Don’t act like you haven’t been dying to benefit from Shisui’s matchmaker skills. I know he got you that date.”

“Irrelevant. What do you want?”

Kakashi stepped to the side dramatically and Sakura, who had been hiding behind him up until then, found herself suddenly face to face with a jounin a little younger than her instructor, who wore his ninja headband as a bandana and had worrying bags under his eyes. He eyed her blankly, waiting for an explanation that wasn’t coming, because Kakashi loved to embarrass his genin.

“Hayate, this is Haruno Sakura, one of the genin from my team. Sakura, Gekko Hayate. He’s a friend of mine.”

“Don’t get too confident.”

The rebuttal was broken off by a wet cough that the man covered with his hand. His voice was low and raspy, without much inflection or emotion. He didn’t look too good. It wasn’t very reassuring.

“It’s… It's nice to meet you, sir.”

For some reasons, that made Kakashi laugh, as the man’s eyes widened in surprise.

“…You too. You can call me Hayate.”

Could she? Doubtful. She nodded.

“Sakura here asked me to be trained in kenjutsu.”
She blushed, caught off guard by Kakashi broaching the subject so bluntly. At least he was the one talking – it had been hard enough voicing it out to him, she would never have been able to ask a stranger.

“Is that so? But she just made genin, didn’t she?”

“She had excellent chakra control and she breathed through the basic techniques. I admit my hands may be a bit… full, with the rest of my team, and they don’t have the same progress at all. Besides, you’re the best the village has to offer in term of kenjutsu teacher. I’m rubbish at it.”

Hayate arched an eyebrow, either at the blatant flattery, or the fact that Kakashi most certainly wasn’t “rubbish” at anything.

“You get it,” he said, waving off the other man’s doubts with a dismissive hand. “She also has a decent level in taijutsu, and she’s a dedicated student. She won’t waste your time.”

Sakura was all but burning up in embarrassment now, at the praises and the scrutiny. She knew Kakashi was trying to convince the other man, but it was still nice to hear him being so flattering – she’d ever dare say a little proud.

Even when he was trying to get rid of her. She understood that she couldn’t get private teaching during their team training, that it was too specific a request and needed to be handled separately, but she wasn’t clear on the reason why he couldn’t do it, apart from the fact that maybe he just…

Didn’t want to.

Sakura really wanted this though. She needed this.

“Why do you want to be trained in sword-wielding then?”

She was a little out of it and she needed a second to register the question was for her. She stammered a bit around her words, blood still rising to her cheeks, but she answered nonetheless.

“I like it. We had a mission. I just had a chance and… You can do something, with a sword. You can’t be helpless. You can protect others. It’s not like the rest. I don’t have a lot of chakra, and I’m not very strong, but I want to fight. And to… to end fights too.”

Kakashi was sending all three of them to do a mandatory psych exam, because of what had happened in Wave Country. She had killed two men – she would have to talk about it. He had asked how she was feeling, if she was affected, and she was, but she wasn’t losing sleep over it either. She had talked about it with Ino, because she was the only one she felt comfortable having that discussion with, and they had agreed that it was just a part of their life. She hadn’t attacked with the intention to kill the two mercenaries at Tazuna’s house, but she had felt relieved, once they were dead. She hadn’t needed to worry about them anymore after that.

“Plus, you can scare people with a sword,” she added quickly, unwilling to linger on the matter.

“I don’t think she’ll settle for a tanto,” Kakashi laughed, “that’s why I brought her to you.”

Hayate observed her for a moment longer, assessing, and she did her best to bear his judgment without squirming.

“Yugao will like her,” he said eventually. It sounded like a good thing, if the small smile softening his face was anything to go by.
“Right? It could even be your first date. Joint training. That’s romantic.”

“Kakashi. Please shut the fuck up.”

“Hayate, language! Think of the kids.”

Hayate and Sakura rolled their eyes in perfect synch.

“See,” Kakashi said, “you’re getting along already.”

Training was cut short the next day, because Sakura was training with someone else, and Kakashi had “things to do”. Sasuke cast a puzzled look at Naruto gathering his things too.

“You’re leaving?”

“Why would I stay.”

“We could train some more.”

Naruto shrugged, indifferent.

“I have my own training to do.”

“Do it another time. Stay here. Spar with me.”

“I don’t want to.”

“We can…”

“I don’t want to spend time with you.”

Sasuke’s mouth stayed hanging but he didn’t find a word to say. Naruto shuffled around, ill-at-ease. Often he looked like he regretted the words that had crossed his lips, but never did he try to take them back.

“Why not?”

“I don’t… have the time. I have other things to do.”

“Like what?”

Naruto huffed, exasperation rising as Sasuke kept pressing. He wouldn’t let go though. Things couldn’t go on like that. He didn’t want them to.

“Things. Leave it.”

“No.”

Naruto was destabilized by his sudden insistence. He was used to Sasuke giving up after a few tries – Sasuke didn’t like to be forceful. It didn’t matter much if Naruto wasn’t in the mood, there was always next time.

But now, things were different. Now time passing was distance growing between the two of them. Naruto would take no more step forward. If Sasuke stayed put, he would only keep getting further and further away.
The other boy turned around to leave. Sasuke went to stand in front of him.

“Let me go.”

“No.”

“What the hell Sasuke? What do you want?”

“I just want to help.”

“I don’t need your help. What do you think you can do for me?”

No answer came to his mind. There had to be something… But he couldn’t think of it.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” Naruto spat like he had proven a point somehow. He had proven shit. He tried to sidestep him. Sasuke moved too, getting closer. They stood almost chest to chest, in each other’s face. Naruto’s eyes were burning with fury.

“You can’t fix this, Sasuke. There is nothing you can do. This is how things are, and you can’t change them. You can’t change me.”

“I don’t want to.”

Naruto huffed a disbelieving laugh. He took another step forward, menacing, all but breathing in Sasuke’s air. Sasuke had learned his lesson though. He didn’t budge. Naruto grabbed his collar, pulling him in.

“Leave me alone.”

“No.”

“Sasuke!”

Naruto tried to shove him away, but Sasuke grabbed his wrists to keep his balance. It didn’t work – they both tumbled backward, Sasuke’s back hitting the rocky ground hard enough to knock his breath out of him, as Naruto crashed on top of him.

Naruto grabbed his collar again, lifting him up to bring them face to face. He was furious, and he was trying to be intimidating, hoping to scare Sasuke away, but all Sasuke could see was that split second right after he had come back to himself on the bridge, the unfathomable depth of his grief and loneliness, and nothing could erase it from his mind.

“What’s wrong with you?” Naruto yelled to his face. “Why can’t you just let it go?”

“I don’t want to,” Sasuke gritted.

Something occurred to Naruto then. He sat back on his heels, freeing Sasuke's legs from under him. He looked serious and resolute and that made Sasuke fear was he was going to say next.

“You said you would stay away. If I asked.”

Sasuke's heart skip a beat before picking up the pace, as his own words echoed in his memories.

He had said that, hadn’t he?

“Well then…”
“Don’t do that.”

“I’m asking. Leave me alone, Sasuke.”

And to be sure Sasuke couldn’t argue any further, to put an end to that conversation without confronting it in any way, because he was a coward and he had to know he was wrong, Naruto slid the mask on his face again.

He wouldn’t talk anymore. For all intent and purposes, he was already gone. Sasuke had the urge to smash the damn thing to pieces, because he needed to see Naruto’s face, and to hear his voice, and to know he was here, he was alright.

But he had said that. He had said he would respect his wishes. Naruto couldn’t hope to convince him that he truly thought he would be better off on his own, but wasn’t assuming to know better about his own feelings exactly the problem?

Would it be better if he complied then?

If he stayed away?

Hm. No.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter, Sasuke is gonna pull Naruto’s head out of his own ass, it'll be great. It's been a long time since we've had a heavy emotional discussion/fight around here right? Okay no it's not been long but what can I say, it's my jam.

Yeah so I should say I don't hate Orochimaru that much. I think he's fun, by far the most entertaining villain of the show. He's so over the top, I know he's bad heh, I'm not saying I'll have him be a good guy or just a misunderstood victim here, but I'll still have use for him, beyond mean-evil guy.

Thank you all for your support!
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Sasuke can't just do nothing.

Chapter Notes

Here we go again. I don't understand how these chapters are so long and yet the story doesn't move one bit... I told my sister I would need AT LEAST two chapters between Wave Country mission and the Chunin exam and she was like "...why??". I don't know why. That's just how things are. In the manga it's like - two pages. ¯\_(ツ)_/¯

This is starting to get tricky plot-wise. I'm scared I'll miss a scene that I'll need later. Planning isn't my strongest suit so... That's also why chapters take longer to come out (that and, y'know, life). I told someone on tumblr that the chunin exam will kickstart on chapter 21... Make that 22 people haha. Enjoy tho!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Naruto used to be good at this.

He had done it for years, most of his life really. Going to school on his own, training on his own, eating on his own. Going for days at ends not excharonyv and jealousy for the proximity and warmth he saw in other, but it was a pain that was dull, ever-present but manageable, something he had accepted as an inevitability. Something he didn’t know, therefore couldn’t miss.

He used to be good at this.

Now he couldn’t bear it.

He no longer went to eat snacks with Sasuke and Sakura after, he slipped away as soon as they were done with training or some stupid, useless mission. He no longer hung out with them when they had nothing to do. He barely talked to Shisui, let alone any of the other people that gravitated around his house. It shouldn’t have been so hard, but it was, it was.

It was so absurd. To be missing his friends.

Sasuke constantly looked on the verge of talking, of reaching out, but he didn’t. Sakura didn’t either, even if for her it was more out of anger, he believed. She didn’t understand, and what she didn’t understand made her mad.

Naruto shouldn’t have cared so much. He had far more important things to focus on, first and foremost find a way of taming the beast, of learning control. He couldn’t afford to be so distracted.

Knowing that didn’t help. Nothing did.

To make matters worse, the frustration it caused didn’t work in his favor at all. The fox had taken
up to mock him constantly, ridiculing his desperate attempts at keeping the distance between him and his friends.

Naruto was almost starting to agree with it. It would have been easier to feel nothing at all.

Shisui was worried about him, which was irksome too. He hadn’t said that in so many words of course, but he didn’t have to. Naruto knew him, and he knew what it meant when he did that face, when he constantly asked what Naruto wanted to eat and what were his plans for the day. Naruto had stopped seeing those as measures of control or surveillance. Shisui was just… Fretting.

Naruto would never get used to it.

He had decided to stay, in the end. He was still pondering over it, but living with Shisui definitely had its perks.

Most notably, since Naruto was supposed to be under his supervision – understand surveillance – the number of shinobis tagging his ass anytime he took a step out of the village’s residential areas had dropped to a round zero. He didn’t know if they expected Shisui to keep him under house arrest or if they had just decided the Uchiha knowing about his comings and goings was enough but in the end, it meant that Naruto was relatively free to wander the village’s land – as long as he didn’t cross the wall, of course.

Shisui wasn’t interesting in monitoring his every move. Naruto didn’t even lie anymore, didn’t say he was going to train with Sasuke or study with Sakura or paint with Sai. He said “I’m going to the forest” and Shisui knew not to expect him back until dinnertime, or even breakfast the next day, when Naruto ended up sleeping under the trees and the starry sky.

Naruto went to the woods to practice fuuinjutsu in peace, or just to be alone. He went to the most remote areas, where he had the least chances of crossing path with another living soul. A human one anyway.

He had stopped being weirded out by the wildlife’s inexplicable fondness for him. The deer randomly straying into the clearing he was practicing in to eat grass and hang out five meters away from him, the occasional birds landing onto his scrolls and picking at his snacks, or even nesting into his unruly hair while he was meditating.

He had been woken up from a nap one day by a small red fox getting cozy on his chest. Dislodged by his living mattress sitting up abruptly, the thing had only leveled a haughty glare at him, outraged, it seemed, not to have been allowed to sleep in peace.

*Is this your doing?* he had asked the other fox, the one that napped inside, not out.

That bastard had only laughed.

It was worse since he had become something of an unwilling protector of these creatures. The foxes could only be found deep in the woods, in the most secluded places, and Naruto had found out that it was because while other animals were generally left alone in the forest, it wasn’t the case for the foxes. Villagers hunted down the occasional deer, rabbits or wild boars for festivals and holidays, but the foxes…

He had stumbled upon two men trying to catch one with a kunai one day. The small, scrawny thing was trapped by the trees and their fast throwing, they were dragging it out. When he had asked what they were doing, they had said that seeing a fox was a bad omen, but that killing it would
bring them good fortune.

They had both taken a paralysis seal to the nape of their neck.

Since then, the foxes always came to him. They laid down on the dead leaves at the foot of the nearest tree and slept or judged silently Naruto’s attempts at sealing. They came with friends, or family – how could Naruto know – and they generally ignored his presence, but if he moved, they followed.

Naruto was past wondering at this point.

They left him in peace at least, something none of the humans he knew were capable of doing, which put all the animals above them in his book. These creatures welcomed him here for some reasons, trusted him in a way they didn’t trust other humans. He didn’t know what that said about him and his own humanity, but he couldn’t see it as a bad thing.

So Naruto went to the woods. He had his favorite clearing, in which he was steadily building stacks of weapons (stolen) and snacks (also stolen).

A sanctuary, of sorts.

He was making good progress with his seals, which alleviated some of the frustration brought by his standstill over the demon fox problem. He had an inkling that maybe the seal had been weakened by the outbursts in Wave Country. Damaged somehow, enough that he had trouble shutting the fox down now, enough that it was always there, hovering at the border of his mind. He had been timidly looking for seals that resembled the one he had on his stomach, but he was reluctant to get into it properly.

If he messed it up… He couldn’t risk weakening the seal even further, or worse, break it for good.

He couldn’t risk unleashing the Beast on Konoha. Again.

*I don’t see why that would be so bad.*

He didn’t even bother answering anymore.

There was something else he had been willing to work on ever since Wave Country. He had had to ask Shikamaru, again, not just because he was the smartest people to whom he could talk, but mainly because Shikamaru had no care in the world about anything. If he found it weird that Naruto came to him at random to ask for kanjis, he couldn’t be bothered to question it or care in any way. Naruto wasn’t worried about being reported.

Besides, asking the boy for kanjis like “Summoning” wasn’t too suspicious since it wasn’t something they had ever been taught in class. Sure, he had raised an eyebrow at Naruto needing to be taught how to write “Fox”, but again, Shikamaru didn’t have it in him to get curious about it. A wonderful quality, in Naruto’s opinion.

With the right kanji in hand, it hadn’t been hard to find the corresponding seal again in Kakashi’s scroll, lifted from his pouch during training a few days before. Some ninja they were, all those easily robbed jounin. At least Shisui was starting to get better at spotting Naruto’s wandering fingers. Naruto should have been teaching classes, honestly.

He had copied down the seal on one of his own scrolls, making a few adjustments here and there, just so that it was a bit more pleasing to the eye. Most of the seals he had encountered were kind of ugly – except the ones in the scrolls marked with the red spiral, which were the best by far. He had
replaced the dog kanji with the fox one everywhere he had recognized it – his practice of fuuinjutsu was pretty experimental, generally speaking. A good thing he had so much chakra to waste.

He had gathered that blood was required for summons. The only thing he missed was the hand seals.

At the time he hadn’t been paying much attention to what Kakashi was doing, and he was paying it now. Was is the Boar first? Or the Dog? He was pretty sure the last one was the Ram. Did Kakashi *have* to make his hand signs so fast?

He tried several combinations, with no success. There was no way to know if he was messing up the hand signs, the seal itself, or anything else. Fuuinjutsu, he had found, was way more complex and intricate than most other ninja arts. It could work in a lot of different ways, and could fail in just as many, with no way to know for sure why.

“Summoning! Oh come on!”

The scroll remained stubbornly blank. The young fox that was grooming its fur a few feet away looked up mockingly, as if to underline the fact that it couldn’t be bothered to travel that small distance to pop up on the seal. Naruto glared at it, to no effect.

He formed the signs again, but before he could slam another attempt on the scroll, a noise behind him made the fox scrambled away and himself jump on his feet, alert.

“It’s Boar-Dog-Bird-Monkey-Ram, if you must know. But you’ll get nowhere without a contract.”

It was a woman. Middle-aged, blonde, tall and muscular, with an angry frown on her face, swaying slightly probably thanks to the bottle clutched in one of her hands. He had never seen her before.

“I didn’t think I’d find someone here. I used to come to be alone, and train in peace,” she said, making a gesture that englobed the small clearing.

“Find yourself another spot,” he shot back, defensive. He wouldn’t let go of this place without a fight. It was his favorite on account of him being the only one knowing it. Or so he thought.

“Oh, don’t worry, I will,” she deadpanned, not looking particularly pleased about it. She took a long swing from her bottle, before letting out an inelegant sigh and wiping her mouth with the sleeve of her green haori.

She leaned against a tree trunk with a roan. Naruto didn’t think she was that much impaired by her drunken state though. He didn’t approach her.

“So yeah, a contract,” she said, falling back on their previous topic of conversation. “Otherwise anyone could summon any animal at all time. That would be a pain.”

“What kind of contract?”

“Somethin’ like a pact. So that they will come to your aid. You have to give them something in return. Can be anything, chakra, protection, your soul after you die… Be careful to read the contract first. Animals can be rightful bastards.”

With these words, she bit down on her thumb and signed so fast he couldn’t even decipher it, her hands a blur as they went through the combination. She slammed her hands on the ground and there appeared…
“A slug?” he scoffed. It was quite big, about the size of one of his scrolls, but it was a damn slug, white and slimy. The woman barked out an ugly laugh.

“Yeah, a slug. Don’t underestimate it. In fact, don’t underestimate things in general, brat. Think about it, if I went through the trouble of contracting with them, it has to be for a reason.”

That made sense, but he couldn’t think of a single one.

“So… oh, foxes? Never seen fox summons before. But anything goes, I guess.”

She was leaning over his hand-drawn scroll spread on the ground, poking at it with interest. Naruto rolled all of them quickly to hid them back in his hoodie, out of view.

“I didn’t know they taught seals in Konoha now,” she slurred.

“They don’t,” he answered warily. He didn’t know whether to be careful about that woman or not. She wasn’t threatening, but he could tell she was powerful, far more than her youthful appearance and rude demeanor let on.

“Yeah, it figured. Why would they start doing anything sensible.”

He let out an involuntary scoff. She took another sip out of her bottle.

“Oh!” she exclaimed. “I get it. You’re the demon fox boy, aren’t you?”

Naruto tensed up all over again. She wasn’t wearing a headband – was she not a shinobi? It seemed unlikely. And she looked like she knew Konoha. But he had never seen her before.

“Is it the whiskers that give it away?” he asked lightly, even if he had a death grip on the chakra sealing scroll in his pocket. She barked a humorless laugh that caught him off guard.

“Ha, no. These have nothing to do with it. I’ve seen ‘em before y’know. But Izumi talked a lot about you.”

In his surprise, Naruto forgot to be careful.

“You know her? Is she back?”

“Hm hm. Completed her mission veeery well. Look. I’m here.”

He knew Izumi had been looking for someone. Was that this woman? Six months on the road to bring back a drunken hag?

They were interrupted by a distant voice breaking the whispers of the forest. Screaming.

“Tsunade-hime! Tsunade-hime, where are you?”

The stranger cursed.

“Dammit, already? I need to up my game it seems.”

“Go away.”

She raised an eyebrow at him.

“Excuse me?”
“Get out of here! I don’t want them to find this place!” Naruto said, too panicked to sound as firm as he would have wanted to. She grinned.

“Only if you let me come back here.”

“This is my spot!”

“I was here first.”

“If it was a hundred years ago, it doesn’t count!”

Her eyes twitched and she crossed her arms on her chest, not decided to move. Naruto listened worriedly at the voice getting closer.

“Alright fine, fine! We’ll… we’ll share. But only if you teach me summons.”

“Deal, baby boy.”

They even shook on it, and she offered him her bottle. He grimaced, disgusted by the smell. She let out a booming laugh before drinking some and turning around, ready to meet whoever it was that was looking for her.

“Who the hell are you anyway?”

He thought maybe he had heard the name Tsunade before, but he couldn’t remember where. She fixed her brown eyes on him, way too intense and focused for someone seemingly half-drunk, and for a moment she looked both incredibly angry and impossibly sad, looked like she wanted nothing more than to lay down on the floor and never get up, or turn around running and never stop.

For a moment, Naruto felt very close to her.

It broke off when she grinned, without any trace of joy.

“My name’s Tsunade, brat. And I’m the new boss of this dump.”

There was a light knock on his bedroom door, and despite Sasuke appreciating the effort of not barging in without warning, he was busy sulking over Naruto and wasn’t in the mood for company.

“Go away, Itachi.”

He groaned as the door slid open anyway, but it wasn’t Itachi standing behind it.

“Well is that a way of welcoming a retuning shinobi…”

“Izumi!”

He was up and tumbling over her fast enough she barely had the time to brace herself, before he was slamming into her, crushing her into a brief hug before taking a step back to look at her.

“I didn’t know you were back today,” he said, while trying to look for injuries or any sign that things had gone awry while she was away. She only looked a bit tired, but otherwise, she was unharmed.

“I know, it wasn’t scheduled. I came back this morning and scared my mother to death, and now I
came to greet your family. I only crossed path with your father though.”

At least he had let her in, Sasuke thought.

“My mother is training her team, and Itachi is… around, I think. I’m not sure.”

“Well, at least you’re here,” she said with a smile. “How are you?”

Sasuke opened his mouth. It was a simple enough question. It wasn’t even a real one. Just a conversation opener, the one everyone said all the time. He just had to say he was fine. Even if he wasn’t. But he was. Wasn’t he?

“Sasuke?”

“We went on a mission and it went really bad.”

She sat him down on his bedroom floor, and he told her everything. Everything he hadn’t told his parents, Itachi, Shisui, and the medic-nin that had assessed them a few days ago and deemed them all fine and good to go. He didn’t even pause to wonder if she knew about Naruto, if it was a good idea to tell her. Surely she did, and even if she didn’t… Izumi wouldn’t judge. She would be good about this.

She would know what to do.

So he told her how scared he had been and how bad he felt now, how Naruto didn’t talk to them anymore, how he hid behind that awful mask and grew more distant every day.

“And there’s also…”

He activated his Sharingan, to show her.

“Did you gain it during your fight?”

“I think so, yeah. I didn’t… really noticed.”

In fact, he hadn’t even known he had manifested a second tomoe in both of his eyes until days after their return, when he had been studying his Sharingan in the bathroom mirror. Most likely, it had sprung to life when he was trapped in the ice prison with Naruto, trying to keep up with Haku’s movements.

He hadn’t told anyone. He didn’t feel like bragging about it. He would have rather have a first level Sharingan still, if it meant they hadn’t gone through this.

“You’ll need specific training to get used to the additional strain on your chakra system, and to adjust to your new reaction time.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“But you haven’t told anyone.”

He shrugged. Having to get into details about what had actually happened in Wave Country would be as bad as bearing his parents’ enthusiasm about his developing Sharingan. He didn’t want to deal with either.

“I don’t like this. I don’t like… I don’t like things to change.”
“You can’t help it. Change is inevitable.”

“I know that, it’s not… I want things to change. Some things. But I want it to be because I decided it. Because I made it happen. I don’t… I can’t control anything. I don’t have any power.”

He could have learned about Naruto’s condition in any number of way. Someone should have chosen to tell him. He could have reached the next stage of his Sharingan through steady training, instead of during a fight for his life that had resulted in Naruto being deeply hurt, even if he had not been injured. There were still so many things his family didn’t tell him, and so many things he didn’t know. He hated that feeling, of being helpless, of only being carried away by the flow, unable to act, to do anything. Naruto had pulled the rug from under him, he was the one who could decide, Sasuke could only watch.

He hated it.

“I can’t do anything.”

“Yes you can. You can, Sasuke. Naruto… he may look like he knows what he’s doing and what he wants, more than you do, but he’s not. He does need help, just like you do, just like anyone else.”

“He doesn’t want my help.”

“Then you have to figure out what he needs.”

Sasuke blinked away his Sharingan before focusing back on Izumi and her gentle smile. She was rubbing his back, he hadn’t even noticed. It was nice.

“You have to find something you can give to him, something he can’t get on his own. What do you think he wants, right now?”

“Apart from being left alone?”

"Being left alone isn't his goal. Why does he want that?"

"Because he… he’s scared."

"Of what?"

"Losing control."

He looked numb, these days, Naruto. He was no longer angry at everything or excited about anything. He kept it all on lock, carefully hidden. He only looked scared.

“What you have to do,” Izumi said, “is make it so that he can’t refuse your help.”

For all that he didn’t want to make friends and approach people in general, Naruto had no qualm about asking others for what he needed. He had done so with Sasuke, years ago, to get stronger, and with Sakura too. He had done so with Sai, and Ino, because they were the only ones who could get him what he wanted.

Back then Sasuke was the best student in their class. That’s why Naruto had approached him in the first place. Because Sasuke could help him. And it didn’t matter if that’s all it was at first, because Sasuke could do the rest of the way. He had managed to become his friend, despite his reluctance. He could break through Naruto, once more, he could make himself impossible to ignore.

He had let Naruto down on the bridge. He had been unable to help, to be there when his friend
needed him. So now Naruto thought he could do without him. And that wouldn’t do.

“You’re really good at this, Izumi,” he said, grateful and a little awed. She beamed.

“I do my best!”

Lost in thought, Sasuke couldn’t shake the feeling that he was forgetting something essential. He looked around him, trying to trace back the thread of his thoughts, before it dawned on him.

“I’m sorry, Izumi, I didn’t even ask you… How did your mission go? What were you even doing?”

Her smile tightened a little. She let out a nervous chuckle.

“Well, you see…”

“Tsunade-sama, please, please quit it on the disappearing act. At least for the first few days? Please.”

What could Tsunade do, faced with these pleading eyes? She was lucky Shizune was largely unaware of how efficient her whining was on her mentor. It was a weapon Tsunade wasn’t eager to put in the young woman’s hands.

“I just wanted to have a look around. This place has changed quite a bit.”

“Everyone is waiting for you.”

Tsunade rolled her eyes but followed obediently Shizune sprinting to the Hokage Tower. Half a day they were here and Tsunade was done already. She wanted to go lie down in the woods and stay there until the local fauna was so used to her presence they would nest on her chest and eat her hair.

“Today or tomorrow, what does it change? I’m here now. Stuck for good. I’m not going anywhere.”

There would be plenty of meetings, she trusted. She would miss plenty and still attend plenty more – she wasn’t so keen on taking a head start.

“You have to introduce yourself,” Shizune berated, as she would a reluctant teenager, a habit Tsunade didn’t call her out on because she found it endlessly amusing. “Besides… The Sandaime asked to see you.”

That darkened her mood for good.

Her mind was in shamble – she didn’t know what to feel. She was happy and eager to see him, she had always been fond of him and he had taken good care of her and her brother when they had no one. But if she was back now, forced away from her self-imposed exile, it was to fix his mistakes, it was because he had failed. He was her mentor, her teacher. Seeing him so fallible… The only thing she could have maybe leaned on, gone. She was utterly alone in this.

“Tsunade-sama, please, hurry up!”

Well. Not quite. Despite the stress, despite her worries, Shizune was happy to be back, it was obvious. Strange, because she had even less attachment to the village than Tsunade had – she was so young when they had left, and she had never expressed any regret, anything she missed and
wished to go back to.

Homesickness was the strangest thing. And very badly named. Tsunade was the homesick one – she was home, and it made her sick.

She was submerged by memories, of wandering these streets, of times long gone. They were different of course, barely recognizable at times, but there was no mistake possible. It was the same place.

They went up the stairs toward the Hokage’s office and she was six again, running around the corridors, getting reprimanded by the chunin working the assignment desk. Nawaki was here – his legs were too small, he couldn’t keep up. Tsunade went back to haul him up on her back so that he wouldn’t miss a thing. She was already stronger than most.

Or she was a little older, fourteen and pissed at another boring mission at the border. She was dragging both Orochimaru and Jiraiya behind her, so that they could go whine to her great uncle for more exciting missions.

War was at the door. But she didn't know that yet.

Or she was even older, and she was dreading yet another unproductive meeting about limited resources and bad news from the battlefield. But at least Dan would be there. He would sit by her side and support her claims – or make them for her, if it was another women-shouldn’t-talk-about-war day. She wanted that stupid meeting to be over already, so that they could go to her place and cuddle under her covers.

Or she was walking the corridors dressed all in black, mourning. Which time? Her parents, her brother, her lover, her friends? There had been so many. Sometimes there were joint funerals, six for the price of one. Sometimes there was none at all. People went missing, and eight months later someone raised their head from their paperwork and pondered aloud, “I wondered what happened to…”

She was twenty-nine, and she was leaving this place for good, never to return.

“Tsunade-sama?”

She was fifty-four. She was back. She was becoming Hokage.

“Sorry. I got lost in thought for a second.”

Tsunade felt guilty about the amount of worrying Shizune did over her. The girl was frowning as usual, forehead creased, wrinkled before its time. She would have liked to believe Shizune would get some peace, now that she no longer had to look after Tsunade, but that would have been a lie. Tsunade didn’t want her to leave her side, but most importantly, Shizune wouldn’t budge.

Not yet. One day, maybe.

“Are you alright?”

“Can I ask you a favor?”

Shizune squinted, confused, but she nodded.

“All those years you’ve called me Tsunade-sama, when there was really no use and no one else did. Now that it’s all they’ll be doing, would you finally take to calling me Tsunade? Please?”
In other circumstances, Shizune would have argued – they had had this discussion before, many times. Things were different now though. Things were changing.

“I’ll… I’ll try. Tsunade.”

Just another thing to get used to.

“And okay. Let’s do this.”

They had arrived at the last floor. The corridor ended on the open doors of the Hokage office. Even from the other side she could see all heads turning toward the stairs, impatient, trying to get a look. Turning on her heels and marching right out wasn’t an option, she knew. And yet, what a nice idea to entertain, even for just a second.

The thing was, when you were running away, you could never stop. If you stopped, even just a second, it was over. She had been running for more than twenty years, but as soon as she had just considered slowing down, turning back, it was already over. She could no longer run.

So she marched on and entered the office, careful to look much more confident and in control than what she felt. It was an instinct that came to her easily – being taken seriously was hard enough. If she looked like she doubted herself, it was a lost cause.

“Good afternoon everyone. Sorry for the delay.”

She didn’t offer an explanation or further excuse, and they grumbled but didn’t comment.

“Welcome back, Tsunade.”

Her old teacher was still sitting behind his desk. It seemed impossible to believe that she would soon have to think about it as her own. That this would soon be her office. Her mess.

She nodded respectfully, but now wasn’t the time for heartfelt reunions. Not with such an audience.

She took her time to look at each of them. They were young, in her eyes at least. In their late thirties, most of them, looking serious and invested like this truly mattered. She recognized the Uchiha, the Hyuuga, the Nara… and this one, he looked familiar too. Sakumo’s son, maybe? Anko had mentioned him. She was here too, probably kept waiting after delivering her report. She didn’t look too pleased about that. Akimichi, Yamanaka, Aburame, Inuzuka – the only woman among the clan head. Ah, well, one was better than none at all. There were even younger faces behind them, jounin in their uniform, and further behind, the impassible Anbu masks fixed on her.

They were young too, those under the masks – she didn’t need to see their face to know that. The boy in the forest had had a mask too, tied to the side of his head. For a moment she had thought it was from the Anbu, and she had been angry, but it wasn’t.

A meager comfort – that kanji on the forehead…

She had the feeling she would keep making unpleasant discoveries for the weeks, maybe months to come.

She was displeased to see old Homura and Koharu sitting in a corner, assessing her openly. After the fiasco with Danzo, she would have thought the old council in enough disgrace that she wouldn’t have to deal with them at all. All wasn’t lost though – from the configuration of the room, from where everyone was standing, form their withdrawn position on the chessboard, she could infer that they weren’t the ones holding the cards right now. That was one good news, at least.
There was a bit of a shuffle among the clan heads, when the Yamanaka seemingly pushed the Nara to speak up despite the man’s reluctance. They were young indeed. Most of them were barely genin when she had left, their face vaguely rang a bell, but she would have been hard-pressed to put a name on any of them.

“Tsunade-sama, I trust that you know why we’ve asked of you to come back,” the Nara said, cutting right down to it. She appreciated his lack of manners – unlike some of his colleagues, judging by their expression. She nodded.

“And… Do you accept?”

It didn’t sound like a formality – they were genuinely wondering. They didn’t know her, so they couldn’t know that her being here was answer enough, that she wouldn’t have made them the courtesy of coming back to refuse the offer.

She still had a way out. She could still say no. Turn away. Forget about all this.

She looked at Anko, her sulking face, the impatient rhythm she was tapping with her foot, anxious to get out of there. She looked at Sakumo’s son and his absent father. She looked at each clan head, reluctantly hanging on to her every word, wishing for changes, for things to go their way for once. She thought about Izumi, cheerful and full of hope, about her family and friends she had kept babbling about the whole way back to Konoha.

She thought about the boy in the forest. His resemblance with Nawaki was uncanny – expect Nawaki had never worn such an expression of defiance and bitterness on his face.

“I do.”

Tsunade was officially done with running.

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Training wrapped up in the same dull, depressing mood it had these past few days. Kakashi could act as if nothing was amiss all he wanted – it did nothing to alleviate the tension between Sasuke and Naruto, and between Naruto and the world at large. Sasuke supposed that the man was as much at a loss as Sakura and himself in ways of breaking through Naruto’s thick skull, but Kakashi was their teacher. He was supposed to be better than them. He was supposed to know how to handle this.

“What happened between you two?” Sakura asked for the umpteenth time. Sasuke once again opted for a shrug in lieu of an actual answer, angering her again and further degrading the team mood.

She raised an expectant eyebrow at him, fed up with being kept out of the loop.

“He’s an idiot and a coward,” he said, loud enough to be heard by the other boy. Naruto huffed and puffed but didn’t retort. Sakura huffed too, irritated. Sasuke didn’t have a better explanation for her though. That was, in essence, what had happened. Naruto being an idiot and a coward, and Sasuke failing, again, to snap him out of it.

They had spent the day weeding grass and washing shop windows, back on the dullest missions that were genin’s lot in life. There was no telling when they would be sent out on a real mission again – Sasuke was split between being upset and relieved. Having a repeat of the Wave Country mission wasn’t exactly what they needed right now.
Not that this was much better. The days passed and nothing changed. Sasuke and Naruto didn’t address each other in any way. Sakura made meager attempts at engaging with them both before giving up in exasperation, Kakashi tried to lift their spirit to no avail. Sasuke’s mood only worsened as the days passed and Naruto made it clear that he was very serious about his claim from that time by the river. It was absurd, to be missing his moody complaints and his dry mocking of everything they saw or did. Sasuke wasn’t much of a talker, and he would have said that Naruto wasn’t either, and yet this silence, it usually wasn’t there between them.

Sasuke was starting to feel threatened by the possibility of truly losing Naruto’s friendship, and he didn’t like that one bit.

The thing was, at the end of the day, Naruto was his best friend. He was his best friend out of the two whole friends he had, and the idea of losing him filled him with dread and anguish.

He thought maybe Naruto felt the same, but by confronting him, Sasuke took the risk to discover he didn’t. He wouldn’t run away from this though, no matter how scared he was. He wanted to know, and he wanted Naruto to know too, to be sure, to say it aloud.

He was surprised by Sakura’s lack of insistence, but soon understood where it came from – Ino was speed walking toward them, trying and failing to look detached instead of excited.

“Hello, Ino,” Kakashi greeted with an amused smile, surely because he knew what her answer would be. It didn’t fail – she squinted at him, suspicious, and only offered a stilted “hi” in return. Ino was openly hostile to anyone above the age of twenty, sparing no one her rude demeanor, including important people or her own jounin instructor. Sasuke wouldn’t have been able to get away with half the things she pulled off, but her father’s constant reprimand meant little to her.

Sasuke found her equally infuriating and inspiring. Kinda like Naruto.

Her face morphed into an excited smile as soon as she looked away from Kakashi and back at Sakura.

“I took care of everything, we can go today!” she whispered with an air of great conspiracy.

“Really?” Sakura asked, looking very pleased. Ino confirmed with a nod, pride shining through her smug expression.

“Sasuke, Naruto, you should come with us!” Sakura exclaimed, overly enthusiastic. Ino didn’t look so eager, but she didn’t protest. As far as she was concerned, Sakura could do whatever she pleased, ask whatever she wanted. Ino would work to grant it to her.

“Where?” Sasuke asked, curious despite himself.

“I got my father to take me with him to meet that woman,” Ino said, pleased as punch. “The one who is going to be the Godaime.”

“You’re not supposed to know about that yet…” Kakashi chided without much conviction. There had been no official statement, and yet Sasuke doubted there was anyone in the village who didn’t know about princess Tsunade and the reason for her return to the village.

“Are you in?” Ino asked, ignoring the jounin.

Naruto answered first.

"I'm not going to the Hokage Tower if I don't have to. Besides, I've met her already."

"I'm not going to the Hokage Tower if I don't have to. Besides, I've met her already."
His expression of complete boredom couldn’t quite hide his satisfaction at his friend’s gaping faces.

“When?” Ino demanded, incredulous and pissed off at him getting the honor first. The woman was all everyone was talking about, but no one had even gotten a glimpse of her, except those allowed into the Hokage office. The genin knew who she was, of course – the stuff of legend – but that only made them more eager to meet her in person.

“In the woods. Chance meeting.”

With the amount of time Naruto spent there, it was actually believable.

“Urg, fine. Sasuke?”

“I’ll pass too.”

It was his turn to be gaped at. Of course, he also wanted to meet princess Tsunade – if only to assess the competition. If her reign was even half as long as the Third’s, she would be the one he would receive the Hokage seat from. But she wasn’t going anywhere, he would have plenty of other chances to meet her. It could wait.

Talking to Naruto, however, couldn’t.

“You’re no fun,” Ino said dramatically. “Whatever then, your loss. Sakura, let’s go!”

The girl cast a wary look between Naruto and Sasuke. He nodded at her, trying to convey some sort of reassurance, although he wasn’t that confident himself. There was a non-negligible possibility that this would blow up in his face. It was a risk that had to be taken.

Sakura left with Ino, the two girls chattering with obvious excitement. They shared a level of intimacy and complicity that Sasuke couldn’t help but feel envious of. He didn’t see himself ever sharing that kind of bond with anyone.

Kakashi departed too, no doubt to drink alcohol with the other jounin instructors, so that they could complain about their genin. Naruto made to leave too.

Sasuke stopped him, planting himself in front of him.

“Fight me.”

Naruto had a feeling Sasuke would try something again. He was still startled by his bluntness.

Sasuke was not interested in being subtle anymore – or in simply ignoring things until they went away, like Naruto did all the time. Why, why couldn’t he just let it go?

“Fight me.”

“No.”

Naruto tried to sidestep him – of course Sasuke didn’t let him. But this time, instead of dancing around the subject, instead of trying to talk again, Sasuke directly jumped to the next step.

He punched Naruto.
Or well, he tried to. Naruto had no choice but to block, and to hit back, just because. They exchanged a few more hits – it was ridiculous how easily they could fall into it. Fighting with Sasuke wasn’t ever painful or unpleasant, even when he didn’t want it. It felt more like dancing maybe, something they did together, not one against the other.

It didn’t change the fact that he didn’t want to.

“I’m not in the fucking mood, Sasuke, stop it!”

“No.”

He should have been able to just walk away. But that’s not how it worked. Besides, Sasuke wouldn’t let him.

If he had to knock him out to get his peace, then so be it.

The problem was, Sasuke was familiar with most of his tricks by now. He knew all the seals he used in sparring, and he even knew about his favorite moves and combinations. Granted, the reverse was also true, even more so because Sasuke was more predictable than Naruto, not as good at improvisation. That didn’t mean he was easy to beat.

“Sasuke!”

Inevitably, Naruto was getting angry. And inevitably…

What a brat. Want some help with this?

He tried to stomp down his rising unrest, but it made him lose focus on the fight. He wasn’t used to trying to reign in on his emotions while fighting. It was among the few moments where he could uncoil, let go.

But not anymore. He had to stay calm, had to.

Sasuke was making that hard though, fighting dirty, making sure to be as infuriating as possible. He brought out the Sharingan when Naruto puffed out some extra shuriken from a scroll, and the red eyes never failed to make him feel uneasy.

“Sasuke, stop it!”

“Why?”

“Because I…”

They had moved closer to the tree line. He attempted to focus on his chakra flow, to climb one and put distance between Sasuke and him, but unlike sealing, which he could do in his sleep, practicing this kind of control, even on such a small level, was only fueling the fox’s ploy.

Red chakra slipped through the crack, mixed with his own. He lost his footing and crashed on the ground, hard. It only added to his growing rage.

“I can’t… You have to leave me alone. I don’t…”

He couldn’t say it. “I don’t want to lose it, I don’t want to hurt you.” He didn’t want to say it aloud. Didn’t want to admit how scared he was.
“Yes, you can.”

“What?”

Sasuke’s fist broke through Naruto’s guard, making him stumble several steps backward.

“You can control it. You have to, right? That’s what we’re doing.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Isn’t that what you want?”

Naruto frowned.

“That’s none of your business.”

“Yes it is.”

“Why?”

“I’ll help you with it.”

They had good practice of bantering while they fought, and they were barely out of breath. Focusing on Sasuke's voice and nonsense helped Naruto to tune the fox out.

“I don’t need your help!”

“Oh, so you’ll make it on your own then? How do you plan on doing that?”

Of course, trying to keep himself in check on his own wasn’t so smart, but it was still better than the alternative of having anyone else help him with it. Because what if he lost it? What if he slipped? There were good reasons why he trained as deep in the forest as he could. Had it been up to him, he would have trained a thousand miles away.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about! Didn’t you see? You saw what I did! I don’t want to…”

“You won’t.”

That certitude in Sasuke’s voice was grating on his nerves.

“You won’t, Naruto. I won’t let you.”

“What?”

“I’ll stop you. Next time, I’ll stop you.”

That gave Naruto a pause. They landed back on their feet and stared at each other for a moment. With the Sharingan, it felt like Sasuke could burrow into his very soul, get into his head.

Naruto wondered if he could see the fox chilling in there.

“You can’t.”

“I will. I’ll train too. I’m stronger than you.”

Naruto scoffed. The nerves.
“No you’re not.”

“Really? Prove it then.”

He wanted to. But he couldn’t. If he got too excited, or too worked up, or…

“Don’t be so scared.”

Naruto snarled.

“I’m not scared!”

“Sure you are.”

Naruto was the one to kick the fight back into motion, jumping Sasuke in hope he could make him shut his stupid mouth and wipe the smugness from his stupid face. Sasuke was expecting him though. They exchanged more hits, staying on taijutsu for now. It worked best when they were in that state – Naruto surely didn’t have enough brain power available for any more advanced move.

Sasuke did – he didn’t get overwhelmed like Naruto, he could stay functioning no matter the stress. But he was matching Naruto’s state of mind, just like Naruto did when the other boy wasn’t in the mood for getting punched and fell back on ninjutsu.

This was nothing like a real fight.

Nothing like Wave Country.

“What can you even do?” Naruto spat out, intent on being hurtful if that was what it took to shake Sasuke off.

“I don’t know yet. We’ll figure something out.”

“Why?”

“I’m not leaving you to fight this alone.”

“Why?”

Sasuke fell back into his standard guard. Naruto knew why he was keeping the fight going – it was the surest way of keeping them both into that conversation. Naruto wanted to walk away, but he couldn’t just give up now. Besides, Sasuke would come after him. If he wanted to leave, he had to put an end to the fight. Either by beating Sasuke or…

By surrendering.

“We’re friends.”

Why did they always say that like it meant anything. It was the same in the movies – “because I’m your friend”, “because I love you”. What did it even mean? Why was it so important?

Sasuke’s hands flew into the hand signs of his fireball technique – Naruto could only identify it because he had seen it countless times. Otherwise, Sasuke was signing too fast for the seals to be easily identifiable.

He was getting better.
Naruto jumped sideway – the fire followed him. He cracked out a scroll, determined to suck it in, but the fire changed course at the last moment. Up until recently, Sasuke could only change its general direction. Now he had such control over it that he could have made it into an art show.

“Katon! Fire Dragon Jutsu!”

The head of the fireball took the shape of a great dragon, its long, sinuous body curling into the air, chasing after Naruto. He didn’t have any ninjutsu to counter it. But he had seals Sasuke had never seen before.

Sasuke had the fire dragon chase after him because he believed Naruto was running the training ground at random. He wasn’t though. He was drawing a very specific pattern, running up to specific points. Dropping a hand on the ground as if he needed the support to take the sharp turn that helped him escaped the dragon. Dropping a hand on the peaks of a five-point seal.

He ran back to the middle of the pattern. Sasuke wasn’t caught in it, which was preferable, since Naruto wasn’t exactly sure what it could do to an actual person. He slammed the final seal on the ground.

The dragon vanished, chakra sucked in the ground by the large seal. Gone in an instant.

Sasuke didn’t take the time to be surprised. He stepped forward to drop back into Naruto’s space, but…

“Don’t!”

Sasuke staggered as soon as he put a foot into the seal. Naruto sped toward him and shoved him backward, hard, so that he was no longer caught in its influence.

So that’s what it did to people. He would have to think back on its intensity if he didn’t want to kill both his enemies and his teammates from chakra exhaustion.

He went to check on Sasuke, but that bastard had already recovered, and he tackled Naruto to the ground. This time he was the one to pin him down, to keep him from getting back up. And unlike Naruto the previous time, he had no intention of running away.

“You’ll never be strong enough to fight that thing,” Naruto said, a little angry and a little pleading, maybe.

“Isn’t that what you’re trying to do? Why couldn’t I do it, if you could?”

“It’s not the same! I have to. I have to or…”

“If you can do it, I will too. I’m serious. I’ll stop you, Naruto. And if you can’t do it, I will still. I won’t let you down.”

“There’s no way…”

“I’m going to be the next Hokage! Do you think I can't handle your sorry ass?”

Naruto pushed Sasuke back until he was sitting on his heels. He sat up to face his friend. Sasuke looked dead serious, determined, but angry too, frustrated. That made two of them.

He wasn’t… entirely wrong though.

What if Sasuke could stop him? When Naruto couldn’t stop himself? Of course, Kakashi could too,
and anyone with these paper seals. He ought to steal one and see what they were made of. Just in case.

But if it was Sasuke, it was different. Because if it was Sasuke who had this power, if Sasuke could go against the fox taking over his mind, then it was okay.

If it was Sasuke, Naruto wouldn’t have to worry about waking up in a cage.

How?

How what?

How can you trust that he won’t do it? Why is he different?

Naruto couldn’t answer that.

I just do. I trust him.

It had never occurred to him how true that was.

“Naruto?”

Coming back to himself, he saw Sasuke was staring at him, brows furrowed, looking worried. He didn’t know what it looked like from the outside, when he got lost into talking with the demon. It was probably very weird.

“It’s not what you think,” he said, because if they tried this, Sasuke had to know. Naruto had to tell him. It would be a good test. It would tell him everything he needed to know about how Sasuke truly felt about it.

“What?”

“It’s not… I am scared of losing control, it’s true. But more than that… I’m scared of giving in.”

Sasuke’s confusion only increased. Naruto looked away, itching to slide the mask on, to hide his face. He knew they hated it. He knew they would have smashed it to pieces had it been an option, and he knew they didn’t understand why he felt the need to hide behind it.

They couldn’t understand. It wasn’t about hiding, not really. Not from them anyway.

But when he had the mask on, it felt like he wasn’t exactly there anymore. He wasn’t exactly himself either. What he could hide from were his own thoughts and emotions. He wasn’t part of the world then.

Actually, he was back in that clearing, in the middle of Wave Country’s lush forest. It was peaceful and calm, and Haku was there, smiling softly, quiet but supportive all the same. He could even hide from the fox, that way. He could turn his back on it, keep its voice out, keep everything out.

Now wasn’t the time for hiding though. As scary as it was, he had to stay in plain sight. He had to face Sasuke.

"I didn't lose to him, back then. The Kyuubi… it didn't take over.”

“Then what…”

“I asked him to come.”
They probably looked a little silly, sitting in the middle of the training ground, disheveled and out of breath. Sasuke was very still, his eyes riveted to Naruto’s, intense and unwavering. The red had faded away, but he didn’t look any less focused. The black was just as deep, just as mesmerizing.

“I wanted to get out of the ice, and you… I needed to get us out. So I let him come.”

That one, terrifying second when he had thought that maybe that was it, maybe Sasuke was dead, it had been all it took for him to surrender, to let the demon take the lead. Naruto would have done anything then, to get revenge, to inflict the pain he was feeling. Even letting the Nine-Tails out. Even killing them all.

That was what truly scared him. People would die, it was inevitable. People would get injured and killed in front of him. He didn’t trust himself to fight it then, to resist.

And if he didn’t trust himself, his only option was to trust someone else.

“You… You can talk to it?”

"It is in my mind."

Sasuke gaped at him, dumbstruck.

“I thought… I thought it was like a wild animal. I didn’t think it could talk.”

That was a fair point. Naruto had been talking with the fox ever since he had discovered its presence, so it had never seemed that odd to him. But in the stories and history, nothing had ever hinted that the Nine-tails was anything more than a feral beast.

Turns out it was a feral beast that was, in bonus, super annoying.

You’re the annoying one.

“It’s my fault,” Naruto said, because Sasuke looked confused but not angry or scared as he should have, he didn’t seem to get it, didn’t understand. “It’ my fault, if it came out. It’s my fault if Haku died.”

He didn’t expect anyone else to give two fucks about the death of the teenager, but Naruto could think of nothing else. He longed to be back to that moment in the woods, to hear Haku’s voice and see that beautiful, androgynous face again, smiling softly, looking sad but at peace, content. But he had killed Haku, with his bare hands.

Sasuke nodded seriously, as if to show he was hearing it, was taking in the weight of Naruto’s words. But he didn’t draw back and he didn’t leave. He stayed right where he was, and just as determined.

“We’ll know now. We’ll figure something out, and we’ll know what to do. It won’t happen again.”

Sasuke wasn’t much interested in being reasonable. He just said this stuff, and he believed it. Maybe it was arrogance, or stupidity, or sheer stubbornness, but he just had absolute faith in the fact that what he wished for would come to pass. Failure wasn’t ever an option. Things had to go this way. They just had to.

For Naruto, who couldn’t believe anything could ever work in his favor, it was extraordinary.

He had to test it though. Just a little more. Just to be sure.
“Didn’t I told you to leave me alone?”

And he had almost meant it too.

Sasuke’s eyes narrowed, he looked lost in thought for a moment. The skin on his left cheek was starting to darken and swell from an earlier kick. There was also a bit of blood at the corner of his mouth, and the usual red, dry patches that appeared around his lips when he breathed his fire techniques for too long.

Naruto couldn’t look away.

“I know. And I will. If you ask again, I will, I promise. But that doesn’t mean I’ll give up on you.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’ll still be there. I’ll still watch your back, and I’ll still work so that you don’t have to be scared anymore. I told you I wasn’t going anywhere – even if you are. If you turn back, you’ll see me. I’ll be there, I will.”

Naruto was convinced he could bring Sasuke to abandon him for good. He had ideas as to where he could push and press, an instinct on what he could say that would truly cut deep, that would really hurt him, enough maybe that he would finally give up. He could do it, if he wanted to.

“No matter what?”

“Hm.”

Sasuke didn’t believe he could. Sasuke thought they would be friends forever.

Naruto had to battle the urge to find out who was right.

Sasuke rolled his eyes, getting impatient.

“If it’s so hard for you to believe, just tell yourself I do it out of concern for… other people. Someone has to watch you, since you’re so dangerous. I’m only doing my duty.”

Sasuke thought it was laughable. To Naruto, it was a much better an explanation.

Either way, that’s what they could say, if people ever asked. It was more logical. It was easier to swallow. Sasuke was just too dumb to see it.

“You can’t tell anyone. About what I told you.”

“The Nine-Tail talking to you?”

“Yeah. I’m serious. You can’t tell. Not to Itachi or Shisui, not to Izumi, not to your parents, certainly not to Kakashi, or anyone else. Alright? They can’t know.”

If it came out that he could summon the thing at will, that he could chat with it and that they could influence each other, they would put him back in the cage for good. They would fear him even more.

“What about Sakura?”

There was a form of accusation in Sasuke’s voice. Naruto pondered about it.
“…I’ll tell her. Not you.”

Sasuke didn’t look convinced – for good reasons. But Sakura would ask questions, she would want to get into this in depths, and Naruto couldn’t handle it right now, her curiosity, her urge to study and understand. She wasn’t scared enough for his taste. Sasuke would be more cautious. And he wouldn’t want to talk as much.

“Alright. I won’t tell.”

Still, Naruto could refuse. He could reject Sasuke once again and keep going as he had, keep trying to figure things out on his own. A part of him kept insisting it would be the smarter move, that involving Sasuke was a terrible idea, both because they risked injuring him seriously this time, and because giving him that kind of power over Naruto was properly terrifying.

But on the other hand…

It really was no fun. Being alone.

And if he failed and no one was there to catch him in time, he would blame himself forever. It would be selfish to refuse the offer. He needed to know someone else could step in.

He needed to know, if he ever hoped to sleep again.

“Oh okay.”

Sasuke startled.

“Really?”

“Yeah. Let’s do this, Sasuke.”

And maybe, maybe he had another reason for agreeing.

The crease of worry splitting Sasuke’s forehead in half smoothed over, he relaxed at last with an audible sigh, and he even smiled a little, relieved, content, determination shining in his dark eyes as he held Naruto’s gaze, promising that they would, indeed, do it.

And Naruto couldn’t regret his choice then. Because he had another, simpler reason.

Maybe, for once, Naruto just wanted to please his friend.

The single thing that was fortunate in this situation, and the only thing standing between Tsunade and the sweet release of being on the run, was that most of the clan heads and jounin she had to deal with seemed to, amazingly enough, maintain a vague semblance of social and family life.

Oh, she had no doubt they would spend the night in the Hokage office if they could. But between husbands and wives, kids and colleagues, friends and relatives, it was rare for any of them to linger past dinnertime. They obviously weren’t very pleased about it, but seemed to mutually hold each other to it. If the Nara wanted to stay, there was always the Akimichi or the Yamanaka to push him out the door. Yamanaka Inoichi had even ushered in his own brat earlier, paired with another girl with bright pink hair, who were just "dying to meet princess Tsunade”. Both of them were thoroughly enthralled by Tsunade’s mere presence.

Cute kids.
The Hyuuga and the Uchiha were stuck between competing for most stable household and most
invested councilor – she could play them both on that string if she wanted some peace.

The jounin took turn reminding their fellow shinobi to go home and sleep.

It was subtle, but they simply took care of each other. At the end of the day, the one who went
home the last was the Hokage himself.

There was no one coming to collect him. She had gathered that his wife had died on the night of
the Nine-Tails’ attack, and his relationships with both his kids were rather tensed. He even had a
grandson, an angry little thing that wreaked havoc in the village and had jounin chasing after him
at all times. Whether to make his absent grandfather's life harder, to gain his attention or to shake
the weight of his name off of him was anyone’s guess. She knew from experience it would most
likely get worse before it got better.

So Hiruzen didn’t go home, and she didn’t either.

She couldn’t fall asleep before midnight and she tried to walk the streets only when they were
empty, wary of meeting people, known or not. For now, she and Shizune slept in the apartments
meant for foreign guests, close to the Hokage Tower. She didn’t want to think about settling down
anywhere just yet.

All this made for long, awkward evenings of shared labor in the office. Hiruzen wanted to put all
affairs in order before stepping down, and was walking her steadily through the duties she would
have to uphold. Even if, she expected, there would be some changes to this, with how involved the
clan heads wanted to be now. She didn’t mind, on the contrary.

Less work for her.

He was explaining diplomatic relationships and ongoing commercial trades to her, but they had yet
to just talk. Talk for real, about personal matters, feelings and all that shit. Tsunade was more than
fifty – she didn’t like it, but she was aware talking things out was a necessity.

Before, she would have expected him to launch the conversation. He was the teacher, it was his
job. But they were both adults now, and she no longer knew what she could hope from him.

She couldn’t focus on what he was saying, something serious and boring, while they had so much
to discuss. When she had so many questions.

“What happened to Orochimaru?”

That was the other reason why it was a bad idea for her to be starting any kind of important talk.

He stopped mid-sentence and finally looked at her properly. She realized their gaze had barely
crossed since her arrival.

“What happened with him? And with Jiraiya? Why aren’t they here?”

Somehow she hadn’t truly believed her friends wouldn’t be in Konoha until she had been faced
with that harsh reality. They were both gone. She was alone.

“Jiraiya is a spymaster now. He has his network to maintain, he’s always on the road.”

“Why?”
“I think after the war he wanted to keep moving. He could never have contented himself with a more administrative position and… well, neither of them was interested in building up another team.”

She didn’t want to believe their friendship had not survived her departure. And yet…

“Then he was chasing after Orochimaru. And then, when that failed, he took to keep an eye on him, as well as any other outside threats. You know we suspect foul play in the Kyuubi’s attack.”

It was all so factual, emotionless. That didn’t tell her anything about what could have gone through Jiraiya’s mind, what he was thinking, why he was doing this.

“And Orochimaru then? Why isn’t he here?”

Why did you let him go?

Hiruzen had the good taste to at least look guilty.

“I should have kept a closer look on him,” he admitted.

“You think? You knew he was like this. You knew he had to be watched.”

“Don’t you think I had many other preoccupations at the time, Tsunade?”

“Don’t take that tone with me. I am not a child anymore. I am not your student.”

“You will always be. All three of you.”

She huffed, displeased – because he was right. She still addressed him as such, she could never take to calling him Hokage-sama. He would remain Sarutobi-sensei. There was no changing that.

“Alright. Why didn’t you form someone else then?”

His face hardened but he didn’t answer.

“Why is there no one else to succeed you? If we were all a lost cause – and we were – why didn’t you train someone else? Why does it have to be me?”

“I always wanted one of you to take on the hat.”

“But we didn’t want to!”

He raised an eyebrow at the outburst and she made an effort to calm herself. How she hated those people who thought raising your voice meant losing the argument. She had a loud voice, dammit. And she had emotions, like normal people did.

It had always seemed so unfair to her. Had Hiruzen formed this particular team with that goal in mind? If so, what had he seen in them, to believe it was a good idea? And if not, why was it supposed to befall them then? She knew it had always been somewhat expected of her to at least want to become Hokage, just because of her family. But she didn’t want it. She was not caring enough and selfless enough to be a good leader. She just wasn’t interested. And neither were her two friends.

“Orochimaru did,” he countered calmly. She scoffed.

“Oh really? He did? Orochimaru? “I have more fingers than people I can stand” Orochimaru? “All
Hidden Villages are the same” Orochimaru? What would he had even done with that? Why would he have cared?”

“I’m not the one you ought to ask that.”

“I don’t need to ask. I know. Orochimaru wasn’t after your seat. He may have hungered for power, but he had no interest in ruling.”

“Being Hokage would have allowed him to act as he pleased.”

“From what I heard, it was already the case.”

Had the old man not lost two thoughts about it? Being Hokage would have driven Orochimaru mad as much as Jiraiya. It was one of the most ridiculous claims she had heard.

“He just wanted to know he could do it. Just like with everything else. He wanted to be considered for the job at least, nothing more.”

“You don’t know that. You weren’t there, Tsunade.”

“I know him.”

Maybe they had only been a trio of idiot kids in his eyes, but her two teammates were among the people who counted the most in her life. Always together, the three of them, always one against the world. And she knew them. She knew them, as she knew herself.

“What he wanted was no more than what he always asked of us.”

“And what was that?”

“A reason to stay.”

She had lost count of how many times he had asked, especially when they were away in foreign countries. “Why don’t we just leave? Why are we going back?”

Always they would have to find an answer for him. “It is our duty. We swore to it. They need us back then.”

Eventually though, the one that worked was always the same.

“We need you.”

He had never felt like he belonged in Konoha. By many aspects, he didn’t. But he belonged with them. It was enough.

Until they weren’t there anymore.

How ironic, that he had ended up being the one who stayed the longest. War and loss had driven her out of Konoha, disgusted by how meaningless it all was, but it had worked just fine for him. He maybe even liked it better this way.

Comforted in the knowledge that things like morals and justice were pretty damn flexible after all.

Tsunade had skimmed through the report of his activities. It was sickening, dreadful… and all authorized officially by Root, all overseen by Danzo himself. Orochimaru must have been delighted to be endorsed by the – second – highest authority of the village.
After all, “we’re just following orders” had been a favorite of his. When orders went his way. He would have said he was just obeying. And to shinobi in general but to him especially, whose sense of compassion and morality was all but nonexistent, it was absolution.

She was convinced he didn’t even think he was doing anything wrong. It was authorized, so it was fine. That’s how he operated.

Then, of course, Danzo had jumped ship, denied it all, as soon as they had been found out. Orochimaru had been told that no, after all, it wasn’t good at all. And no way was he going to stay and face consequences he had thought himself safe from.

Dumb fucking idiots.

“And that shit with the Uchiha then? What the hell, sensei?”

He frowned at her language but mercifully didn’t reprimand her.

“Things got out of hand,” he said lamely, looking back at his papers, as if she was going to let him escape that particular topic.

“Yeah, no shit.”

“Don’t think for a second that you’re above this, Tsunade. You will have similar choices to make, sooner than you think.”

“I won’t choose this.”

He grimaced, pained.

“It wouldn’t have come to pass.”

“Are you sure about this?”

The others seemed pretty convinced Danzo would have seen his plan to completion. Hiruzen was the only one who still believed it was some kind of misunderstanding. How was it possible to have a blind spot this big?

She wondered then how big hers was, when her old teammates were concerned. Were they all doomed to make similar mistakes?

A world of good did teamwork do to them. Maybe they ought to reflect on that.

He smiled at her, and she knew the conversation was over. He wouldn’t discuss that with her. Maybe it was for the best. What more was there to say? There was no changing the past.

“I do wish the circumstances were different. But I’m happy to see you, Tsunade.”

She couldn’t bring herself to return the sentiment. They had all believed she would be back eventually. That it was just a phase, that she would get over it.

They didn’t understand – she had been fully committed to never stepping a foot in Konoha ever again, until the day she died. Did he think she had finally seen reason? That she had finally changed her mind?

She hadn’t.
She wished he could have been able to provide comfort, to soothe her torment like he used to. But 
that, like many things, was long gone.

“You should have trained someone else.”

He sighed his “why are my students so stubborn” sigh, but he didn’t try to deny it.

Chapter End Notes

When you think about it it's crazy that there was no one to take the Hokage's spot at this point, besides two wandering shinobis traveling around and never seen in the village.

Is Tsunade too indulgent toward Orochimaru? Maybe. But I do believe there was real love between the three of them. And also, I don't think she had such a strong moral compass either. She's from the war generation, and she's more pissed that he could do his shit in the first place right under everyone's nose than for his actual crimes. That's not to say she won't try her hardest to kick his sorry ass when they meet again...

In which we learn that fuuinjutsu is like computer programming. Why did it work? Dunno. Why didn't it work? Dunno. I've been meaning to give Naruto fox summons for a long time. He'll be friends with Tsunade cause she'll hide in the forest with him and teach him cool stuff instead of working.

I really like that "Sasuke is stupid stubborn" headcanon. That guy is a riot. We always focus on Naruto claiming he'll be Hokage, but like, Sasuke stating he'll kill Itachi is no less hysterical. I don't think it was dumb optimism on his part. More like he couldn't tell himself anything else. Sasuke doesn't do self-doubt x) He's like a bulldozer. Straight through.

Next time we'll TALK about the chunin exam, and then we'll finally get into it ^^ I'm happy heh.
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

This is a "on with the next arc" chapter.

Chapter Notes

So, as you may have seen on my tumblr if you follow my rambling, I almost postponed this chapter because I got a classic "when is update" comment just as I was finalizing it, so I didn't want to post it because I didn't want to like, make it look like this kind of comment actually works. But then I got a very nice and long one, so I figured I could post for that person instead. The thing is, I don't like not to post when my chaps are ready, and I AM feeling bad about the delay, even if I know I shouldn't, cause I don't owe anything to anyone and I just have life going on y'know.

So please remember that your local fanfic writer is a human with things to do and if you're going to inquire about the next update at the very least drop a kind word about how you like their work first. In my case chapters take longer because I'm busier but also because I'm probably having a drop in inspiration/motivation, and it's really not that kind of demand that are gonna solve that...

ANYWAY, done with the ranting. I'm not actually that mad you know, in the end I'll post no matter what! This has been a PSA. Let's move on to the Konoha shitshow, shall we? I hope you'll enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was a game they were used to playing by now. They sat on their knees around the table, picking at their plates in silence or exchanging inane chit chat, very deliberately ignoring the terrible mood hovering on the whole room, be it Itachi being especially quiet, in that way he had to give his brooding a physical presence, or their parents being mad at each other for one reason or another, or just their father angered by whatever had happened during the day. One of them would be sulking hard, sucking in the cheers, and Sasuke and his mother would be left to attempt battling it, to try to launch a conversation and lighten the heavy atmosphere, often to little success. No one was to ask what the problem was exactly. No one was to broach the subject causing turmoil. Better to act as if everything was fine. Better to say nothing.

This time though, it was Sasuke who was responsible for the gloom.

He had always wondered why the others couldn’t just make an effort, just for the duration of dinner, so that they didn’t impose their brooding on the whole family. But he was finding that hard to do it himself now. He just didn’t want to pretend. He was upset, and he didn’t know how to fight it.

And it seemed that the game rules didn’t apply to him, because soon enough his mother laid a hand on his shoulder and asked a concerned “Sasuke, what’s wrong?”
His thoughts kept circling back to his last conversation with Naruto. “There is something we have to try”, he had said that afternoon at the training ground, reluctant but determined. “With the Sharingan”.

According to Naruto who had heard it from Shisui, the Sharingan could grant power over the Nine-Tails. That was the reason why Naruto had gone to live with Sasuke’s cousin in the first place. That was probably the reason why Naruto was so miffed by the Uchiha’s dojutsu.

“You didn’t know that?” Naruto had asked.

No, no, Sasuke had not known that.

It wasn’t so long ago that Sasuke just went to his mother when he was upset. There was nothing back then that he felt he couldn’t tell her. He didn’t use to think she wouldn’t answer his interrogations, or worse, answer with a lie.

Now though…

“You know, when I was little, I hated leaving the Uchiha district.”

He raised his eyes from his bowl to look at his mother, knowing he also had his father and brother’s attention now. They weren’t the ones he was hoping any straightforward answers from though.

“What do you mean?”

“I just didn’t like it. With the others we would go to the fields behind the district instead of the playgrounds near the Academy, because it always felt like… Like we weren’t really welcome there. People looked at us weird. The other kids weren’t allowed to play with us.”

Another unspoken thing that had never been mentioned in any way. The few times he and the other Uchiha his age had tried to inquire about it, they had just been told that it was nothing, that they needn’t concern themselves with it, or even that they were just exaggerating.

“It stopped. After a while,” he added. He tried to decipher his mother’s expression, to understand what she was thinking, but she was no more expressive than any other member of their clan, and he couldn’t tell.

“Really?” she said, missing casual by about a mile. He waited, just to see if she was going to add something. She didn’t.

“I always wondered why it was, why we were in such bad terms with the rest of the village, and the other clans.”

The thing was, kids talked. Among themselves, they exchanged and debated, so no Uchiha kid was stranger to that state of fact, nor were the ones outside the clan. Those rules were supposed to be unspoken, but they had spilled all the same. He had never witnessed it being truly antagonizing, but that was mostly because they did abide by the rule. The Uchiha stayed clear of the other kids and their hanging spots. It was just how it was. Until it wasn’t.

Sasuke had always wondered about it, as he had wondered why all the parents, Uchiha or not, but Uchiha especially, were so adamant on them never approaching Naruto.

“The Sharingan grants control over the Nine-Tails.”
Sasuke had asked though, he’s asked his parents only a few days ago about them being told to avoid Naruto.

Had they lied then? Again?

“There was a lot of political tension at the time. It’s true we were badly viewed for a long time. But we worked those things out.”

It didn’t look like she was going to add anything.

He understood that something like this would be a delicate matter, that they couldn’t just spill it to anyone. He did. But he wasn’t anyone. Itachi was twelve at the time all of this had shifted, the age Sasuke was now, and he was involved in the clan’s inner working, he was even present to the clan’s meetings.

Why couldn’t they just tell him?

“You always said I couldn’t become friend with Naruto. Couldn’t, as in it wasn’t allowed,” he insisted. Naruto had told him he had to find out more about this, because maybe that was the key to finally earning him some peace of mind. He looked exhausted these days – he slept badly.

Sasuke wanted to help, he did. But he didn’t want to tell his parents that he knew about it. He wanted them to be honest on their own. He wanted his mother to tell him the truth.

“What does it have to do with Naruto?” his father interceded.

What indeed? Sasuke almost said. He refrained.

Maybe they wouldn’t be on board at all with what he and Naruto wanted to do. If he was right, if this was the reason why the village distrusted the Uchiha – an extension of the way they distrusted Naruto really – then weren’t they getting exactly into what they feared? Sasuke had no interest in actually controlling anyone. All he wanted to do was give his friend some reassurance that someone would be able to stop him from going on a rampage without meaning to.

If his parents wanted to play dumb and treat him like a child, he would just do that without their support.

“Nothing,” he answered.

He was so disappointed though. What did he have to do, that they would start to take him seriously? That they would stop seeing him as an unruly brat that couldn’t be trusted with anything remotely important?

They had never shied away from including Itachi in everything.

Dinner resumed in the same awkward silence, as Sasuke resolved to find out answers on his own.

“Do you think he knows?” Mikoto asked worriedly as soon as Fugaku joined her in bed.

“How could he? Who would have told him?”

“I don’t know. But his questions were specific.”

Fugaku sighed heavily. He wasn’t home much lately, caught up both in the handover and the
increasingly disturbing news they got from various spies and observation missions around the Great Countries. Tales of unaffiliated shinobis too strong to be handled by bounty hunters, wreaking havoc with no discernible patterns.

He had a hard time concerning himself with Sasuke’s moodiness, while being very aware where that kind of dismissal had led him before.

He didn’t know how to balance it all.

“He will know in time,” he declared. They had had long, exhausting arguments about what route to take with Sasuke, after the disaster with Itachi and Danzo. Mikoto was adamant that he be left out of the politics of the clan, but they hadn’t factored in the fact that he would want to be involved.

One thing was for sure, neither of them was looking forward to having to explain to their righteous son their own failings and shortcomings. With the benefit of hindsight, the village’s mistrust toward the Uchiha clan and the clan’s reactions to it painted neither group in a good light. Sasuke was so intransient – how could he swallow this? What would he think of all of them?

There was also the matter of Itachi’s involvement. Sasuke finding out about that particular issue kept their oldest son awake at night. They all wanted to keep Sasuke blissfully unaware of the ugliest side of their clan’s history. But maybe it was just wishful thinking.

“In time,” Fugaku repeated. They would need to have this conversation sooner or later. Soon, not now. They still had time.

Mikoto agreed, but she didn’t really look any less worried.

Tsunade was in a warm and wonderful place. Maybe she was on an empty beach, soaking up sunlight in a very small swimsuit, or even naked. Or she was drinking alone on the patio of a small house in the mountains, admiring the landscape with only the chirping of some birds to disturb the peace. She would even have settled for being in the forest with the bratty jinchuuriki, who was, at the very least, fun to be around.

One thing was for certain, she wasn’t in the Hokage office waiting for the jounin facing her to be done arguing which one had the most important report to communicate or paper to be signed.

Not at all.

She was forced back there though, when Aburame Shibi had to restrain Inuzuka Tsume from jumping… Damn, she couldn’t remember the name of that one.

“Tsunade, which one do you want to hear first?” Shibi asked, and she had to admire his complete lack of involvement in a situation where he had a gesticulating Inuzuka woman locked in his arms.

“I have not been listening to a single word any of you have been saying in the past ten minutes. No, you know what, make it twenty.”

That got her the attention of everyone present, even if they were now united in their annoyance at her lack of interest. Was it her fault if they were all so damn boring?

"Alright, listen up. I asked you to tell me what was urgent. As in, what I need to take care of first. I would like everyone here to make an effort and understand that if you tell me every little thing needs to be done immediately, some issues are going to arise, on account of me having only one
brain and two hands."

She knew she really wasn’t working in the right direction if she wanted them to trust and appreciate her, but frankly, neither were they. Did they act that way with Sarutobi? She doubted it. Then again, did he even hear them at all? Maybe he left that to someone else. Or just let them do whatever. Or nothing. She had no idea.

“Now, which one of you is going to lay claim on the most important thing to deal with right now?”

Unsurprisingly, no one peeped up. Why did this feel so much like teaching a bunch of unruly children?

“There is the Chunin exam.”

All heads turned toward the back, the group parting to reveal to view the jounin who had spoken. It was a young man with a senbon between his teeth, making a good job at looking disinterested even if he had half the clan heads and jounin of Konoha staring at him.

“What about the Chunin exam?”

“It starts in two weeks and little to no preparation has been undergone to organize it,” he deadpanned in a very professional voice for someone who was throwing barely veiled criticism at everyone around him.

“You are?”

“Shiranui Genma, Ma’am.”

“Well, Shiranui Genma, I like how you think. Alright people, new top priority is set.”

They started to protest, of course.

“Is that really what you should be focusing on?” Hyuuga Hiashi asked with that clan specificity all the Hyuuga had to be perfectly polite and supremely condescending at the same time. Or maybe it was just a man in power thing.

“As a matter of fact, I think it is, yes,” she said sweetly. “Because in the ocean of letters all marked with the same level of urgency that I have on my desk, look what I found this morning.”

She unearthed a scroll from the small mountain threatening to spill over. The seal was broken, but still recognizable.

“That’s…”

“The Kazekage seal, yeah. Raza of Suna has expressed interest in attending the exam this year. I seem to recall relationships with Suna have been steadily improving these past few years, correct? The Mizukage of Kiri’s attendance isn’t written off either. It is the first major cross-country event Konoha will host in, what five years? Six? And you were the ones to tell me we had to do something about Konoha’s still depleted forces. Plus, a Chunin exam involves the whole village, it’s a fucking party, and that will allow me for some visibility. We can double it as a handover ceremony and save us the trouble of setting up two distinct public spectacles. So yes, I think this is what I’m going to focus on.”

For all that they whined about getting more responsibilities, of the Hokage delegating some duties to them, they were still incapable of handling things without her approval first. Well, that would be
trial by fire.

“Go do your own things. I want reports on your activity, but you don’t need my signature on every last piece of paper you come across. All of you have expressed interest in tackling particular issues. Well go for it. And leave me alone.”

Seriously, what did they expect her to tell them about rice price and the state of Konoha's road? She had been back for the whole of one week. And she really didn’t care. She had no intention to babysit the whole Administration, it was about time they got their own hands dirty.

“Shiranui Genma. Since you were the one to speak up about it, I’m putting you in charge. Congratulations.”

The man’s face betrayed nothing of how he felt about that, contrary to all those around him. The clan heads present cast both him and Tsunade an incredulous look. She sighed. She was tired already. She needed a drink.

“I’m not putting this in any of your hands. One-off diplomatic events of this type won’t be put to the credit of a clan. Am I making myself clear?”

Maybe it was because, for all intent and purposes, she didn’t have a clan anymore, but she had no patience left for their delicate sensibilities. She appreciated their involvement and she knew she would need their help, but she wasn’t willing to put more power in their hands than she had to.

Besides, they really had other things to be worried about.

“I’m counting on you to handle your respective duties,” she added, to soften the blow somehow. Did the Uchiha, busy with the police force, or the Yamanaka, handling most of the Intelligence, think they had time to play party planner right now? She had to laugh.

They finally, mercifully decided to leave her alone, leaving only young Genma behind, looking longsuffering.

“You’re not going to make any friends like this,” he commented off-handedly.

“I’m not here to make friends. They’ll get used to it.”

“Or depose you.”

“See? It’s a win-win situation.”

A corner of his mouth raised just a bit, and another reason why she preferred to deal with clanless shinobi was that they just had a way shorter stick stuck up their ass.

“Anyway, I hope for your sake that you spoke up about this because you already had something planned,” she said as she gestured for him to take the seat in front of her desk.

“As a matter of fact, Tsunade-sama,” he answered, popping open a storage scroll that immediately burst with a stack of annotated paper high enough to rival her own annotated paper stack, “I have.”

Maybe she was the one who would regret this.

“Alright. Again.”
“Yeah just… just give me a minute.”

Naruto huffed, displeased, and Sasuke kicked him in the leg to the best of his abilities with both of them sitting cross-legged on the mushy forest ground.

“The Sharingan consumes a lot of chakra okay?” he said, irritated.

“Some ultimate technique you guys have that it leaves you dead tired after barely an hour…”

Now really wasn’t the time to fight, Sasuke told himself as he kicked Naruto again. That would be a waste of energy. Besides, he knew that Naruto was just trying to set him off. The fact that it was working only made it worse. It was a vicious cycle.

“You literally have nothing to do here but to sit on your ass while I do all the work, so shut the fuck up.”

“I have to endure looking at your ugly ass dojutsu. That’s work enough.”

That earned Naruto another kick, albeit a softer one. Truth be told, it was hard for him to sustain the scrutiny of the Sharingan. It was obvious how he wanted to avert his gaze, look away, but he didn’t. He stayed stubbornly motionless as Sasuke stared inside of his eyes, trying to break through to his mind, as he had been taught.

It was easier said than done though. And he didn’t want to raise suspicion around him by showing a sudden eagerness into learning about the Eye of Hypnotism.

He had just been able to dig up some scrolls in his father’s library, pertaining to the functioning of the Uchiha clan’s dojutsu. They would have to make do with it.

“Okay, I’m good. Let’s go again.”

He was honestly feeling a bit dizzy, but he didn’t want Naruto to call him a weakling again. Besides, he was close to getting it, he could feel it. Just a little more…

Usually, this was a skill best trained with another Sharingan user – their eyes were more open, more easily breached. Ironically, the Sharingan biggest weakness was probably another Sharingan. Sasuke focused all his attention on Naruto’s eyes, letting them grow bigger and bigger, until they filled his entire field of vision, and then…

It was like plunging into a pit. He felt himself falling into darkness, even though he was aware that his body wasn’t actually moving.

He found himself standing in a vast, dimly lit room, overcome by the sound of water dripping from a pipe somewhere. It felt claustrophobic despite its size, like the walls were closing in around him.

Naruto stood right in front of him. He had the dumbest expression on his face, completely awestruck. His eyes flickered toward something in Sasuke’s back.

Sasuke only had time for a glance above his shoulder – he saw bars, darkness cut in shreds by a number of bright white teeth, and two gigantic eyes filled with fury.

GET OUT.

He fell back from his sitting position and found himself staring at the forest canopy, flat on his back and ready to faint.
“Are you okay? Oi, are you okay? Sasuke, come on, are you dead?”

“’m not dead,” he sighed. He sat back up with some difficulties – there were black spots crowding his vision and he had a doubt where up actually was for a second.

“You said you’d be fine!”

“I did not say that.”

“Don’t fucking faint on me you bastard!”

Naruto looked fairly distressed, face folded up with worry as his hands hovered above Sasuke’s shoulders.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” he assured, although he wouldn’t be standing up any time soon. “So, was that…”

“Yeah. It wasn’t very happy to see you.”

The Kyuubi had knocked Sasuke right back out of Naruto’s mind. They were going to need a lot more practice.

Another day.

“I think we’re done for today,” he said, sheepish.

“No shit.”

As predicted, getting up turned out to be a bad idea, and he was only saved from a painful face-floor encounter by Naruto grabbing his arm and swiftly putting it around his shoulders.

“I can walk on my own.”

“Yeah, yeah, shut up.”

They took the way back to the Uchiha district.

It never got easier for Naruto to walk the Konoha streets. The stares and the whispers were the same, no matter what he did, no matter where he went, and with whom. Most people just ignored him as one ignores those around them, but as soon as they spotted and recognized him, there was always something passing on their face, shining in their eyes. He knew none of them. But they knew him.

He made the effort not to wear the mask when he was with his friends, for their sake. How he wished he could though.

He had the vague hope he could abandon Sasuke at the entrance of his district, but the other boy still wasn’t steady on his legs, and Naruto had no choice but to take him all the way to his front porch.

Uchiha Mikoto smiled when she saw him, although it rapidly morphed into concern when she saw the state of her son.

“He overdid it in training,” Naruto summed up quickly. It was the truth, strictly speaking. “Get
some rest, Sas’,” he ordered, knowing that dumbass could very well go back to throwing shuriken at a tree as soon as he wasn’t seeing double anymore. Sasuke was feverish and weak, even paler than usual, which Naruto didn’t think was possible, and guilt swelled up in his guts. He had been the one to push them for more, even if he knew Sasuke’s stamina was shit compared to his.

He took a step forward to knock his front head on Sasuke’s, locking their gaze.

“You’re not allowed to get hurt on my behalf, Sasuke,” he said through gritted teeth, low so that Mikoto wouldn’t hear. Sasuke frowned and wrinkled his nose, ready to protest surely. Naruto stepped back before he could, putting some distance between them, already on his way.

“Do you want to come in for a bit, Naruto? I’ll make some tea,” Mikoto called as he kept moving backward.

“Sorry, I have to go.”

He spun around so that he didn’t have to bear her disappointed look. He didn’t get why she was so intent on interacting with him. He supposed it was for Sasuke’s sake, but he had enough well-meaning Uchiha to deal with in his life.

“Naruto, hi!”

Speaking of which.

“Hi, Izumi.”

“Are you going back home? I’ll walk with you. I need to see Shisui.”

Maybe it was even true. But it was also true that the Uchiha clan had a general air of fear and wariness around him that seemed to be of a different brand than the rest of the village’s. Sasuke had made the connection right away, when Naruto had told him about the power the Sharingan apparently granted over him.

“If the village is so… uneasy with you,” he’d said, a nice way to put “hate you on sight” into acceptable words, “it stands to reason that they wouldn’t be so fond of those who could control you either.”

Naruto had vague memories of the other kids badmouthing the Uchiha when they were younger, of them never going out of their district much, except for police duty.

So yet another thing he was responsible for.

Well, the clan had a better reputation now, for one reason or another. It didn’t change the fact that they still held that particular fear of him, the one that had pushed Sasuke’s parents to try to forbid their son to even approach Naruto. In hindsight, his disobedience was even bolder than they had thought at the time.

Sasuke had seen that right away, because he reasoned like a member of a clan. Clans had always appealed to Naruto at least as much as the concept of family did, if not more. To his young eyes, clans were like an extra large family with bonus secret techniques and common goals. A place of belonging and a source of meaning – two things he craved.

Suddenly, he didn’t want to go home anymore, to go stare at the ceiling of his room while Izumi and Shisui talked and laughed downstairs. He was incapable of joining them in those moments – he could interact with them apart, more or less, but both at once, it was an impossibility. He always
felt like their relationship took so much more space, there was no room for him anywhere, not between them or anyone else. He didn’t know how to interact in a group. Sasuke and Sakura where the exception and even that didn’t go so great lately.

“You’re not coming?” Izumi said when they reached the house.

“I have something else to do.”

She narrowed her eyes suspiciously before deciding to let it go. It was even true – he had something to do, kind of.

He was going to go bother Tsunade.

“Why did no one told me it would be so damn boring?”

“Because you wouldn’t have accepted the job otherwise.”

Tsunade glared at the young man, but he seemed to be already immune to it, and just gave her a lazy smile before going back to the list of genin he was reviewing for the exam. Shiranui Genma was rapidly becoming her favorite jounin, mostly by the force of proximity – he was always hanging around her office these days – but also because he had a no-nonsense attitude that she appreciated. He was structurally incapable of playing nice, which she could imagine had gotten him into trouble with his hierarchy before. Now that he was sure he would have no such issue with her, he didn’t hold himself back at all. He was infuriating, but at least it was entertaining too.

Sage knew she needed every bit of fun she could get.

She was busy staring off into the void and the door to the office, praying for someone to cross it and offer some distraction. And for the first time in her life, her prayers were actually answered, in the form of a small blonde kid with a nonchalant air that betrayed a slight anticipation, as if he expected to be turned away.

“Well, if it isn’t my favorite brat in the whole village!”

For a boy with such a tough act going on, he was ridiculously easy to fluster.

“Bet you say that t’all brats,” he mumbled with an angry frown, shoulders hunched and hands hidden in his short pockets.

“No I don’t. Genma, tell him I don’t.”

“No, she doesn’t,” the man obliged with a faint smile. Naruto shrugged, embarrassed. Really, too easy.

“Are you busy now old ma’am?”

Genma raised an eyebrow, looking either scandalized or impressed. Tsunade grinned.

“You know what? I think my schedule just cleared up.”

“It certainly didn’t.” Genma deadpanned, sounding defeated already. She got up from her chair just as one of the Anbu patrolling the area dropped through the window, called by the telltale sound of Tsunade getting fed up with her work.
“Hokage-sama, you promised Shizune you would stay put for a few more hours,” the young man in the mask said, long-suffering.

“Something came up. Naruto here is in dire need of my help, it just can’t wait…”

“Hokage-sama… Please don’t force me to chase after you.”

"Naruto, I heard a rumor that you were pretty good at losing people on your tail,” she told the boy, ignoring the poor Anbu.

“What of it?”

“Race you to you-know-where?”

“It’s supposed to stay a secret!”

“Then make sure no one follows you.”

And without getting an answer, Tsunade jumped out of the window and took off through the roofs of Konoha.

The Anbu were good, of course, but she had spent most of her childhood pulling that exact stunt, and the village had changed, sure, but it hadn’t changed that much. She always had to attend extra lessons as a child, because she was “destined to great things” and her grandfather and great uncle saw her marching in their footsteps one day. There was nothing she wanted less though – what she liked back then was trekking in the forest covering herself in mud and study the behavior of the animals she managed to catch sight of or try to brew poisons with plants she found lying around.

Nawaki was the one destined to great things. He went to the lessons and ate that shit up, always so eager to study or train or learn just about anything.

He would have made Hokage alright.

She was already chilling in the clearing when Naruto came stumbling in.

“You’re here!” he exclaimed, as if he was surprised she could pull it off.

“I am the Hokage, brat. Did you think you could best me?”

He made a face that said he did.

“Kids these days…”

She dug up a sake bottle from between tree roots and laid down on the grass in a patch of warm sunlight, ready to take a well-earned nap. That was without counting on Naruto though, who stepped between the sun and her, making her groan.

“What do you want?”

“You said you would teach me summons.”

“And it has to be right now?”

“Are you saying you won’t do it?”

She caught something in his voice that made her bit back a mocking reply. Resignation maybe,
disappointment. Like he knew she was going to change her mind, expected it, and had accepted it already as an inevitability.

Tsunade didn’t make it a habit of disappointing children.

“Alright,” she said, sitting up. “Let’s do this.”

The surprise on his face would have been comical if it wasn’t a little worrying. Why was he so convinced she would let him down?

Doubt rapidly left room for determination on his face. His resemblance with Nawaki was uncanny, especially with this expression.

But then again, there was a chance, if he was an Uzumaki…

An impression further reinforced by his effortless grasp on seals. She had gotten only a glimpse last time, but now she could freely observe how he copied intricate seals without thinking, fixing tiny mistakes and wobbliness as he went. She had him practice on written invocation seals first, so that he could summon someone of a higher rank than the common fox. It was better to try and meet right away one important enough to sign a contract with, instead of just trying and trying at random.

“You’re really good at this,” she commented as he drew yet another summoning circle because the previous one had some mysterious defect he wasn’t satisfied him. “You’re a credit to your clan, Naruto.”

His brush froze above his paper.

“What?”

“What what?”

“What did you say?”

A drop of ink fell from his brush and splashed over the seal. He didn’t notice.

“Even if clans have their predispositions and specialties, it doesn’t make every member automatically good at it, and it doesn’t make their talent any less admirable.”

“What are you talking about?”

She frowned, puzzled about his own puzzlement.

“You’re… You’re an Uzumaki, right?” she asked, suddenly doubtful. She hadn’t had the time to dig into the boy’s history, even if she really wanted to. She figured it would come up sooner or later.

“My name is Uzumaki Naruto,” he answered.

“Yeah, so…”

“So what? There is no Uzumaki clan.”

Now how was she supposed to react to that.

“I beg you pardon?”
“I never met anyone else called Uzumaki,” he defended, probably sensing she was losing her goddamn mind.

“I don’t understand. Who are your parents?”

It was his time to stare at her, harsh and closed off.

“I don’t have any.”

“Who were they then,” she insisted, impatient.

“I don’t know!”

It felt like she had stumbled into a lucid dream or something.

“What do you mean you don’t know?”

“Is it your old age that makes you this slow? Why do you think I live at Uchiha Shisui’s place?”

She recognized the pique as the defense mechanism it was and decided to let it slide – there were far more important things to be focusing on right now.

She had wondered why the boy lived with a young Uchiha jounin. There could have been a number of reasons for that though, and none of them were directly related to the fact that he apparently didn’t know who his freaking parents were.

There had never been much Uzumaki in Konoha, but she had assumed… Were his parents the only ones left? But why didn’t he know anything about the clan he was bearing the name of?

“Are you telling me there’s not a single Uzumaki in Konoha beside you?”

He looked away pensively, debating with himself.

“Can you keep a secret?”

She nodded, solemn. What she was seeing of his behavior and what she had just learned were starting to draw a pretty ugly picture of the boy's life in the village, and she wasn’t about to add to it.

“Follow me,” he said with an air of conspiracy, before jumping up in the trees and taking off.

She ran behind him, all the way up to the top of the Hokage mountain. The sculptor had come in the morning to take the measures of her face, and it had taken most of her willpower of the day to sit through it. She had no wish to see herself carved up in the mountain with the others – firstly because she was sure she would look ugly as hell, but mostly because it felt like a travesty. Her predecessors had been put up there because they deserved it, because they had worked tirelessly to earn it, to prove themselves. But her? She was just filling in a blank. She wouldn’t be remembered like they were.

Naruto led her on a grassy spot just above the Yondaime’s head. There was a stone erected there, with flowers laid at the bottom, some fresh, some long since faded. The stone was covered with carefully carved names. It wasn’t difficult to guess what it was.

“I thought the memorial stone was right by the cemetery,” she commented, joining the boy who was squinting at the little characters, trying to decipher the names.
“This one’s special.”

“How so?”

He traced a finger on the relief of the kanji, lips pinched and face bitter. He didn’t look at her when he answered.

“This is for the victims of the Nine-Tails.”

There were so many. She had almost come back, when she had heard about it back then, but she was on the other side of the country when the news had arrived with a week delay, and by the time she had reached the borders of Konoha, more time had passed, and she had figured there was nothing more she could do there.

All those people… And in the end, it had taken only the power of one man to bring the Demon down. None of them had had a single chance to hurt it.

They had died in vain.

The first name, at the top of the stone, was the Yondaime’s. Namikaze Minato. She remembered only vaguely Jiraiya’s favorite student. Sarutobi was also fond of him, and, she suspected, not over his death. Both because they had been close and because his sudden and premature disappearance had meant chaos at the top of the commandment chain, and had forced him back into the hat. Her old teacher should have been enjoying his retirement for fifteen years now.

“Look!”

Naruto’s index rested under a string of kanji she had no difficulty deciphering, on the third line of the long string of names.

Uzumaki Kushina.

“I found a stone the other day, in the cemetery. It had this name, and the date of my birth… I figured maybe she would be here too. It’s a she, right? It’s a woman’s name.”

Tsunade stared at Naruto. Somehow she had been under the impression that he was older than this, despite his small height and childish feature. He just looked so harsh, all sharp edges. It was the first time she saw him with such an expression, one that had its place on a child’s face. The first time he actually looked like a twelve-year-old.

She had no idea he had been turned into a host as a newborn. The very day of his birth.

The name Kushina though… She wasn’t sure, but she seemed to recall a girl with bright red hair and a feral grin. Chosen to be the next host of the Kyuubi.

She had to look into this.

“Yes,” she answered belatedly, when she became aware of Naruto’s interrogative gaze on her.

“I figured that maybe, you know… I’ve never heard of anyone else bearing the Uzumaki name so…”

He had figured she was his mother. But he wouldn’t say it aloud.

He really had no idea who his parents were, and she couldn’t wrap her head around that.
“Didn’t you ever try to ask? About your parents?”

The look he gave her could have melted ice.

“Right, it never occurred to me,” he bit back. Fair enough.

He turned back toward the stone, toward that tenuous link, that small piece of the puzzle carved in front of him.

“No one ever answered me.”

“The Sandaime…”

“He said it didn’t matter. And that I shouldn’t ask.”

Tsunade took a deep, steadying breath. It would be very ill-mannered to damage either a memorial stone or the Hokage monument.

“Is it… is it true then?”

“What?”

“There is a clan?”

Tsunade knew well enough what reluctant hope looked like. He was careful to keep his emotions in check, not to show too much, or even feel too much, most likely. Even now he looked so reticent to ask, unwilling to care and yet unable to help it.

She couldn’t have explained even to herself the fondness she felt for that troubled kid.

“Famed for their practice of fuuinjutsu and their enormous chakra reserve. Both things you seem to have inherited.”

He fought off a pleased smile. She wished he would just give in to it.

“And where are they now?”

Ah. Now that was a harder question.

“They were native to a hidden village that no longer exists, so they scattered throughout the country. I thought there would be a few left in Konoha but…”

His face fell, disappointment obvious even if he tried to hide it. She was positive there had to be some Uzumaki left, somewhere. But if they were, they were laying low, and for good reasons. Uzushio had been destroyed because of the fear the Uzumaki name could induce, the power they could yield. No doubt that they wouldn’t be advertising it. Which make Naruto bearing the name even weirder, but then again, she wouldn’t begrudge anyone for leaving him this link to his late family.

“I could tell you about them,” she offered. “I’ve known some of them, and I’ve been to their village, before it fell.”

“Why?”

He was more distant now. Gone were the traces of interest and wonder she had managed to coax out of him – he was back on the defensive, tightly guarded up.
“Why what?”

“Why would you do that? Why be nice to me?”

She stayed silent for a while, at a loss for what to answer to that.

“Maybe I’m just a nice person.”

He scoffed, which was mildly vexing but also well-earned probably. He didn’t look that amused though.

“Even if you were.”

Why was it so hard for him to believe that she was just looking out for him. At random, sure, but she just liked him. There wasn’t much of a reason behind it.

“I want to make sure you’ll come back to my office and give me an excuse to run off again,” she said, opting for a silly answer since she couldn’t think of a heavier one that would convince him. It made him laugh a little at least.

“You bet I will!” he promised. And maybe it wasn’t very fair to the rest of the village and all the people working their ass off to keep it running under her new command, but it was the first time she actually considered that coming back might have been a good idea.

“Maybe we could just… stay here,” Kurenai said to the bottom of her empty glass she was eyeing regretfully. Asuma was thrown back in his chair, staring at the ceiling, or at the smoke rising slowly from his cigarettes.

“For how long?” he asked. It jolted said cigarette that was stuck between his lips. The ashes consumed at the end fell onto his face, and he cursed loudly as it landed into his beard.

None of them bothered to dignify that with a reaction.

“Forever?” Kurenai answered, ignoring his whining about burnt facial hair. “They have sofas here, they serve good food. We could set up shop.”

“Let’s take it one step further and buy the place,” Kakashi said, although it was a bit muffled because his forehead rested on the table and he was essentially talking to his knees. “This place sees good traffic. We wouldn’t be so bad off.”

“You guys are so fucking pathetic it’s hilarious. I want to punch all your teeth off.”

Kakashi made the effort to sit up to look at Anko. She was grinning widely – the greeting was affectionate, coming from her.

“What are you doing here?”

“I followed Gai. He told me you would all be sulking here.”

“And where is he now?”

“FRIENDS!”

Her grin only widened, but of course it couldn’t rival Gai’s smile, who materialized by her side.
“We must move now! We wouldn’t want to keep the kids waiting.”

Kakashi shrugged at that, while Asuma and Kurenai wore similar expressions of disagreement. They could very well do that.

There was no denying Gai anything though, unless they wanted to get banned from their favorite restaurant for good, so they paid for their drinks and followed him outside.

“If it wasn’t for you, we wouldn’t ever get anything done, Gai”, Asuma said as he upturned mournfully his empty cigarette pack.

“Why thank you, Asuma!”

They chose not to point out it wasn’t exactly meant as a compliment.

“Come on, move,” Anko said before parting ways. “Or Genma will have your asses.”

“I still can’t get behind the process for choosing the proctors this year…” Kakashi pointed out. She flipped him off as she walked away.

“Let’s go then,” Kurenai said firmly, having found some of her motivation back.

They were probably being overdramatic and ridiculous, but Kakashi honestly didn’t look forward to the conversation they were about to have.

They found all their kids gathered as agreed in the Academy courtyard, the four groups of three huddled together and casting nasty looks at the other teams and at Genma, waiting in a corner. They perked up at their instructor’s arrival, eager to see what this was all about.

“Let’s get this over with,” Asuma said to the jounin. The kids all turned to him, curious.

Apart from his own team, Kakashi knew most of the kids only in passing – and by the dramatic recollection of his fellow team captains. They looked innocuous enough like this, and it was hard to believe that Lee and Neji regularly rolled in the dirt fighting it out, or that Ino could shout very, very loud and never hesitated to make it known to her team.

What fun they were all going to have.

Small mercy, Anko hadn’t followed them. Kakashi wasn’t sure he could have dealt with watching her being entertained by their messy teams. No doubt would she remind them again how smarter than them she was for never agreeing to train a genin team, to which Asuma wouldn’t miss retorting that it only was so because no one was dumb enough to trust kids into her hands. They usually solved that particular fight with a drinking contest, so it didn’t hinder anyone’s good time. As long as they didn’t turn it into a drunken brawl.

Genma wore the same bored, uninvolved expression he always did, but they all knew he was actually the driving force of this whole operation, bullying everyone into doing their part while managing to look like he didn’t care either way. A feat.

“Hello everyone, I’m Shiranui Genma, and I’m the head examiner of the upcoming Chunin exam. You may have heard already, but Konoha will be hosting the exam soon, and every genin with at least one C-rank mission completed is allowed to register for it, which means all of you qualifies. So we’re here to ask you if you want to.”

It usually fell to the instructors to decide if their team could enter the exam or not, and Kakashi
couldn’t decide if the Godaime didn’t trust any of their judgment, if she just wanted to get the kids more involved, or if she just enjoyed fucking with them. It was rare that a team wasn’t entered at the exam anyway, if they qualified. The kids didn’t want to be stuck as genin and the village was in dire need of more higher ranked shinobi.

“You’re asking us?” Shikamaru enquired, mildly puzzled. Their look of utter confusion was hilarious – they weren’t used to be asked any sort of opinion.

“Yes. The Chunin exam is the only way to be promoted to the chunin rank. And be aware that the distinction will matter in earnest starting now. No genin will be sent to any mission ranking above C, if even that, no matter the circumstances, no exception.”

Tsunade had looked at them dead in the eye, during the first meeting regarding the Chunin exam, and declared that even if the country was crumbling down, no genin would ever see the edge of a battlefield under her command. Some thought it was all talks, but Kakashi trusted she would hang on to it, and without much difficulties. The threat of mysterious shinobi groups attacking at random and tension still ripe with the other countries had fallen on deaf ears regarding the matter, as well as the worryingly low number of shinobi in their rank already.

“Have them pass the exam then,” Tsunade had said. The message was clear – dissuade their students to enter if they deemed them not ready for it. She had to be aware though, that it wasn’t up to them, not really.

"The exam is difficult, and dangerous, with casualties every year. You have the choice to wait the two years until the next one to better prepare yourself, if you deem it wiser."

“There is no choice to be had here.”

Genma ignored the Hyuuga boy’s interruption.

“The choice is yours, but the exam must be tackled on as a team of three. Mind you, it doesn’t have to be your current formations. You only need to be all in agreement. You can also consider your teachers’ opinion.”

None of them even glanced at their instructors standing right behind them.

The Hyuuga sighed, exchanged a look with the girl from his team – Tenten? – while ignoring their third member entirely. Gai’s expression was pinched, but he wouldn’t speak up.

“We will attend the exam,” the boy declared.

“Don’t you want to discuss it further?”

“No.”

“I look forward to fighting all of you,” Lee exclaimed eagerly. His resistance to Neji’s disdain was impressive.

“Your team is registered then,” Genma concluded, ticking something on the clipboard he was holding.

“What do you say, Hinata?” Kiba asked the second Hyuuga of the group. She stared at both her teammates, unblinking and voiceless.

“She doesn’t have a choice either,” Neji snarled from the side.
“Did you hear me asking for your opinion, asshole?” Kiba shot back.

“What did you say you…”

Kurenai stepped deftly between Kiba and Neji. Kakashi wanted to go home right now.

“Hinata?” Shino asked again. She didn’t utter a word, but after a while, Kiba sighed audibly.

“Fine,” he said, resigned. “We’re in too. All three of us.”

It was Kurenai’s turn to look like she had bitten down on a lemon. It’s not like it was a surprise though. Sadly, Neji was right – the choice wasn’t theirs, not really. Those clan kids, they didn’t really get a say in these matters.

“As we are,” Ino piped from the other side of the group. She glared at Shikamaru, but that didn’t prevent him from speaking up.

“We are?” he asked, either annoyed or just bored.

“Yes, we are.”

He shrugged, not seeming to care either way. Choji didn’t protest.

That left only one team.

“What about team 7?” Genna asked. All attention turned toward Kakashi’s team. They probably would have liked the opportunity to discuss it in private between them, but they were on a schedule, and they would have to decide on the spot. Besides, he was pretty sure the information had leaked already, if only because of Ino’s bad spying habits. They had had some time to think about it.

“I think we should do it,” Sakura said timidly, ill-at-ease with the attention. Naruto wasn’t about to play east though.

“Why?”

“You don’t want to?” Sasuke asked, irritated.

“I’m asking why you do.”

The Uchiha’s expression soured considerably and it’s through gritted teeth that he answered.

“Itachi was already a chunin at ten.”

He bore Naruto’s flat stare, until the blonde boy turned to Sakura.

“I don’t want us to be left behind,” the girl said with a little more confidence, almost defiant. Naruto wasn’t impressed though.

“What’s the point of the exam?” he asked Genna. The man shrugged.

“Well, to become a chunin.”

“So I guess the next legitimate question is, what’s the point of becoming a chunin?”

Shikamaru scoffed, and didn’t let Ino’s glare deter him.
“What? It’s a good question.”

One that wasn’t surprising, coming from Naruto. He had no interest in making ranks.

He didn’t even want to be a shinobi.


"The point is not to stay useless low-level grunts!” Ino exclaimed, biting.

The look on both boys’ face expressed clearly how little they thought of that argument.

“Naruto, come on…” Sakura said weakly, unwilling to argue but wanting to change his mind all the same. She and Sasuke were already on board – they were sold to the shinobi life already.

“What? Give me one good reason why I would agree to go through this.”

It was quite fascinating, to see their dynamic, the power at play between all of them. Sakura frowned, looking upset, which made Ino frown in turn. She looked at Shikamaru, pointed at Naruto with her shin, as if to prompt him to say something. He let out the longest, most drawn-out sigh, before focusing on Naruto, deep in thought. Searching for a good point to make.

“If even just one of you makes it chunin,” he said, “your team will be disbanded.”

Sakura gasped, affronted, as Sasuke grimaced. Naruto looked considering though, pensive, holding on Shikamaru’s bored gaze without blinking.

“Oh, okay, fine,” he eventually conceded.

There was a chance he was agreeing to that particular tune for the sole purpose of pissing his teammates off – it was effective too. He couldn’t help but antagonize them at every turn lately.

“Very well. Thank you all, that will be it. You’ll get further information soon,” Genma concluded before taking his leave, not without a last look of encouragement toward the other jounin. His job here was done – theirs was just beginning.

All the kids were now to be prepared for the exam.

Team 7 had the skill level, but Kakashi wasn’t sure they were ready to face the emotional toll of the trials. For once, he and his colleagues would have appreciated the opportunity to bare their team from entering the exam. Oh, well, it was only wishful thinking. He could have managed to convince Sakura, probably, but there was no way he would have persuaded Sasuke to give up on trying for the promotion this year. Sasuke had ambition, he was impatient, and there was nothing he believed couldn’t be done, if he set his mind to it. Plus, they were dumb kids. They didn’t know what they were stepping into.

And if by some miracle Sasuke had given up on it, Fugaku certainly wouldn’t have. This choice wasn’t the kids’, anymore than it was their teachers’. It was a frustration they all had to compose with.

It was late into the night when Tsunade finally found herself on her own. The sun had set while she was getting a headache over all the official guests that would have to be dealt with during the exam.
with Nara Shikaku and Yamanaka Inoichi, and now her office had to be the only room still lit up in the Administration Tower.

She needed to have a conversation with her mentor – she didn’t want to ask anyone else about Naruto and the Kyuubi. It was too complicated to try to guess who knew what, and what they thought of it. She didn’t like to be suspicious of everyone around her like this, and it exhausted her in advance to know it wouldn’t abide any time soon.

And what she was about to do would move things both in the right and the wrong direction.

“Lynx?”

The Anbu jumped swiftly through the open window to come kneel in front of the desk. Tsunade wondered what they made of this during the winter.

“Take off your mask. Those things creep me out, and it’s only us.”

The woman hesitated, but she slid off her mask obediently. Yugao was the Anbu most often attached to the Hokage’s safety, but Tsunade had never had a proper talk with her before.

They were in for quite the introduction.

“Is there something I can do for you, Hokage-sama?”

“There is. Get up.”

Yugao was rather small and lean, compared to her peers. Tsunade had no doubt about her capacity though.

“Yugao. Do you consider yourself to be loyal to this village?”

A credit to her training and position, Yugao didn’t flinch, didn’t show any sign of surprise or confusion.

“Yes,” she said firmly.

“And to me?”

“You are the Hokage.”

Which meant she was loyal to the hat, if not to the one wearing it. It made sense – Tsunade was the newcomer dethroning the old king in this situation. She would have found it alarming that the elite forces weren’t a bit wary of her.

“And what does this loyalty mean to you?”

Yugao frowned.

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“Do you think… Loyalty is obeying orders without question, or do you believe your commitment to its values is showing resistance if need be?”

The poor girl looked a little mystified.

“I’m sorry, I know this is rather abrupt. Please don’t think too hard about what you think I want to
hear, there is no right answer. Speak freely.”

Tsunade was pleased to see the girl take the question into careful consideration before finally answering.

“If ever the good of the village and the will of the Hokage were to diverge… I would pick a side, yes. I would try to do good, if I could. But if... if disobedience is punished by death, maybe I ought to obey then. At least on the surface.”

So it was a question she had asked herself before. That was a good sign.

“If I may ask, Hokage-sama, what is this all about?”

They all had that slightly awkward note in their voice, when they addressed her as “Hokage-sama”, as if they had corrected their pronunciation in the last moment, or weren’t sure they were using the right words. Sarutobi’s influence would hover for a long time. They still called him Hokage-sama too, and would likely keep doing so even when her appointment was set in stone – both metaphorically and literally.

“I am going to give you a mission order,” Tsunade said, picking up the scroll in front of her. “I want you to read it, and I want you to tell me if you accept it or not. You do have a choice. If you refuse, I will consider it the answer of all your peers, and I won’t ask anyone else. Although I don’t dismiss the idea of just taking care of it myself...”

Yugao didn’t like what she was hearing. It was understandable. Tsunade had been brought to the village with the specific purpose of rooting out such shady practices. She had no intention of building her reign on this, but she wouldn’t be able to rest easy as long as it wasn’t done.

“If you accept, I will ask that you select a few people you can trust to carry it out. We don’t know each other and you don’t trust me, but you have to believe that this is not a test, or a trap. I need to ask it of you, and I need to know what your answer would be. I need to know what has become of this place.”

“You’ve been gone a long time,” Yugo commented as an answer. It wasn’t accusatory, merely analytical, as she tried to parse out Tsunade’s reasoning. Tsunade nodded. Yugao took the scroll.

She really had an exceptional poker face. She let nothing filter through of what she felt upon reading the mission order, and it was an equally blank expression she turned toward Tsunade when she was done.

“Can I think about it?”

“Yes.”

Tsunade couldn’t very well say no, even if she would rather have had an immediate answer. Yugao rolled back the scroll and Tsunade started shuffling papers around again, not in the mood to take care of it but not ready to leave just yet. She thought the young woman would take her leave, but she stayed right where she was, motionless, lost in thought.

“I accept.”

Tsunade's head snapped back up.

“What?”
“I accept.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to take more time?”

“I don’t need to. I know what I have to do.”

She looked fierce all of the sudden, determined.

“Can I ask why?”

For a second the young shinobi was lost in memories, bitterness and regret souring the softness of her face.

“I picked the wrong side before. I obeyed, when I knew I shouldn’t have.”

It seemed to be everyone’s story around here.

“I know who will help willingly. It will be done, according to your wishes.”

Tsunade had a feeling that it would be as much her wishes as theirs. She would have to dig in some more into those sordid affairs, but for now she was glad that little bet hadn’t blown up in her face.

“I don’t intend to keep it a secret,” she assured. “Not for long anyway. And this will be my entire responsibility. You won’t be involved.”

The way Yugao stared at her was indecipherable, and Tsunade felt uncomfortably scrutinized. She wondered what Yugao was most suspicious of, where she thought laid the lie. Time would show here there were none. If Tsunade accomplished only one thing as a Hokage of Konoha, it would be this.

“I will keep you informed. Good night, Hokage-sama.”

The woman disappeared in a puff of smoke, leaving the tired Godaime alone in her vast office.

“Arrangements have already been made for accommodation, and Baki will be here to take care of all your expenses. You’re not expected to mingle, but it’s a good opportunity to observe the other villages techniques and resources. Don’t wander Konoha alone though. If we’re no longer active enemies, we’re still far from allies. Understood?”

“Yes, Kazekage-sama.”

She had never liked the Kazekage’s office. The room was too big for its purpose, the ceiling too high. Weirdly enough, it gave her a feeling of claustrophobia. Maybe because it was so empty despite its size, it narrowed all the focus down to its center, to the vast desk and the space in front of it where she had to stand like she was standing trial.

Or maybe Temari just hated a room so strongly associated to her father.

“Will that be all?” she asked after an uncomfortable pause.

“No.”

He leaned forward in his chair to rest his elbows on his desk. A change of posture usually meant a change of roles.
“Konoha has expressed the wish to limit the number of death during the exam this year,” he said without hiding how little he thought of that idea. “So I count on you and Kankuro to reign your brother in.”

“Yes, father.”

She used to be confused by this juggling between her military leader and her father, but she was used to it now, and could easily tell the difference. Not that it mattered all that much – the orders were pretty much the same.

“I’ll join you in Konoha for the last task. You’re dismissed.”

“Yes, Kazekage-sama.”

She breathed out a sigh of relief when she was finally out the door. Kankuro was waiting for her in the dark corridor.

"How does he suppose we should do that?” he snarled.

“Shut up. Go pack your bags. And leave Gaara to me.”

He frowned but didn’t protest – he wouldn’t risk arguing with her in front of their father’s door. It was pointless anyway. They had to abide by his will, one way or another.

She wished she could have been excited about the Chunin exam. Going out of Suna, visiting Konoha, meeting new people from all around, going out of Suna. But Temari couldn’t really be excited about anything anymore. As long as it involved her younger brother, there would be an undercurrent of fear and guilt preventing her from enjoying anything. And this promised to be especially stressful. Her brother lose in an unknown place full of strangers he was here to fight.

In short, a recipe for disaster. And as usual, a mess she would have to handle on her own.

Chapter End Notes

THEY ARE HERE! My boy Gaara’s gonna enter the scene soon, I'm emotional.

I made the decision to have Tsunade being pretty unaware of lots of the shit that have been going on since she had been gone, because of reasons. She really did miss a lot, which is not something she (or others) will feel especially good about. Also, as a very boring and serious person, I don't condone ditching your duties like this XD she'll grow into her position and role as a leader, but for now she doesn't feel legitimate enough to fully get into it.

Konoha (and this world in general) really is Failed Kid-Adult Communication Land. You may have noticed that adults dismissing kids' feelings and opinions only for it to come bite them in the ass later is kind of a theme here haha. They're honestly trying - they're just kind of incapable of seeing those children as actual functioning brains with emotions and agency... Tough :/

That awkwardness during family dinner is lifted straight from real life lol.

Sorry for all the rambling. See you next time!
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

On to the Chunin exam!

Chapter Notes

I'm taking longer and longer ain't I? BUT for my defense, this chapter is the longest one yet so. I'm not super happy with it but I don't know how to make it better and it's 12k but I don't want to cut it even if I probably should. I feel like nothing happens here tho? Are you people enjoying this? Please tell me. I'm hitting a low and I don't want to lose my motivation cause I really want you to read what come next... I'm just faced with the daunting possibility of this thing getting to 300k by the time I wrap up Naruto part 1... This is scary.

ANYWAY I forget to put it there in the previous chapter, but I draw stuff for this fic sometimes, so here's a studying Naruto and here's the Uchiha trio.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There were only a few precious hours during the day where the sun shone through the canopy into Naruto’s clearing. He had become very good at sun-based time estimations so that he could be there when warmth and light spilled onto the forest ground, so that he could lie down and bask in it, let it warm him to his very core. It was the closest he ever came to actual calm and felicity, emotions and troubles falling away to nothingness, letting him taste the simple pleasure of napping in the sun. He listened to the forest sounds, felt the light breeze brush over his skin, ruffle his unruly hair, and he felt part of that world, like he belonged in this tiny spot of peace and sunlight. He rarely fell properly asleep but could drift off, mind wandering into shapeless daydreaming. It was probably the most unguarded he ever was.

“We heard you were looking for us.”

Naruto shrieked.

In a second he was on his feet, kunai in hand and head swimming, nauseous from the sudden change of mindset. He looked around him, trying to spot the threat, wondering how he could have missed someone sneaking up on him like this.

“Over there, human.”

His eyes snapped to the side, to the big rock that hid the clearing from the nearest forest trails. He blinked stupidly, as if it was going to alter this strange spectacle. It didn’t.

There on the rock were sitting two foxes. Not sitting as foxes sit though, but as a human would, legs dangling over the edge. One was smaller and of a lighter shade of orange, younger maybe, kicking its legs without paying much attention to what was happening. The other was almost red
and was staring intently at Naruto.

They were both wearing colorful kimono.

“Uh… Hi.”

The oldest – presumably – jumped off the rock to stand just above Naruto still sitting on the grass. The fox would have reached to about his waist had he been standing, but like this they were almost on eye level.

“What can you give?” the fox asked without preambles.

“What?”

“What can you give? In exchange for a contract?”

It appeared to Naruto that he would have to get his shit together very fast if he didn’t want to blow that encounter. He would freak out about it later.

“I-I don’t know. I can bake?”

The older fox didn’t miss the confusion in his voice, but the younger one did – it ran to them with an excited shriek and practically shoved his companion out of the way.


“Akito!”

The young fox pouted at the reprimand as the other snarled, displeased.

“I took you with me because you promised to stay put!”

“But he can bake! It’s a good deal!”

“No it’s not!”

“Yes it is!”

Naruto briefly considered just going back to sleep and letting this weird dream runs its course.

Instead, he chose to jump in.

“I can bake mochi.”

As expected, it made the younger fox squeal in delight and the older grimace.

“That won’t be necessary, really.”

“Who are you?”

They all realized at the same time that it was kind of the important question they should have lead with.

“Sorry, sorry, we’re doing this the wrong way. It’s your fault, Akito! You distracted me!”

“Heh? It’s not my fault! I’ll tell mom you said that.”
“And I’ll tell her you disobeyed!”

Naruto barking a laugh interrupted the exchange. He couldn’t help it, this was just so absurd and so mundane at the same time, there was nothing to do but laugh.

“Anyway,” the one in charge picked up with an embarrassed cough. “I am Akira of Mount Inari, and this” – he gave a tap on the other fox’s head – “is my little brother Akito, who is never coming out on a mission with me ever again.”

“You’re the meanest, Akira!”

“And what do you want from me?”

Akira cast him an incredulous look and really, Naruto would never have thought that foxes could be so expressive.

“It’s more like what do you want from us. You called, right? The messengers of princess Katsuyu told us about you looking to contract with us.”

“Princess… who?”

“Katusyu. The great slug?”

Naruto thought he would only ever witness Tsunade talking about slugs with such seriousness and reverence, but that was forgetting talking foxes, apparently.

Did that mean Tsunade had asked her summons to… what, campaign on his behalf? She said that it was hard to get a contract without knowing any other contractors first. He had the seal and the jutsu right, but if a creature didn’t want to come, it wouldn’t.

“We usually don’t contract with humans,” the fox said with some measure of disdain in his voice, “but the foxes and the other animals around here speak fondly of you, so I was sent to see what this was about.

“O… kay.”

This was without a doubt the weirdest thing that had ever happened to him.

Akira looked a little nervous under his air of superiority, which put Naruto a bit more at ease. Maybe it wasn’t only awkward for him.

“So. What can you give?”

Naruto wasn’t any closer to having an answer to that question.

“I have no idea! What can I give?”

“I… I don’t know! It’s the first time I’m negotiating a contract myself!”

“I thought you didn’t do contracts.”

“I said we didn’t with humans. There’s plenty of other creatures who require our services.”

“Great… I don’t know then, what do you want?”

It completely threw the fox off his game for some reasons. Akito laughed, nudging his brother with
an elbow, who fake coughed to find back some composure.

“What do I want?”

“Huh, yeah? It’s for you, right?”

“You want to contract with me?”

“Isn’t that what you’re here for?”

Naruto had a feeling that they weren’t talking about the same thing at all. Then again, as far as he was concerned he didn’t know what they were talking about at all. He had no idea how this was supposed to work.

“Don’t you want someone… Why do you want to summon us anyway?” Akira asked, irritated by his own confusion. Naruto shrugged.

“I don’t know. Seems cool. Oh, I know!” he exclaimed, remembering something Tsunade had said. “I could give you chakra.”

Akira scoffed.

“I doubt a human could have any amount of chakra that could content us.”

“Well I have… non-human chakra too.”

The fox frowned.

“We’re not interested in the Nine-Tails’ poison.”

“Isn’t he like, one of you?”

“The Tailed Beasts are not animals. He may look like a fox, but he’s not like us.”

“Alright. My own chakra then. Try me.”

His stupid amount of chakra that had caused him so much trouble at school had to be worth something. His clan’s heritage, Tsunade had said. Naruto didn’t want to think about it – what use was a clan, if they were all dead? Was it even true? The name could have been given to him at random. He didn’t want to think about it, and he wouldn’t.

Akira looked skeptical, but deemed Naruto’s determination good enough, for he stepped forward and held out both his… paws, under Akito’s wide-eyed curiosity. Naruto gave him his hands.

He imagined that was what those who fell prey to his widespread Chakra Vacuum Seal felt. The seal didn’t affect him much, so surely anyone with regular reserve would have been sent to their knees by Akira sucking up chakra like this. Naruto felt himself weaken, but he was far from depleted when the fox released his hands, looking grudgingly impressed.

“Maybe it could work…” he mumbled, a bit reluctant. “Would you still protect the foxes? Humans need to be kept in check around here.”

“’Course. Was already doing that anyway.”

“What do you think, Akito?” Akira asked his brother. The young fox squirmed at the sudden attention, but recovered his bright demeanor soon enough.
"I like him! His chakra tastes good too!"

"It sure does…"

Akira cast Naruto a long, calculating look. His eyes were entirely black, and his face still, it was hard to know what he was thinking.

"We’ll be back,” he said solemnly. In a puff of smoke, they were both gone.

“Alright then,” Naruto answered to empty air, before dropping back down immediately, intent on resuming his nap and see if this made any more sense when he woke up.

At the very beginning of their first lesson, Hayate had said “for now we will do exercises that won’t make sense to you and will probably bore you to death, and once you understand how they can actually help you, you’ll have made some measure of progress in your training.”

The exercises in question were breathing ones mostly, or things about balance and muscle strengthening. Sakura had found the comment to be odd and bit insulting, because she wasn’t dumb, she could infer why it was important to have good balance and centered breathing to do well with a sword.

She got it now though. Like, really got it. As she and Hayate circled around each other, sword in hand and ready to strike, she could feel the change that had occurred inside of her thanks to his advice and strict training program. The awareness she had of her own body, of every muscle, of the weight of the sword in her hand, and how open she was to her environment too, to her opponent, attuned but not distracted by it, all of it. Things that she had developed only on a very base level at the Academy, all tied now into kenjutsu practice.

None of the ninja arts could be picked on easily, simply to try it out. It was a question of feelings, of affinities. Hayate could be quite passionate about this subject, something his friend Yugao never missed to tease him about. She was maybe his girlfriend, Sakura wasn’t sure – they weren’t very demonstrative, and it’s not like she would just ask. Yugao was intimidating, more than Hayate in her eyes. She gave off powerful vibes of controlled strength and deadly efficiency, she was beautiful and distant. Sakura always stuttered around her.

She wasn’t here now, which was probably a good thing for Sakura’s concentration as she steeled herself for her fight against Hayate. No practice move today, no exercises – their swords were real, and he wouldn’t hold back.

Her sword, they had lent it to her. It was longer and heavier than a standard tento, but still not long and not heavy enough to her taste. Hayate had laughed, when she had told him, and said they would see about custom made blade when she could hold her own against him for more than a few seconds.

Which she was determined to do today.

They kept observing for a short while, the time to get into the right state of mind, to catalog the ground and obstacles around them, things to look out for or that could be useful later. She itched to make the first move, but he had repeated enough that as long as she wasn’t sure about having the superior skillset, it was always better to let them come. He had formed her on defense more than attack – “the goal is to survive against a strong opponent, not to beat a weak one”. Although they had focused more on offensive moves since her registration into the chunin exam.
She didn’t block his first swing head-on but deviated the blade instead. “Dodge whenever you can, especially if you don’t have the physical advantage.” She had been putting on muscles, but it still made her very bones shake when she actually stopped a blow with her sword.

She dropped to the ground to destabilize him and try to break through his guard. “Being little is an asset here.” He was too fast of course, and he jumped back to avoid her blade, although it was long enough that it almost nicked him. That’s what she liked about it – the longer it was, the bigger the distance she could keep between her and her opponent, or breach to reach them. “When you’re fast enough, you’ll be able to keep them from even approaching you”.

She jumped forward, sword at the side. “Position first, blade second. Don’t think about where the sword is going, but where you are. Sword will follow.” Of course, he could block her hits with ease and did just so. His blade slid against hers, straight toward her exposed front. She twisted her hand to block it at the hilt and stepped out of the trajectory of the sharp edge. His momentum made him keep moving forward when she drew her sword back to her and for a brief second his side was exposed – but again he was fast enough to spin around and block her again without her managing to make the most of it.

They avoided using taijutsu moves during their spar, because he wanted her to win with the weapon she had in hand. Just a nick, a drop of blood… That would make her entire day.

So instead of stepping away and gaining her balance back, she jumped to the side, pivoting her blade around Hayate’s, until the tip pointed toward his shoulder. She jumped forward…

Only to realize that she was in the perfect position for him to aim for her arm, and probably cut it clean off.

Her blade ripped through the fabric of his vest and cut the skin of his shoulder just so, before he kicked her hard on the side and sent her rolling into the dirt, scrapping her hands and knees on the dusty ground and quite literally biting the dust.

She coughed, both to clear her lungs and because the blow had knocked all air out of her lungs.

“That was reckless, Sakura.”

Looking up, her eyes fell on the cold face of Yugao.

Sakura blushed and accepted shyly the woman’s extending hand. Yugao helped her to her feet, putting a bit too much strength and sending Sakura staggering.

“You… You were watching?”

“The end of it. You’ve made good progress, but you’re not swift enough yet to make that kind of move.”

Sakura ducked her head. She had let herself be carried away, and that was never good in a fight. Had he been a real enemy, he would have injured her badly.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Hayate said. “You did well. Not everyone would have the skill to make good of the opening you gave anyway. But I hope you wouldn’t have gone for it if it hadn’t been me.”

She shook her head, although she wasn’t really sure. The opportunity was just there… She couldn’t resist taking it, and she had kept going even after realizing it was the wrong move.
“You need to plan further ahead.”

She reddened in shame, embarrassed by the chastising. She hated failure and she hated to be a disappointment. She should have been more careful.

She felt even worse when Hayate brought a hand to his bleeding shoulder, assessing. So reckless, for such a small result. It was a mistake. She should have…

“I can’t believe you made such progress in such a short time. Kakashi didn’t lead me on this time… I’m aghast.”

Yugao nodded approvingly before tossing him a piece of gauze for his wound as Sakura stared dumbly, not sure she had heard right.

“You’ll make me look good during the exam,” Hayate deadpanned in a tone that suffered no doubt.

“He’s proud of you, Sakura,” Yugao translated with an affectionate scowl at the man who let out an embarrassed half-laugh. Sakura’s face was on fire.

“Oh…”

“Did you doubt it?” the woman asked, not unkindly. She had to know the answer already. Hayate’s words were scarce and never harsh or unearned, but Sakura still couldn’t quite believe that he was honestly content with her progress.

“Thank you,” she said, overwhelmed, hoping they knew the answer already. Hayate’s words were scarce and never harsh or unearned, but Sakura still couldn’t quite believe that he was honestly content with her progress.

“Are we done for today then?” she asked as usual, instead of “could we go on a little longer?” because she couldn’t say that aloud.

“One last thing,” Yugao said. She unhooked the sheath hanging on her shoulder and presented it to Sakura. It held a long, wide sword with a two-hand grip that looked well-worn but still in good shape, solid and heavy.

“It’s nice,” the girl said, at a loss for how she was supposed to react. It was very nice indeed, and she almost asked if she could try it out, but refrained, not wanting to sound too bold. Besides, swords were something of a personal matter, and if training swords passed from hand to hand, fighting swords were rarely used by more than one person.

“It’s for you,” Yugao said, a little amused. Sakura stared at her blankly.

“What?”

“It’s for you,” she said again. “It’s an old sword of mine, the very first I owned. I think it will suit you just fine.”

They were both staring at her, and she couldn’t figure out how they expected her to react to this. It didn’t look like it was a joke, or maybe they were really good actors? Jounin were supposed to be good at pretending, right?

“I don’t understand.”
“It’s a gift, Sakura,” Yugao answered. “You’ve been a dedicated student and you’re a very promising kenjutsu user. You’re tackling the chunin exam, which is not an easy feat, and you need to be prepared. Both of us are leaving for a mission soon and we won’t be here to watch so… consider this our way to encourage you.”

Yugao was so beautiful, it was unfair. Especially when there was the oh so rare ghost on a smile on her otherwise guarded face. Hayate’s face never showed much either, but he was smiling too. They were serious about this.

“I… I can’t accept that. It’s too much, it’s… I couldn’t afford it.”

“You do know what a gift is right?”

“Yeah but…”

Sakura had developed a bit of an obsession with swords in the past few weeks, and she had spent no small amount of time admiring the blacksmith’s work at the armory. There was a genin working there, Tenten, who had apparently waited all her life for someone who would listen to her weapon knowledge. Sakura knew a lot about swords now, a LOT. She knew how they were made, for what purpose.

And she knew their price.

She had almost given up on kenjutsu altogether when she had first seen the price tags at the weapon shop. Her only option was to make do with the armory’s loan for now until she could make enough money to afford a proper blade. That meant making chunin at the very least – jounin would be better, if she hoped to gather the sum before she was thirty. Anbu got their tanto from the village, but she would never be strong enough to join the special forces, and tanto were too short for her taste anyway.

Sakura and Naruto were the only genin of their year who were still using the Academy issued weapons instead of better ones sold at the shop. New weapons weren’t something her parents could afford, not for her – they had to tend to their own stash, since their missions were their only mean of subsistence.

The sword Yugao was holding probably cost more than anything Sakura had in her home. Anything that her parents’ money could buy. She had resigned herself to make do with subpar until she could sustain herself, and to not let that slow her down despite the shame that never failed to creep up on her every time she was reminded yet again that there was no prestige attached to her surname, and certainly no wealth either.

She and Naruto had taught themselves how to sharpen and take proper care of their blades, to make sure they lasted as long as they could. They had decided they wouldn’t care.

This sword was so, so nice.

“You deserve it Sakura,” Hayate deadpanned without much feelings. That was the final blow.

She was crying when she took the sword and kept crying as Hayate ruffled her hair with a laugh and Yugao patted her shoulder awkwardly.

“I’ll take good care of it,” she promised, clutching the sword to her chest.

“Make good use of it,” Hayate demanded instead. She nodded firmly.
She would take her team through the chunin exam.

“You’re not taking the exam, right?”

Sai didn’t raise his eyes from the paper he was meticulously covering with grey paint – he was in a black and white landscape mood lately, walking the fine line between ethereal and depressing. Shin seemed to have a system in place to decide which artwork went up and down the walls – they had run out of place to hang them all long ago.

Naruto’s messy name calligraphy was still there in its corner, something that always came to his mind whenever he got the distinct feeling that Shin didn’t like him at all.

“No.”

“What even is your rank nowadays?” Naruto asked, in a mood to dive into subjects they usually stayed clear of. They had never acknowledged out loud how much they knew about each other’s situation.

“I was in Anbu.”

“That’s not a rank.”

It was subtle, barely visible, but Naruto caught the downturn of the boy’s mouth, the tightening around his eyes. Naruto felt on edge, and vulnerable, from the favor he was about to ask Sai. It made him vindictive, which was unfortunate when one needed to obtain help. He couldn’t help it though.

“Chunin then. But I don’t do missions.”

“Why not?”

Sai paused, thinking his words over, and made eye contact with Naruto for the first time, and Naruto knew he had gone too far.

“Same reason you don’t I imagine.”

Naruto sucked up a breath, annoyed by the unexpected jab. He was the one who had crossed the line first though. They didn’t address those matters, it was an unspoken agreement between them. Yet he felt the urge to push for more. Perhaps he needed this to be acknowledged out loud, just once, to know he wasn’t the only one in the known.

“Do you think it will change someday?”

“Maybe.”

“Do you want to?”

“Go on missions?”

“Get out of the village.”

It always went back to that. It wasn’t about leaving, not really. Naruto wasn’t even set on that – as he was, he couldn’t trust himself to wander the wild alone, not when there were such risks that he’d
lose control. He couldn’t inflict the Beast upon this world.

Yet he knew he would feel better if he was at least allowed. Even if he never did it. Even if he remained trapped here.

“Maybe.”

Sai couldn’t have much more than him to hold onto here.

“I need a favor,” Naruto asked bluntly. Talking with Sai was always a strange experience – there were moods and currents to their conversations, things couldn’t just be said at random. He had wondered how to broach the subject all day, but it was obvious now.

“Tell me.”

“You still have access to a lot of information right? The libraries, the Archives…”

“Yes.”

It was something better left unquestioned.

“I need you to look for a name.”

“Which name?”

“Mine.”

“You’re looking for ramen recipes?”

Naruto choked on his own breath, spluttering around a startled laugh. Sai’s face showed nothing of course, as deadpan as ever, which made it even funnier. When he was somewhat recovered, Naruto noticed the smallest upturn of the other boy’s lips, a little smug.

“Damn. You making jokes is always jarring.”

The building tension was effectively broke. Naruto didn’t know if it was on purpose, since Sai never seemed to feel the need to break any form of tension and often added to it instead. It was welcome regardless – Sai wasn’t too angry at him then.

“I meant the Uzumaki name. They’re supposed to be an ancient clan from… Somewhere.”

“Your clan?”

“Or so I was told.”

“Allright. Anything else?”

Naruto bit his lips, hesitating. He was showing a lot of his cards, something he was never keen on, even with someone he trusted. But if he could tell those things to anyone, it was Sai – he wouldn’t ask further clarifications, he wouldn’t tell anyone either. His strict disinterest into other people’s business was one of his greatest quality, and, Naruto suspected, had to do wonders to his peace of mind.

“There is one person, specifically. A woman. She was a ninja of the village I think so… Maybe in the registers.”
“Her name?”

“Uzumaki Kushina.”

It was so weird to say it aloud. Even more so to another person. Once again, sharing this made it more real, made it a physicality of this world.

“Your family?”

Naruto shrugged, hoping he didn’t look as desperate as he felt.

“Maybe.”

There was a pregnant pause as none of them knew where to pick up from there. Naruto couldn’t help pressing further. He had shared something huge, and he wanted some kind of repayment.

“Do you know yours? Your family?”

As far as Naruto knew, Sai and Shin didn’t have a last name.

“I have Shin,” Sai answered simply. He was back into his painting. His tone suffered no doubt, no hesitations. Final.

After all, if they had had family remaining somewhere in the village, they would have gone back to them already, like the others who had sprung up sometimes after the Danzo’s death had. Sai didn’t seem torn over the question, and Naruto envied him. But then again, Sai didn’t doubt that he had indeed been born from human parents, that he was a real person. Naruto just wanted the proof. He wanted to know where he had come from. If that Kushina woman had given birth to him the day of the Kyuubi’s attack, or if he had come after, because of it, because the Beast was being shrunk down into a more harmless form... He wanted to know if he had ancestors, if they were people related to him, dead or alive, or if he was just the Kyuubi with a human shape.

If they were a reason why he was born, other than being a prison cell. If he had been wanted. If someone, someday, had wished for his existence, had been happy for him coming into this world, for him being alive.

“I will look,” Sai said after a while, and it was a relief, because Naruto could trust he would look indeed, and would probably find something too.

“Alright kids, stop.”

Kakashi crouched to avoid another swing of a sword and a wave of shuriken flying towards his head.

“I said stop!”

He had to grab Naruto’s foot with a hand and Sasuke’s wrist with another.

“What part of the world “stop” eludes you?”

“Come on, sensei!” Sakura exclaimed, sword still high above her head although she had at least interrupted her gesture mid-swing. “The exam starts tomorrow, we need to be ready!”

“Five minutes of training won’t make you any more prepared than you are now. And what you
need is proper rest before the first task.”

“Alright, alright,” the girl grumbled, finally lowering her sword. “But you’re treating us to some food then!”

That was incentive enough for the two boys to settle down too, as the kids started arguing ramen against soba. They ended up at Ichiraku in the end, as always. Sakura had caught Naruto’s passion for it, and unlike him, she knew how to make her case.

“Today’s food’s on me, children!” Teuchi exclaimed when he set the bowls down in front of each genin. “You need your strengths for tomorrow!”

“Thank you, Teuchi,” Kakashi said for his three badly raised students who dived straight into their bowls without as much as a grateful nod.

“You’re paying your own bowl, Kakashi. You don’t have anything to do tomorrow.”

The kids snickered at him. It was only fair, he supposed, and that was always better than four bowls out of his own pocket. They were going to left him penniless at the rate with which they coerced him into buying them food.

“Go home and rest,” he ordered them before leaving, knowing full well they wouldn’t obey. He couldn’t begrudge them – they were overexcited, full of a mix of anticipation and fear.

He couldn’t exactly relate.

He was seven when he had tackled the chunin exam. He had been assigned randomly to a genin team short a member that he had ditched pretty much the second the first task had started. He had never had a proper team before Minato’s.

Obito and Rin had been together for the exam. He imagined they had been just as excited, just as eager to prove themselves. He didn’t even know who was the third genin of their team back then. They hadn’t been friends that long, in the end.

He thought he would go home, but his feet took him to another part of the village, in front of a familiar door. He was hesitating to knock, debating just leaving and going to run laps in the forest for a few hours. He didn’t even know what he was doing here. He would just be a bother.

As usual though, his friend just knew. The door opened without prompting.

“Kakashi! I was hoping you would drop by.”

Gai always did that – always made it look like Kakashi was the one doing him a favor by visiting him, like he was the one in need of his company, knowing Kakashi needed the incentive to give in on spending time with him. This time though, Kakashi had an inkling that Gai was just as desperate for companionship as he was.

“Can I come in?”

“Of course, of course!”

Gai’s flat was just as tidy but cluttered as usual. He had loads of pictures hanging on the walls and propped of shelves covered in books and knick-knacks picked up during missions. He made a point to bring back some for Kakashi too, and complained dramatically every time he visited Kakashi’s place and noted yet again that they weren’t on display.
Kakashi kept them neatly stacked in a dedicated shelf in his wardrobe. He would tell him one day. Maybe.

He loved coming here. It felt more like home than any place he had ever lived in or visited. He was in a few of the pictures hanging around the place, during laidback missions, at the bar, with the other jounin instructors. When he was here, he remembered that he did have a place somewhere, that he was part of this world.

One of the shelves was dedicated to Gai’s genin teams, from his own when he was a kid to all the ones he had trained after that. On the last one, Lee and Gai had the exact same blinding smile, while Tenten looked more long-suffering, if a little fond. Neji was sullen in the corner, looking away from the camera.

“I’m worried about them,” Gai said, following Kakashi’s gaze toward the picture.

“Aren’t you always?”

“It’s different this time. I don’t want them to get hurt.”

For Kakashi, it was his first time experiencing that anxiety of sending their students to the exam, where they would fight for the promotion, sometimes to great injuries, or worse. At least the death rate should lower than average this year. It had never bothered him before, not when he had passed the exam himself and not when his friends had either, but now, knowing what Sasuke, Naruto and Sakura would face tomorrow, he wasn’t liking it that much.

“It will be fine,” he assured, despite having absolutely no ground onto which he could base this certitude. Gai smiled, a little strained.

“You’re right! There’s no need to worry!”

No need, he didn’t know. But no point, for sure. It was out of their hands now.

There was a lot of trees. A lot of them. A lot.

He had never seen so many trees. Actually, most of those he had never seen even one. Green wasn’t found much in Suna, except in the greenhouses, and the cacti. There were no cacti here though, unfortunately. And Gaara hated the greenhouses.

He hated this forest too, and for the same reason. It wasn’t so much the plants, which were the most worthy forms of life in his eyes. It was the humidity.

He hated it. It clung to his skin, oppressive and suffocating, far from the dry air of Suna. The earth was damp and rich, compact. Gaara was used to being surrounded by sand – in the air, in the ground, everywhere. This felt like a betrayal, the very world around him not at all as it should have been.

Why was he even here?

*Why are we even here? Why? Why?*

Temari and Kankuro were eager to finally make chunin, after missing the last exam because of civilian unrest in Suna. But Gaara couldn’t have cared less – such concerns where of no use to him. He didn’t go on missions, he wasn’t part of the shinobi force.
He wasn’t part of anything. He stood apart, as he always had, and always would. Temari and Kankuro could have done with any other genin entering the exam too. There was no reason for him to be here, in this awful place full of trees and water.

We should kill as many people as we could, to make up for it.

It wasn’t a bad plan, expect it was, because Temari had given him a lecture about limiting casualties before their departure. He didn’t understand it, at all.

Gaara was made for killing. It was the sole reason for his existence, it was why they tolerated him in the village instead of losing him in the desert, it was why his father had given up on trying to have him killed – even if that was also to put on the fact that he simply couldn’t. Gaara was supposed to be a killer, and yet every time he did kill someone, it always ended up being a bad thing. It made others even more afraid of him, made his father rub his temples in annoyance and Temari look away from him, as Kankuro frowned and glared, upset.

Gaara didn’t get it. If it wasn’t for killing people then he had absolutely no reason for existing. And even here, where they were supposed to fight to the death to determine who among them was worthy of a better title, he still couldn’t do that.

It was all so confusing. It made him angry. It made him want to just do as he pleased – it’s not like any consequences would befall him anyway. They couldn’t do anything to him, they had no leverage, they couldn’t hurt him. And yet…

We can’t do that. Temari said not to.

So what?

She said not to.

Temari had asked, and sometimes, when Temari asked something of him, and he did it, she looked at him in a different way than usual. He couldn’t decipher it, but it felt better than when she saw him as a disaster waiting to happen, or that had happened already. So he tried to do as she asked, if he could, sometimes. To get that look.

There would be enough fighting, he was sure, where casualties would just be inevitable. Besides, the exam would be full of ninjas from the other villages, and these were always good to get rid off, right?

Temari and Kankuro were on edge, Baki too, and it put him on edge in return. He didn’t know if they were expecting something to go awry in Konoha, and if that something was just him. But them being on edge put him one edge too, which probably made it worse for them in turn.

Why hadn’t they just left him in the village?

Why are we here? Why are we here? Why?

The line of trees finally broke down to give way to the walls of the hidden village, and surely there would be fewer trees beyond the fortifications. He couldn’t help but have some sand fly off around him, trying to shield himself from the humid air, even if the sand was sluggish in such an atmosphere, even if it frightened the ones around him. There were two ninja in uniform waiting for them at the gate. They exchanged a few words with Baki – Gaara couldn’t care less about what they were saying. He followed mindlessly until they were seated in a guest room with three futons and the others were unpacking their bags. Baki said he had “things to take care of”. Gaara didn’t have a bag. It was all very confusing.
We hate it here. Hate it. Hate it.

Little could anchor him to the present moment, he was always drifting off like this, lost in an inner world he couldn’t even navigate. Sometimes he was there, sometimes he wasn’t – it’s not like anyone could notice.

Temari and Kankuro’s inane chatter was grating, couldn’t they just keep silent? They were going on and on about how Konoha ninja were probably worth nothing and how the exam was going to be a piece of cake. As if they would be the ones putting any work into it.

Their voices were clashing against his skull, irritating the one living inside.

“Shut up.”

Silence came at last. He paid no attention to their outraged faces. They weren’t going to protest so they could pack back their mute anger.

“Let’s go out,” Temari suggested. “Take a tour of that dump.”

Staying in sounded more appealing, but he did have some curiosity about this strange place. He made for the door.

“You… want to come?”

She hadn’t meant him.

Hate her. So disrespectful.

Anger flared again, old and polished but still scorching, still as invasive as ever. They had dragged him here, here he was now. And they wanted to sidetrack him, again?

“Is it a problem?” he asked, knowing full well she wouldn’t answer, because they spoke up but they never backed it up. That was familiar too – the defiance not strong enough to stomp the fear he inspired them, the brief urge to talk back that faded away as quickly as it had come as they took a good look at his eyes, to evaluate his mood, which was always the same. Why did they even bother to talk at all. In the end they always fell in line.

He didn’t even want to come. But they didn’t want him to either, and he didn’t want to make it easier for them. They shouldn’t have taken him at all.

We should just kill them too.

No. Not them.

No. NO? Why not?

He didn’t know why not. But not them. Even if it meant angering the voice, meant it would be louder and harsher and meant he wouldn’t be able to tune it out and would lose time to it again.

They found themselves in the streets. People looked at them funny, but Gaara realized, with some great disbelief, that it wasn’t aimed at him in particular.

For how commonly known his reputation was in Suna, it was nothing here. These people didn’t know him. He was nobody to them.

Kill? So they’ll know.
Maybe he ought to. They had to know. They had to know he had a purpose, a use, that he had a reason for being down here in this world. They had to know, so that he would too.

Kankuro bumped into someone.

Naruto and Sasuke glanced at each other and Sakura could just tell they were going to disappear to train again somewhere. She understood the urge, but Kakashi was right, they needed rest now.

And she needed them not to leave her alone.

“Don’t,” she said, not as firm as she would have wanted, when they jumped from their seat, food gone and ready to go. She didn’t look at them even if she could feel the weight of their interrogative gaze on her shoulders.

“I know that you… have your own thing going on. I won’t ask, if you don’t want to tell me. But we’re going in as a team tomorrow and… And we need to stick together. All three of us.”

She berated herself for sounding so pleading, so vulnerable. But she didn’t want to be left behind, for them to forget about her.

She looked up to find the boys locked into a glaring contest, with no idea what they were trying to silently debate. Naruto lost though, or maybe it was Sasuke, because they both looked unhappy about the outcome.


With Naruto, it never felt like winning, with how reluctant he looked even when he was in agreement. She had learned to ignore it. Questioning his motives and inner thoughts got tricky really fast, so she stuck with what he deigned to say plainly.

Shisui was used to seeing them invade his house at all hours now. Naruto’s room was their HQ, since both Sasuke’s and Sakura’s house were as uncomfortable welcoming Naruto as he was going in. She wished her parents would make an effort to at least pretend like they weren’t wary of a sulky twelve-year-old, but alas, no such luck. Sasuke’s parents did a better job, or at least his mother did, but Naruto always looked like a commoner at the emperor’s table any time he was confronted with any sort of family life.

Besides, he felt safe at Shisui’s place, he felt at home in his little room. And Naruto feeling any kind of comfortable and at ease was rare enough that Sakura and Sasuke indulged in whatever way they could.

“Hello you three! I had a feeling I would be seeing you today.”

“Hi Shisui.”

“Thank you for having us.”

Naruto stayed silent, as embarrassed about them being friendly with the older Uchiha as if he was an overbearing brother or parent. She couldn’t pretend to understand their relationship, she didn’t even know why Naruto lived here. Shisui was good with him though. That’s all that mattered.

“You might want to turn right back, we’re out of snacks,” Shisui said, holding out a few bills. He knew them well. “Not you,” he added, grabbing Naruto by the hood. “You have something to do.”
Shisui jabbed a thumb toward the sink, piled high with dirty dishes. Naruto grimaced.

“Come on! Can’t you take my turn?”

“No can do. You were the one to insist we shared the chores, and the system is absolute. Besides, I don’t want to. And I have a friend swinging by soon so get going.”

For Naruto, this kind of things had to be quite new, when it was so common for everyone else. As it was, he grumbled and mumbled, but he complied willingly enough. Any kid would have run with the opportunity of being spared house chores, and yet it stood to reason that he would do the opposite, especially seeing that Shisui still refused to take his mission money as compensation for his living expenses. Naruto didn’t want to be a burden. He wanted to be useful.

And, maybe above all else, he wanted to belong. To the house, to the village, to the world. He wanted to have his place somewhere.

Sakura relay needed to get her parents in check.

“We’ll leave you to it Naruto!” she exclaimed with a smug grin, delighted not to have to do that. “We won’t be long.”

She glanced at Sasuke, half expecting him to opt out and stay with Naruto instead, but he was already out the door. She waved at Shisui and followed him.

The nearest grocery store was just a few streets away, but the trip seemed to stretch out with how sullen Sasuke was. He had an intense look on his face and she could only assume he was debating something with himself, lost in his own mind. It wasn’t so often that it was only the two of them – maybe he didn’t know what to say to her.

She was at a bit of loss too, and had settled for random chitchat when he spoke.

“We’re trying to find how to control the Demon Fox,” he said in one breathe, still walking fast down the street – she had to take bigger steps to keep up.

“That’s what we’ve been doing. I thought you should know.”

“And... how is it going?”

He wrinkled his nose – not so good then.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

She tried to keep the hurt from her voice and mostly failed. It was supposed to be the three of them together. Besides, she was smarter than them. She could have helped.

“Naruto said he would. But I guess he didn't really mean to. He doesn’t want it to be known.”

“Yeah but...”

It’s me, she wanted to say. She wasn’t just anyone. She wouldn’t have told.

“Why tell me now then?” she asked, split between being angry at Naruto for keeping her out of the loop, and at Sasuke for spilling when it wasn’t his place, even if she was glad to know. Why could nothing ever be easy between them.

“We don’t know what will happen. During the exam. It can be pretty brutal. And... if something
happened. You know, like it did back on the bridge in Wave Country…”

She had a flash of Naruto with his entire arm through the Kiri nin’s chest, blood soaking his clothes, splashed on his face. It was so vivid, sometimes she could swear she was back there, she could hear the disgusting sound of Naruto pulling his arm free, the beautiful, lifeless face of the one they called Haku, and the panic on Naruto’s, on the verge of breaking down. She wished she would have hugged him then, tried to comfort him, but there were so much blood and gore, and he had claws where nails should have been, huge teeth poking out between his lips. It wasn’t something she wanted to see again.

“If it happens again, I don’t know if we’ll be ready to stop it. So… So you’ll have to run, alright?”

Her first instinct was to protest, to refuse. But the image was still there. She could still feel the oppressive wave of chakra that had descended upon them all at once, bitter and corrosive. What could they do against that?

“What about you?”

He pinched his lips, displeased.

“I promised I would stop him.”

“But…”

There was no guarantee he could. She couldn’t imagine Naruto ever getting over hurting Sasuke for real. But if they left him to his own device, who knew what kind of power he could unleash, what kind of destruction he could cause?

Why did it fall upon their shoulders. Why did they have to deal with any of this.

That reminded her…

Her thoughts were thrown into a scramble when she ran into another person, so focused on their conversation she had neglected to look where she was going.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to…”

“Look where you’re going you idiot!”

Taken aback, Sakura could only gape at the stranger who was staring her down with a dirty look, his expression visibly disdainful despite the purples lines painted across his face. His clothes were odd, all black with a cat ear shaped hood, but most importantly, it wasn’t Konoha’s symbol that was engraved on his headband.

It was Suna’s.

“She was just distracted,” Sasuke countered, displeased. He took badly to anyone being disrespectful and antagonizing for no reason.

Next to the unknown boy was a blonde girl taller than all of them and not looking much more sympathetic than her companion.

“Do you have permission to be here?” Sakura asked curtly. They were foreign shinobi, they couldn’t just wander the village as they pleased. The girl scoffed.

“We’re here for the exam,” she said, waving a pass under their nose. ”The chunin exam? I guess
you didn’t hear of it, you must still be in school."

The girl smirked as Sakura fumed, clenching her fists. But a third voice spoke up.

“Can’t you two just shut up.”

The boy was younger than the other two, and yet both his companions stiffened, losing some of their arrogant confidence. Sakura was no sensor and wasn’t particularly good at feeling auras, yet even she could tell that there was something, with that boy. Something they ought to be careful about, something threatening.

“What’s it to you, Gaara?” the first boy asked, defiant despite his obvious discomfort.

“If you get to fight, then I will too.”

It was not much by way of a threat, but it shut the other boy up instantly. That Gaara had yet to pay them a single glimpse of attention, until they heard some footsteps echo in their back.

“What is taking you so long?” Naruto asked from behind her. “Are you…”

Sakura was no sensor. And yet she felt it distinctly, as surely as if they had been in a movie, music coming to an abrupt stop as something major happened on screen, even though she had no idea what it was.

They were taking too long and he had felt the urge to go investigate. He couldn’t stay still for some reasons, he felt restless, moved by an unknown compulsion. He needed to find something. There was something out there, and it wasn’t his two wandering friends. Something, something… or someone.

“What is taking you so long? Are you…”

It’s not that he saw him, not really. He didn’t notice him as one would notice another person in a crowd, if his attention had just been caught at random. His presence became known to him somehow, all at once, he became aware of him standing just a few feet away, inexplicably certain that it was mutual.

Most importantly, it felt like recognition.

*I know you.*

He forgot what he was saying, what he was even doing here in the first place. All his attention moved to the boy with red hair, who was staring at him just as intensely, and he was overcome with the certitude that they knew each other somehow. Even if they were from different villages, even if they had never met.

*We are the same.*

It wasn’t recognizing an old acquaintance. What he saw was something familiar, similar to himself, to his own reflection in the mirror.

“Who are you?”

He barely registered the confused faces around them, asking what was going on with varying degrees of anger and displeasure. He couldn't have cared less. The boy’s face didn’t let much
show, and yet Naruto could read him like an open book, could see his very own thoughts and feelings being reflected back at him. The same. The same.

“I’m Gaara of the Sand. And you?”

“Uzumaki Naruto.”

That’s wasn’t it. That wasn’t what he wanted to hear, and maybe that wasn’t what he had to say either. The demon was agitated, walking circles around its cage, as restless as Naruto felt – or was one restless for the two of them? Naruto couldn’t make the difference between their emotions sometimes.

It was pretty clear now though. Naruto was seeing something on that Gaara’s face, in his watered down eyes. And the beast was seeing something too.

Naruto brought a hand to his stomach. Above his seal.

“I’m Kyuubi.”

The boy's eyes widened imperceptibly, but he understood. He recognized too.

“Ichibi.”

*One Tail.*

They were the same.

The exact same. Naruto didn’t know how it was possible, why it was, but they were the same, they were hosts the same, they were monsters the same. One tail, nine tails. Loneliness and resentment in every line of their faces, in the light of their eyes. The same.

*Can’t believe they let that bastard out of the teapot.*

His head was swimming, thoughts tangled and confused, and he didn’t know how it was possible and he didn’t understand, but there was something settling down deep inside his chest, something he was so familiar with he hadn’t really noticed it. He knew nothing of that boy and of anything really, but Naruto had gained a certitude he didn’t have a minute ago, one he didn’t know could ever come to be and one he didn’t know he craved so much.

He wasn’t alone.

There was another. At least one, and who knew? Maybe more. One Tail, Nine-Tails, so maybe, in between…

*The more the tails, the stronger the Biju,* came the smug voice of the Beast, faking disinterest but wide awake like he rarely was.

*Biju?*

“What’s going on here?”

The others turned their gaze towards the two men fast approaching – Genma and some stranger. Naruto didn’t look away from the boy and the boy didn’t either.

“Nothing, Baki,” the blonde girl said hastily, mistrust and confusion making the statement unconvincing.
“Let’s go, Naruto”, Sakura said from his side. Naruto registered his two friends walking away, but couldn’t bring himself to do the same. Couldn’t bring himself to break their gaze. What if he disappeared once Naruto turned his back on him? What if he was just imagining things?

“Naruto. Come on.”

Sasuke went as far as grabbing his arm, stirring him away. Naruto came back to reason, realized that he was once again acting really weird and that if he didn’t snap out of it they would tell Shisui, or anyone else, and he couldn’t have that. He didn’t want to answer any question or explain anything – he just wanted to talk to the boy.

Gaara. Ichibi.

The others turned away too, going in the opposite direction. Naruto could still feel him. He was there, close to his mind like no one had ever been before, and close to the Beast too, whose interest was piqued, a clear sign that there was something going on indeed, that Naruto wasn’t just making this up.

He followed blindly his friends to the store and back to Shisui’s, vaguely registering he had a guest over, mind entirely focused on the short encounter.

And on the next time they would meet.

They had to be here for the exam. It had gained a lot more appeal to him suddenly. He needed to see him again. To talk, or to fight maybe, he didn’t know. That urge to fight him, he had no idea where it came from.

“-ruto? Naruto!”

It took Sakura shaking his shoulder to bring him back to his room where his two teammates were eyeing him worriedly. He shook his head, displacing invading images of red hair and the love kanji staring at him, mocking and pleading at the same time.

“What?”

“What was that, back then? Who was this guy?”

He sighed. He had hoped they wouldn’t ask, but they weren’t so keen on letting things slide lately, always pressing, always wanting to know.

“I don’t know.”

“Naruto…”

“I don’t!”

It was the truth. He had no idea what was going on.

“I just… it felt like I knew him.”

“Like… you had met before?”

“No.”

They exhaled the same frustrated sigh.
“Say, Naruto. I’ve been wondering,” Sakura said, taking it upon herself to get them out of that topic, which he would have been grateful for if he wasn’t wary of what she would say next. She didn’t look that confident either, but she soldiered on, as she was known to do.

“Where was it before? The Nine-Tail? You know, before it was…”

She pointed at his stomach.

Naruto was feeling dramatic, so he would say the question was akin to being struck by lightning. Sasuke looked similarly mystified by such an obvious interrogation that they had never thought to ask before.

“I… I don’t know.”

In all the stories they had heard about the day of his birth, the beast had descended upon the village like a natural disaster, without warning or mercy. But where had it come from?

“If it was roaming the land before, we would have heard about it,” Sasuke said, a tiny frown of concentration showing he was now invested in the matter.

A giant fox wandering the forest couldn’t be called a surprise. It had to be something else.

“You know, it could be like, it was, huh… You know?” Sakura said, making a vague hand motion encompassing her whole body. Both boys gave her a puzzled look.

“Maybe it was… with somebody else.”

It took Naruto a second to understand what she meant.

“That’s… How would it have gone out then? Besides, they had to seal it away so that they could stop it, right?” Sasuke asked, mildly distressed. That was nothing compared to what Naruto was feeling.

“I don’t know, I’m just wondering,” Sakura said, defensive. “What do you think, Naruto?”

He didn’t think anything. He didn’t want to. He did remember Mizuki’s words though. Such power, it has to be available at some point, even if it’s so very hard to control. So it’s better to seal it into a human. But he didn’t want to think about it.

“You could ask the fox,” Sasuke suggested, and Naruto’s entire body went rigid as if he had been punched. Sasuke seemed to realize what he had said just a second before Sakura let out a puzzled “ask who?” She connected the dots immediately, of course.

“You can talk to it?”

It was easier to focus on his anger over Sasuke’s careless comment instead of the hurt and confusion in Sakura’s voice. Sasuke wasn’t going to take it gracefully though.

“You said you’d told her,” he stated, defiant. Naruto knew he had no moral ground to be the angry one in this situation, but knowing never helped actually calming down. On the contrary.

“And I was going to!”

“No you weren’t!”

Maybe he wasn’t. He had some vague hope that if they never mentioned the demon at all ever
again and that he managed to keep it locked up for good, then Sakura would forget about the whole thing, and he would feel better. Sasuke was already too involved in this. Naruto just wanted to forget about it altogether. He wanted it gone from his mind, both in the literal and in the metaphorical sense.

To the point where he had been seriously looking into his own seal lately.

“What does it say?” Sakura asked, uncaring of their squabble, hurt over his omissions already fading away in front of her undying curiosity. He couldn’t stand her glinting eyes, her interest in this as if it was another subject of study and not a scary, terrible thing that had ruined his life so far and would continue to do so. She saw the Nine-Tails merely as a curiosity, mysterious and exciting, and it made him almost regret she wasn’t simply scared of it instead.

“It’s none of your business,” he said curtly. He was feeling terrible, nauseous, he just wanted to lie down and stop thinking about any of it. Sakura wasn’t on board, obviously.

“It’s important! Maybe we can…”

“We won’t do anything! It’s none of your business!”

“You’re our teammate! We need to know this stuff!”

Was he? Did they? Sakura was a scientist at heart – she just wanted to know more, always. And Sasuke was afraid, Naruto could tell. He was afraid it would get out of control, since they hadn’t managed progress significant enough that it would help them feel more confident about this. Naruto couldn’t blame him though – he was scared too. All the tales he had heard about the exams had done nothing to reassure him. Bad enough if he maimed someone from another village, but if it was someone from Konoha…

It didn’t matter that the exam was dangerous and people there died all the time. If it was him, it wouldn’t be the same. It wouldn’t be okay.

He wondered if the Ichibi worried about that too. Probably not. Naruto recognized murder intent when he saw it. Usually people’s ire and hatred were directed at someone specific – him, often enough, but others too. It was the first time he met a person who just wanted to kill the closest human alive.

Naruto wasn’t afraid though.

Nine tails beat one any day.

“I want to stop talking about it.”

“Come on, Naruto…”

“Please. Stop.”

The only inconvenient of hanging out at Shisui’s was that he couldn’t just leave when he had had enough. It came all at once, every time – one minute he was fine, the next he couldn’t stand another presence, he was overwhelmed by the need to be alone and out of sight.

They needed a better friend. With some measure of luck, they soon would. Sasuke and Sakura could make it through the other side, he was sure, and he could just stop with the shinobi nonsense and focus on something else.
His seal, maybe. How to break free. He had ideas.

For now though, they wouldn’t go away. They didn’t insist, but they got closer, and the three of them huddled together, trying to find some measure of comfort against this impenetrable world.

Hyuga Tokuma had been sitting at Shisui’s table for an entire hour and in that entire hour, Shisui hadn’t managed to make him smile once.

He took it as a personal failure – he had been told many times that he was the funniest Uchiha around. He was aware that it wasn’t exactly a compliment or much of an achievement, but he chose to view it as such anyway. After all, how many people could pretend to have drawn a laugh out of Uchiha Itachi himself? Shisui was freaking hilarious.

Tokuma was a tough client though, in a genre totally different from Itachi. Itachi was all brooding and melancholy – Tokuma was just absurdly serious.

It was sort of a good thing, since they were here to work, after all. The Hyuga jounin was the one among the other Academy teachers that Shisui had deemed the most likely to help him with his project of bringing some changes around the ninja school, an appreciation he had based entirely on the disgusted turn of Tokuma’s mouth that appeared during most staff meetings when they reviewed programs and pedagogy methods. Plus, he was the second youngest after Shisui himself – the rest of the teachers were a few years older and not interested at all in putting in any more work than strictly required.

Well, he couldn’t say Tokuma exactly looked interested either. Tokuma didn’t look like much – like most Hyuuga, his default expression was subtle disdain and disaffection, but Shisui had learned from working with some of them that it was more of a genetic curse than an actual state of mind, even though some knew very well how to be contemptuous dicks.

Usually, members of the main branch.

Of course, all clans had some level of internal hierarchy, more or less pronounced, more or less official, that distributed privileges unevenly, but the Hyuuga sure took the cake. It was never discussed, not with them anyway. Others could criticize it quietly and speculate on this or that Hyuuga’s status, but the Hyuuga themselves stayed very tightlipped about it, and very susceptible about any mention of it in their presence.

Shisui didn’t know which side of the clan Tokuma belonged to, and he wasn’t about to ask.

It was irrelevant to their affairs anyway – despite looking completely disinterested in the question, Tokuma had accepted to help him scavenge around the archives for some sort of information about the school system in other villages, and their own old one. Information was scarce, but he was hoping to get inspired by it, if only into what not to do. Seriously, some of this shit was insane. It was a common joke among the population that no one knew if only unhinged people became shinobi or if it was being a shinobi that made them unhinged.

He didn’t have the answer and would rather not ponder about it too much, but what he was seeing on those reports tipped the scale quite clearly.

And didn’t give much ammunition for jokes.

Oh, he would have managed to make it funny, he was sure, had he had a more willing audience. But more than the lack of smile, Tokuma almost looked offended by attempts at humor and
anything that would lighten the studious mood.

Shisui couldn’t help but see it as a challenge.

He was interrupted in his next attempt, however, by Sakura and Sasuke coming down the stairs. One look at their frowning faces was enough to guess the day’s mood. He would have to drill Naruto for answers later.

“We’ll be on our way. Thank you for having us,” Sakura said, in that way she had to always be polite but always looking like she had no idea why she had to be. He waved at them, ready to go back to teasing Tokuma, when he noticed Sasuke trailing behind.

“What is it Sasuke?” he asked, used to the boy’s “I want to say something so ask me” attitude.

“I heard you talk with my mom the other day. You were saying Naruto was getting better,” he said, looking straight into Shisui’s eyes. The more embarrassed he was, the more confrontational he became, as if he was trying to get over his emotions by exposure.

“Yes?” Mikoto often asked after the boy. Shisui couldn’t fathom why Sasuke looked so displeased with that.

“He’s not.”

The tone was absolute. The next second, he was gone, vanished out the door, leaving Shisui dumbstruck at his kitchen table.

The silence stretched out as he stared at the door and tried to gather up a list of things that had happened recently and that could justify what his cousin had just said, but Naruto was doing better. He was more talkative and open, looked less constipated all the time, and he had accepted to take the damn exam, it had to mean something.

Right?

A movement at his side abruptly reminded him that he wasn’t alone with his thoughts right now. Tokuma’s expression was as unreadable as ever, and instead of the questions or comments Shisui was sure he was going to make about that situation, he said “I think the "break your own finger and then reset it" lesson can join the "no-no" pile.”

It was only a way to move them back to the topic at hand, surely, but the blank delivery was just so on point, Shisui couldn’t help but laugh, very grateful for the other man’s restraint, or disinterest in non-work related business.

Shisui was distracted now though, and the Hyuuga noticed it soon enough. Shisui couldn’t tell if he was pissed by it or not, but when he asked if they could resume another time, Tokuma accepted, so not all was lost, probably. Shisui set to make dinner, something a little more elaborate than usual to occupy his hands and mind. Naruto would need the extra strength anyway. Shisui’s worries about the exam had been kept at bay by the fact that he had managed to wriggle his way into the organization team, so that he could keep up with the updates. It was coming back with a vengeance now.

Naruto came down from his room and set the table in silence. They still hadn’t exchanged a word when they started to slurp at their ramen. Shisuis was rapidly becoming an expert in the dish and would soon be good enough at it to open his own restaurant probably. Tonight though, it didn’t earn him even the smallest smile.
“Ready for tomorrow?” he asked lamely. Naruto shrugged, but his guard was up – he could tell when Shisui was being awkward. He scrambled for a way he could inquire about Naruto’s recent adventures without outright asking how he was, a sure way to push him further into his mutism.

“I heard you had befriended the Godaime, of all people,” he commented.

Naruto hanging out with an adult on his own was mindboggling enough, that it was a figure of the highest authority had made Shisui doubt the authenticity of the rumor. But both Genma and Raido had complained copiously about the boy stealing their new Hokage form her work – something that was intriguing enough that Shisui almost regretted leaving the Anbu and missing it.

Then again, for having met Tsunade, he could sort of see how they would get along. He was greatly taken with the woman himself, since she had been actually interested in his nervous rambling about the Academy, a topic no one above the age of twenty seemed to have any interest in in the whole village. She had given her green light for his looking into improving the whole system – a mighty argument for winning stuck up Tokuma to his side.

But what they said about her was true – she was brash, blunt and didn’t care about being liked, much like Naruto. And she treated him right, from what he could gather. That was enough to propel her high on his list of agreeable people. And on Naruto’s too.

His answer, however, wasn’t nearly as enthusiastic at Shisui hoped.

“We hang out, I guess.”

“You circle is expanding,” Shisui teased lightly. “You need more friends.”

“She’s not my friend.”

Shisui was surprised by the regrets he thought he could hear in Naruto’s voice, despite the finality of the statement.

“Why not?”

“She’s the Hokage.”

“Even Hokage have friends.”

There were weirder things than the chief of the village befriending a twelve-year-old. Age didn’t mean much for shinobi, especially once they were out the Academy and into the ranks.

“I don’t have Hokage friends.”

Naruto was slowly but surely losing his temper. He was more defeated than angry though.

They had never talked about it, but it was pretty clear Naruto didn’t hold much love for the Sandaime. It was understandable. But the Godaime?

“No matter how nice she is to me,” he said, and he was talking to himself now more than to his guardian. “No matter what she teaches me, and how she treats me. If need be, she will be the one to send me back into the cage.”

It appeared clearly then, what Sasuke had meant.

It was always the same, wasn’t it? Things happened. Everyone involved was very shocked and hurt. And then some moved on.
But others didn’t.

Kakashi went to the Memorial Stone, by all weather and at any time, and he stared at it for hours, motionless, as still as the stone. Itachi wandered around with haunted eyes, unable to trust himself with the smallest decision, feeling guilty of any piece of reprieve he got.

And Naruto trashed and turned in his bed, begging to be let out, woke up drenched in cold sweat and scrambled to open the window wide anyway, to let the chill of the night in, and often went up to the roof just because he could, to prove himself he wasn’t trapped down there.

Others moved on, but those at the heart of it all remained stuck.

“It won’t happen,” Shisui said, fully aware he couldn’t pretend to have any certitude about this, getting a harsh look that told him Naruto knew it too.

Sasuke was the first one to arrive, and Naruto was the last, as per usual. He wasn’t late though, so Sasuke said nothing. Naruto looked tired – he still said nothing. Sakura did and got a snappy answer for her troubles. Her persistence in front of Naruto’s reluctance was both honorable and tiring.

Dozens of genin were converging toward the Academy, where the first task of the chunin exam would take place.

“Ready?” Sasuke asked, so that he wouldn’t have to give an answer himself.

“We’re gonna kick ass,” Sakura declared, adjusting the strap of her sword on her chest.

“Can’t wait,” Naruto drawled out. It was maybe even true.

“Let’s go then.”

Chapter End Notes

Did you miss Sai? Cause I did. Also Sakura has a sword, so I'm gald. Also these are my first OCs, I guess? Don't ask, I don't know what I'm doing.

I'll try my best for the tasks not to be just a rehash of canon. The second will be different anyway, and the first, a little too. Is that the angst train I hear coming. Maybe. Soon will be upon us the Naruto & Gaara Epic Bonding Arc, so stay tuned. Also some politics, some Sanin... yeah I'm great at teasing my stuff. See you!
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

First trial.

Chapter Notes

I mentioned before that I didn't like to recount canon events. Can confirm. A good thing that I have an inordinate amount of love for that arc. Also I've been rereading it and it's way darker than I remembered. The Forest of Death is a freaking nightmare. Somehow I had forgotten that I would have to go through all of it plus the preliminary tournament... Sigh. This chapter is a bit shorter than usual (meaning 8,4k haha). Enjoy!

Also, I drew Naruto and Gaara, for your consideration.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

None of them had ever seen so many foreigners. They strolled the corridors in packs determined by the symbol on their forehead, around their neck or on their shoulders, friendly with those who wore the same, distrustful and menacing with everyone else. It was all the more jarring that they were investing the Academy, used to a crowd of much shorter invaders. Sakura and the other genin of her year were among the youngest – the average was twenty, twenty-five years old. A few were twice that age. All looked eager to fight.

Sakura was lost in a weird mix of trepidation and anxiety – despite the fear and worry that all those ninjas inspired her, she also felt the urge to stand up to them, to prove herself to the crowd. After all, they were here too, her team and her friends, they had a legitimate claim on the chunin promotion, just like anyone else. What a high it would be, to succeed where so many would fail, to come out victorious on the other side. Her determination was strengthening by the minute, fed by the simmering animosity hovering above them all.

Weirdly enough though, the first person to antagonize them had Konoha’s leaf engraved on his headband.

“Uchiha Sasuke!”

Oh, Sasuke knew that tone. He had come to decipher over the years the many ways in which virtual strangers would shout his name unprompted. Girls’ voices would usually be full of adoration and try to engage him in an activity he wouldn’t even partake in with his closest friends. Boys’ voices were like that sometimes too, but mostly they sounded just like this one. He even knew what words were coming next.
“Fight me.”

Right on it.

Sasuke let out a heavy, heavy sigh, and turned to face the stranger. Who wasn’t exactly a stranger – it was a boy about his age with a shiny bowl cut and big eyebrows. He had seen him before at the Academy and when they had signed up for the exam. He was in Hyuuga Neji’s team, a fact that made Sasuke even less receptive to the challenge. And he wasn’t receptive in the least to begin with.

He answered straight from the heart.

“No thanks.”

Eyebrows obviously wasn’t expecting this, but really, what did he think? If Sasuke indulged every shinobi who wanted to measure up to him, he would have done nothing at the Academy but fight all day long.

And Sasuke, in the deepest and most secret recess of his mind, had that small, hidden fact carefully stashed away – he wasn’t exactly fond of fighting.

He liked to train with his brother or his friends, because they had a good time and he liked the competition. But he couldn’t in all honesty say that he enjoyed fighting. It was just an inevitable occurrence of their shinobi life, one he had no intention to perform unless necessary. And beating up a fellow ninja just because he wanted to wasn’t necessary at all.

“No do you not think me a worthy opponent?” the other boy asked, the anger building in his voice a warning that maybe the fight would be inevitable after all. Sasuke derided no small amount of pride from being a member of the most powerful and recognized clan of the village, but he could have done without the envy and competition that followed. Defying an Uchiha was both a straightforward way of assessing one’s own skills, and of gaining respect and levity, if the fight went well enough. Each and every one of them had had to deal with it at one point or another. Sasuke remembered Itachi deftly dodging surprise requests for a fight or a training session at the most random times, of his brother being approached even when they were just hanging out together, getting snacks or chilling in the village.

So very rude. Yet another reason for them to stay within the relative peace of the Uchiha district.

“I’m just not in the mood,” Sasuke answered, judging best to keep to himself that he would be hard pressed to value the boy’s worth in any way, since he didn’t even know his name, let alone his fighting skills.

By his side, Naruto took a step forward.

“I am though,” he said nonchalantly, looking like he did, indeed, want to punch someone, as he often did. “Wanna go?”

The other boy frowned his impressive eyebrows.

“Who are you?”

“Sorry, I don’t go first.”

The boy looked absurdly embarrassed, given the situation, when he realized how rude it was not to have introduced himself. Provoking strangers into fights was okay though.
“I’m Rock Lee.”

“And I”, Naruto said, falling into position, “am gonna kick your ass.”

Regardless of the fact that Sasuke very much doubted that – the name Rock Lee, he had heard before, and the boy’s guard was flawless – he really wasn’t in the mood for this.

“Leave it Naruto, there’ll be plenty of fighting later,” he said, loud enough that Rock Lee could hear him too.

None of them seemed in agreement.

“I need to know how I measure up, Uchiha Sasuke. And I will.”

Fast was all Sasuke had the time to think, when the boy all but vanished in front of them. Sasuke didn’t see him rush toward them, and even if his trajectory was not hard to guess, all he could do was put his guard up and prepare for a hit, any hit.

A foot clad in hideous orange warmers flew toward Sasuke’s head.

It never connected.

Instead, it struck hard against the lacquered wood of Sakura’s sheath, that she had put up in front of her like a shield, both hands gripping firmly each end to absorb the strength of the blow. She had jumped in front of him, not because she had followed Lee’s movement or anything, but purely by reflex. She had her back to Sasuke, and yet he could feel the magnitude of her anger, radiating off her whole body. Naruto was pressed to her side – Sasuke could barely see Lee, beyond the wall of their two bodies.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Awestruck, Lee put his foot down slowly, opening his mouth around some justification. Sakura didn’t let him speak.

“He said no! He said he didn’t want to, meaning he doesn’t want to! What’s so hard to understand about it for you? Are you dense? Who do you think you are? We’ve done nothing to you! Why are boys always like that, what’s your problem, huh? What the hell is wrong with you?”

Sakura had no problem with fighting at every turn. But she took great offense at any form of bullying.

Rock Lee was left speechless and getting smaller and smaller as Sakura’s kept setting him on fire with her gaze and words. The cold determination in his eyes was gone, replaced by awkward embarrassment and shame. A normal reaction to anyone getting a taste of Righteous Sakura. She would come back from the high soon enough and be embarrassed too, but at least it was efficient.

“I’m sorry ma’am. I was out of line. Forgive me.”

Sakura lost her momentum and reddened to the tip of her ears as Rock Lee bowed to her low enough that his forehead touched his legs. Naruto only laughed, boisterous and a little mean.

Sasuke was suddenly filled with overflowing affection for his two friends.

“Just… Just don’t do it again! Be more considerate!” she shouted, voice derailing as she fought her own nerves. The boy nodded, a little awed.
“Can we go now?” Sasuke asked. He didn’t care about sounding rude – Lee had been rude first, so he was allowed.

As they resumed walking toward room 301, Sasuke wondered if he ought to be angry at Sakura and Naruto for stepping in like this, as if he couldn’t handle himself. He couldn’t bring himself to though. They, unlike him, liked to fight a lot, and he was fine leaving it to them if they so wished. Besides, they only did it because they cared. Which was nice.

He wondered where Lee’s team was. Sasuke didn’t know Hyuuga Neji personally, but their two clans generally didn’t get along, and Sasuke couldn’t imagine the boy being any less pompous and disdainful than the rest of the Hyuuga. Maybe they would get to fight – it would please his father, if he could beat him.

It was going to be a very long day.

.

She hadn’t thought there would be so many people. And she didn’t like the way they looked at her, at them.

Technically, the chunin exam wasn’t a contest, its purpose wasn’t to pitch candidates against one another. They were compared, yes, but they had to meet the standards to pass, they weren’t judged by how many people they could beat.

And yet, looking at all of those strangers now, feral and bloodthirsty, it was hard to remember this was an official examination and not a clandestine fighting pit.

In this ocean of animosity, Ino’s relaxed face jumped out like a single flower in a patch of grass, and Sakura made a beeline to her friend, intent on ignoring everyone else and knowing the boys would follow. The other genin of their years had had the same instinct, for they were all gathered in that corner of the room, one faction among many.

“Ino!” she called, reaching out to touch, relieved to step into her friend’s shadow. Ino was fearless, and she was standing there as if waiting in line for a waffle, supremely unbothered.

“Hi there cherry pie! You’re almost late.”

“We ran into a rude interruption.”

She cast a dirty look at Rock Lee, entering the room behind them with a member of the Hyuuga clan and Tenten, the blacksmith’s apprentice. The two girls exchanged a quick nod, and Sakura relaxed a little. Maybe the boy wasn’t too bad, if he was on Tenten’s team. It wasn’t the first time they were interrupted by someone challenging Sasuke, and it was bound to happen again during the exam. They just had to gear up for it – Sasuke’s last name would attract competition, it was inevitable.

Next to him, she was as good as invisible. It was both a relief and a little vexing.

Sakura quickly greeted the others. None could pull off the relaxed-and-bored pose as well as Ino, and their expression and posture were more like her own, anxious and trying to hide it. It was reassuring in a way.

Sasuke mingled too, but Naruto stayed at the edge of the group, silent. When Sakura followed his gaze, she found the Suna nin from the previous day staring at her friend, their eyes locked, blind to the rest of the world. Their face didn’t show anything of their feelings, of what was going on in
their mind. Still, she felt the urge to shake Naruto, to break the contact. She didn’t like those people. She didn’t like anyone here.

“So,” she started, anxious to dissipate some of the tension brewing. “Ready for today?”

It didn’t work as hoped. Ino clicked her tongue, irritated, as Shikamaru sighed heavily.

“There’s nowhere in the world I want to be less than here,” he declared, tone dragging. Ino kicked him in the shin. Things weren’t any better between them, it seemed.

“If you’re too scared to pass the exam, you should just fuck off right now,” Kiba commented with a grin. “Less competition for us.”

“In your dream Kiba. We’re going to crush you,” Ino shot back, already ready for a fight. Hinata and Shino stayed silent, as always. Kiba made enough noise for the three of them.

"Our team will come out on top," the boy promised, jabbing a thumb at his own chest. "What do you think, Sasuke?"

Her teammate shrugged.

“We will make Chunin,” he said simply, profoundly uninterested in petty competition. Kiba snarled, annoyed. Competition was his reason for breathing. Naruto would take him up on it, often enough, if only because riling people up was his reason for breathing, but he was still removed from the whole exchange, focused on the Suna boy.

That was, until they were accosted by yet another stranger.

“You rookies should really jot it down. You’re not at the Academy’s playground anymore.”

Ino was ready to go for his throat already. She couldn’t maim her own teammate so she would jump on the opportunity to express her frustration on someone else.

“And who are you to tell us that?”

“Kabuto. I have years of experience on you, and if you don’t realize you’re painting a target on your back right now, then you really don’t belong here.”

Tuning back on the general mood of the room, Sakura had to admit he was right – all eyes in their vicinity were trained on them, and not in a friendly way. She gulped at the open hatred she could read in some of those faces.

“Rookies are always a preferred target for those who want to maximize their chances of success. Especially those from other villages,” Kabuto went on. She couldn’t tell if he was warning them or trying to scare them more.

“You’ve tried the exam before?” Sasuke asked, curiosity winning over his wariness.

“Seven times.”

He said that simply, without shame or embarrassment, while the others gasped, taken aback. Seven times? Really? Was it supposed to be that hard? She had the impression that people made Chunin all the time.

“You must have a lot of information then…” she pondered aloud, curious despite herself. She hated going in blind – she wanted more intel. She wanted to know what they were getting
themselves into.

“I do. Interested?”

They all were, Sakura could tell. Yet it was the moment Naruto chose to step back in and speak up, although he was still looking away.

“Careful,” he warned. “He doesn’t wish you any good.”

“That’s harsh,” Kabuto said with a laugh.

He didn’t know it, but he had already lost his audience.

The thing was, all of them, they knew each other well, very well. For better and worse they had grown up together, shouldered the Academy and their lives as genin together, and maybe for an outside eye they would seem like an unruly bunch with no lost love between them, but they were in this together. They would sooner help each other out than leave anyone behind. They knew each other, and there were things that were known among them.

Like Shikamaru’s stupid intellect or Sasuke’s knowledge on the most obscure things, and Ino’s power of information gathering or Shino’s freakish predictions that always came through.

And they knew, in that confusing way you could be convinced of something without being able to explain why or provide any justification, that Naruto’s instinct about people was always to be trusted.

“I guess we’ll just have to wait and see,” Ino concluded dramatically, turning away from the stunned Kabuto. The others followed suit. If Naruto said he was bad news, then they would assume he was.

“You’ll regret not accepting my help,” Kabuto said good-naturedly, but he had lost a lot of his easy cheers. Choji shrugged at him with an apologetic smile, as if to say “what can we do?”. That was the end of it.

They were not so naïve as to ignore that they would have to turn against each other too, at some point. For now though, they would stick together.

They didn’t have the time to resume idle chit-chat – in a puff of smoke, a cohort of Konoha shinobi appeared in the exam room. Sakura recognized some of them, Shiranui Genma who had collected their inscription forms, and Izumi who gave her a small smile before assuming back the serious expression they were all sporting. Leading them stood an intimidating man with deep scars running across his face. He looked at the gathered participants with an undecipherable expression, severe and unyielding.

“I am Morino Ibiki, proctor of the first stage of this year’s chunin exam. You will be handed a number in exchange for your exam notification, and you will seat accordingly. You will then be handed the test sheets, and I will explain the rules of this exam.”

There was a short pregnant pause as everybody took the measure of what had just been announced. And then, from somewhere beside her, came the disbelieving voice of a very pissed off Naruto. The room was silent enough for him to be heard clearly despite his grumbling. He gave a good summary of the general sentiment.

“A damn written test?”
There were none of those questions he had the smallest hint of an answer for. Naruto had made do in his last year at the Academy, but he wasn’t and would never be an intellectual. He didn’t even understand these questions, when he could read them at all. If this was their way of saying that in addition to being a pain, being a shinobi included stuff like this, he was going to quit for good.

In the meantime, he had to think of something. As much as he didn’t want to be here right now, he wasn’t doing it for himself. He had to see Sakura and Sasuke to the next level of the ladder. He had to fight for their chance, at the very least.

All around him everyone was slowly coming to the same conclusion. There were a few people writing, but not many – most were staring at their test in despair, looking frantically around them for an inspiration, or a way out.

Naruto didn’t know the answers, and neither did most of them.

So he had to cheat.

He had to right? He didn’t like the idea – he had never cheated on a test, not once, despite being in this exact situation many a time, without the slightest clue what to write down, despite having been accused of it on multiple occasions. It just wasn’t a thing he wanted to do. He knew how easy it could be, and he had been tempted to more than once. But what would have been the point? He didn’t care about his grades – didn’t care about the Academy at all. He had no intention of putting any effort into it, even the minimal effort required to cheat.

Besides, he appreciated being able to say, confidently and without lying, that no, he hadn’t cheated on that test. All his teachers always assumed he did, and most of the kids too surely. But he knew the truth. He knew and could affirm without the shadow of a doubt that every and all of his answers, good and bad, had always been his own. That he didn’t rely on anyone else to work for him.

That he wasn’t a damn cheater.

Things were different now. It was the results that counted, and the results would be elimination if he didn’t do something. Sakura would be fine – with that big brain of hers, she would be the one people would cheat with no doubt. She had to be pumped about this, she had been so worried about what would be asked of them, but this was just her speed. Sasuke would be okay too. He was smart, and he had the Sharingan, which was a built-in test cheater if there ever was one.

And what did Naruto have?

Well, Naruto had a neighbor with the Byakugan.

He didn’t think he had ever spoken a word to Hyuuga Hinata, or even heard her voice, but that didn’t mean he considered them strangers. He had often run into her in the forest near the river, practicing her clan's taijutsu alone very early in the morning. She always looked determined but also pained, he always had a feeling that she would rather have been doing anything else, and yet. When she noticed him, she gave him a shy nod, but she never walked away from him, never tried to send him away either. They had shared many quiet mornings like this, at a respectable distance and without a word, but together nonetheless.

As such, he was reluctant about conning her.

He looked around him as discreetly as he could, planning, assessing. He couldn’t think of a better
idea. He would apologize later. Maybe.

He was surprised she had turned to cheating so soon after realizing she too was at a loss as to how to answer the test’s questions. Whatever her reasons, she was determined, just like the rest of them.

There was a guy a few rows before them who was actively writing, without ever pulling his head up. She turned her weird eyes to him. Naruto was unfamiliar with the scope of the Byakugan powers – all he was interested in right now is that it was efficient. She managed to glean answers from the man, and soon enough, she too could cover her sheet in pencil scratches.

He monitored her progress closely, waiting until she had enough answers for him, but also enough time left to start over. She was four questions in. It would do.

A few shinobi had been stricken out already, spotted by the examiners. Naruto wasn’t too worried about that. He was both an accomplished pickpocket and a successful jounin evader. He would have no problem fooling them.

He carefully wrote Hinata’s name at the top of his sheet, before seating back, and, stretching casually, he reached behind him and knocked down some poor idiot’s water bottle.

Hopefully he too would have the time to write his answers again, but Naruto wouldn’t lose sleep over it. He was well within his right to wish for fewer participants to reach the next level, right? At any rate, the man reacted as expected – he leaped to his feet with a curse and started to insult Naruto copiously, drawing the attention of everyone in the room. Naruto was deft of hands and could multitask – with a careful read of where eyes around them were looking at, under the guise of shying away from the man’s anger, he timed his action carefully, and sat back satisfied in his chair when his victim had been ordered to calm the hell down and had received a new test. Hinata exchanged a sympathetic look with Naruto that made him feel terrible, especially when she went back to her own test and he saw the surprise on her face, when she found out the sheet was blank.

She raised her eyes just in time to see him erase her name from her test he now had under his hands, and pencil in his own.

There was nothing she could do about it, not now. Even if she complained, she couldn’t prove the theft, and time was running out. The examiners would tell her to get over it just like they had that guy and his water bottle. Naruto had no doubt others had worked to sabotage the concurrence as much as to secure their own performance. That’s just how these things were supposed to work.

That didn’t make the confused and hurt look she leveled on him any easier to bear.

He looked away. His deed was done, his grade secured above zero – he rested his head on his folded arms, to prevent his answers from helping anyone else and to protect it from a comeback theft. All he had to do now was wait for the mysterious tenth question. At his sides, Hinata started to write again from zero.

A true fox, whispered the voice inside of him, impressed for all the wrong reasons.

Just shut up, he answered. It didn’t quiet the laugh.

“If you chose not to answer, you will be disqualified this year. And if you do, and you get it wrong, you won’t ever be allowed to pass the chunin exam again.”

Now that sounded a bit… extreme. There was still more than a hundred person in the room, and
surely it would never stand that none of them would be able to make rank ever. It just wasn’t realistic.

But then again, if it counted on the fact that some would give up and some would be able to answer the question indeed…

Sakura shook her head. What a shitty choice to make.

In all probability, the first part of the test was just designed to weed out those of them who couldn’t do some basic cheating without getting caught. She had seen it happen all around her – culminating in freaking Ino and her mind jutsu. She could have chosen anyone else, but of course she had turned to Sakura, confident she would have answered all the questions. It was flattering for sure, but also infuriating. Ino had watched her do all the legwork just to sweep in last moment to reap the benefits. Even if it was precisely the spirit of the task, it was still maddening. She would make her pay.

If they made both made it to the next stage.

She had to believe her teammates had managed to scrape up some points, but what to do now? If the tenth question was anything like the nine others, very few people would be able to answer it, and they all had to be aware of that. But then again, maybe it would be something completely different. The test had proven not to be interested in actually testing their intellectual skills – another thing to be bitter about, why were they never interested in their intellectual skills? – so it wasn’t unlikely that the mysterious question would be vastly different.

Still, would they be able to answer it?

“I… I yield.”

She couldn’t see from what village they were from. Not from Konoha, that was for sure, unlike the second person who took the same decision. Their numbers were called, along with their teammates’. They all exited the room, defeated, head and shoulders low.

Another raised their hand, then another, finding the strength now that they weren’t alone in that decision.

What to do, what to do?

A few rows before her, Sasuke turned ever so subtly to look at her. With an almost comedic timing, Naruto did the same – they glanced at each other briefly, and then looked back at her. One with a tilt of his head, the other jutting his shin out, questioning.

“What do we do?”

They knew she would most likely be able to answer the question, whatever it was. If they botched this, it wouldn’t be her fault, but theirs.

So they wanted her to decide.

They listened to her. It was always surprising, no matter how many times it happened – when they needed a plan, when they were wondering what to do, they turned to her without fail, waiting for her judgment. They could argue, but in the end she had the final call, always. They trusted her judgment.

She had never felt it more acutely than in this moment, and it had never felt so heavy, so
burdening, that trust. What if she made the wrong call this time? Their failure would be her fault then.

The thing was, there was the logical reasoning weighing the pros and cons, trying to calculate and ponder and think.

And then there was the part of her that recoiled at the idea of just… chickening out.

It would be safer to retreat, not to risk it. But oh how loathed she was to raise her hand, to give it up. To go back home weighed down by failure, never knowing if she could have made it further, or worse, hearing that she could have, after all. That it was the wrong choice. And even if it wasn’t… What satisfaction would it bring? Even if the final question turned out to be impossible to answer, would she feel good about it, knowing she hadn’t even wait to hear it out?

She was distracted from her thoughts by a familiar silhouette starting to raise a hand not far from her, someone who had less reason than most to be doing that. She blinked, confused as to why Shikamaru, of all people, would want to opt out of a theory question.

He didn’t have the time to though.

In her back, someone slammed their hands on their desk, and Sakura didn’t have to turn to know who it was, could picture her jumping on her feet and glaring hard enough that the boy had to feel it.

“I swear to all the gods there is Shikamaru, if you raise your fucking arm I will rip it out of your fucking body.”

The boy pivoted on his chair to meet Ino’s eyes, with the same bored demeanor he always showed and that drove her crazy.

“Isn’t it the safest option?” he asked, and it was so damn hard with him, to know if he was mocking of just disaffected. Sakura understood why Ino had so little patience for him.

“Screw the safest option. And screw you, you dick! How dare you! You’re only saying that because you want to leave this place.”

Shikamaru had to be the least ambitious person Sakura had ever met. She didn’t understand him at all. He wanted nothing out of life, he had no drive, no passion. It was no surprise he and Ino couldn’t get along.

The proctor looked very amused by the exchange, and did nothing to stop it. Sakura was embarrassed on behalf of her friend, while knowing it was pointless – Ino didn’t know shame. She didn’t care.

“You should want us to stay, Shikamaru. With luck you’ll be banned from ever becoming a chunin.”

Even Sakura knew that was unfair – the boy wouldn’t go that far. He wouldn’t do that to his team. But Ino had been on edge lately, way more than usual, for reasons Sakura hadn’t been able to pry out of her. And she had been considerably less tolerant of Shikamaru’s bullshit. It was probably linked somehow.

“If we fail,” Ino said, hard and determined, “it will be because we weren’t good enough, not because we’re pathetic cowards, or lazy pieces of shit like you.”
He just shrugged in answer, always of a few words, another thing Ino had against him. Sakura had been trying to give her pointers – between Sasuke and Naruto, she had plenty of experience in the No-I-Won’t-Voice-Any-Of-It department. For all that Ino complained Sakura was lucky with her team, she would have gone crazy in team 7. Shikamaru and Choji were her friends, as hard as it was to see that right now.

“Your call, boss,” Shikamaru said.

“Damn right it is.”

She sat back, and he didn’t make another attempt to check himself out of the competition.

Neither did anyone else, actually. Her outburst had settled it somehow. Sasuke and Naruto didn’t turn to Sakura again, and she realized her decision was already made too. They wouldn’t walk out.

The proctor assessed them quietly, looking at each and every candidate with a calculating expression. Was he trying to intimidate them? To judge their motivations and values? Who could tell?

“Very well. I suppose this is it then. All of you have chosen to hear the last question. And all of you…”

Just then, his attitude changed entirely. He relaxed, lost some of the harshness that was darkening his features, and he smiled a crooked, wicked smile, as if he was in on the funniest joke in the world that no one else was privy to.

“…have successfully pass the first of the chunin exam’s trial. Congratulations!”

They were all too dumbstruck to react. For a moment.

“What—what? What do you mean, that’s it?” Sakura exclaimed, unable to contain herself. “And the tenth question?”

“There is no tenth question. Or, well, let’s say that choice was the tenth question, in a way.”

She sat back into her seat, shocked, as others shouted questions and protests. The man talked about the vital skill of collecting information, even pointed at some chunin infiltrated among the participants, to serve as targets. He uncovered the consequences of that particular game in real life, scars and burnt tissue covering the skin of his skull hidden under his Konoha headband. She had to look away from the gruesome testimony to how far it could go, chewing the inside of her cheek where her own scar tugged at the skin. As they grew older they would all sport more and more of those, until it was the norm rather than the exception.

Retrieving information without getting caught, at any price, she understood the importance, she got the point, but…

It meant that actually knowing how to answer the test counted for nothing. Nothing at all. It was supposed to reward good cheaters, but it was possible and even likely that some had simply not been willing to risk it, and had waited with a blank page for the tenth question that could save their ass.

That she had answered all these questions had no weight at all.

“That choice was the most important of all, in a way. Give up, or keep going? On a mission, it’s no choice at all. You can’t just turn back because you’re not sure you’ll succeed. You have to keep
But what if they knew for sure it was pointless? What if they did calculate the risk, and figured that the odds were awfully unbalanced?

Shouldn’t they have turned back, that day on the road to Wave Country, after the first attack? Yes, they would have abandoned the mission, fail their objectives. She was convinced they should have anyway. This mission shouldn’t have been theirs to handle in the first place. What was so wrong about deciding that you were in over your head, that it was safer to retreat?

Sakura was used for her particular brand of skills to be entirely undervalued. She had always excelled in class, constantly at the top, getting the best grades and always grasping everything faster than the others, but a bookworm had no value in the shinobi world. It had only ever earned her passing praises from their teachers, but as long as she wasn’t that good at fighting, they didn’t care. That she could indeed make those calculations, determine if it was indeed worth the risk, nobody cared. That she could come up with a better, safer plan, an alternative that would save time, resources, or blood, nobody cared either.

To think she had thought her intellect would have value for once, but the worst thing was that that test had proven exactly how right they were to dismiss it. The safer choice would have been to give up and it was the impulsive decision ruled by her feelings that had been the right one in the hand. Had she listened to reason, she would have raised her hand. Instead, it was competitiveness, pride, blind bravery, recklessness that were rewarded.

She looked down at her useless test, that didn’t sport a single mistake, she was sure of it. She felt the urge to rip it to smithereens, to scream, to break something.

Thus when one of the windows exploded inward, for the briefest moment she thought it was her fault somehow.

The woman did an elaborate flip while throwing four kunais that pinned to the floor and ceiling the four corners of a flag where “On to the second trial with Mitarashi Anko” was written in messy white paint.

The dramatic entrance was received with awestruck silence, broken only by a snicker from somewhere on the side. Naruto saw Izumi try to stifle a laugh, and that’s when he remembered where he had heard the name before. That Anko was the girl’s mentor of sort, the one who had fetched back Old Tsunade.

As such, Naruto decided on the spot that she could be trusted. Besides, she looked infinitely more fun than that gloomy guy going on and on about pain and sacrifices for the good of the mission.

Her grin was feral when she announced proudly that she would eliminate half of them in the second trial. Yeah, Naruto liked her already.

They followed her out of the Academy, team regrouping to talk in hushed whispers about the trials, the one they had just successfully passed and the one that was to come. Sakura was sulking – maybe because she had almost walked them out of the exam. Naruto would have followed her lead, for he didn’t care much about the outcome, and Sasuke would have too, because she was the one who decided that sort of things. They passed the participants who had chosen to give up, and he could imagine the delight others would take in telling them they had been screwed over. Sakura’s face soured even more.
They were joined by Izumi, who, like the rest of the examiners, looked like she was having a much
cleaner time than them candidates, just as Sasuke was asking Naruto about his own cheating
methods.

“He swapped his test with his neighbor’s,” Izumi revealed with a grin.

“You saw me?”

“It was a good distraction, but I know you. I knew not to look away.”

“That’s not fair,” he grumbled, annoyed that she had seen so clearly through his little act. She
chuckled, but she was serious when she answered, “it often isn’t. Besides, the enemy having intel
on your capacity and even personality is nothing rare.”

Didn’t they know that. They were all acutely aware of being under all the other genin’s scrutiny,
while doing some scrutinizing themselves. The chunin exam was a good opportunity to assess the
other villages’ strengths, and if they had made little display of those during the first task, it was fair
to assume the next step would be different. Hiding their strongest assets and capacities while trying
to draw out others’ was as much a part of the test as anything else.

Kakashi had told him, in not so many words, that it would be best for him to hide his status of host
to a raging beast.

It was so strange to be among people who didn’t know to hate him on sight. Oh, they hated him
plenty of course, but no more or less than all the other foreign shinobi. Just for that, Kakashi’s
warning had proven useless.

That was without counting that there would be another one.

He didn’t exchange much more than a few stolen glances with the Suna boy – Gaara, Gaara was
his name. He was still hyper-aware of his presence, attuned to it like nothing else before. Was he
hiding too? Was he, too, surprised by the anonymity brought by such a large crowd of strangers?
Naruto was dying to ask, but now wasn’t the time.

They stopped near a remote training ground that, unlike most, was surrounded by high fences and
unauthorized to civilians. Something that didn’t bode well for what was to come. The woman in
charge, Anko, looked delighted. She pointed at the ground behind her, massive trees forming an
impenetrable wall that made what lurked behind a complete mystery.

“The second trial will happen here;” she announced. “This is training ground 44, otherwise known
as the Forest of Death.”

There was a dramatic pause – she was obviously very pleased with that.

Naruto couldn’t help but scoff.

“Is that supposed to be scary?”

As an answer, the woman threw a kunai to his face.

He maybe would have died, if not for Izumi, who stepped in deftly and deflected the blade,
flashing briefly the red of her Sharingan.

“Anko-sensei! Please stop trying to scare them! There’ll be plenty of that later!”
The woman barked out an ugly laugh, proud of the display.

“You’re right, you’re right. Gather round, idiots, it’s time for some rules to be laid out. And zip it if you don’t want to take a kunai in your meaty parts.”

Her smile was promising. No one piped out a word, and Naruto was sure she was disappointed.

“Alright. You have collected crucial information during the first trial, and now, you’re gonna have to defend it with your lives.”

She produced two scrolls, marked with either the “Earth” or the “Sky” kanji.

“Each team will receive one of those. Your goal is to steal the scroll you don’t have from another team, and make it to the tower in the center of the forest before the end of the trial. If you make it without both scrolls, you’re out. If you don’t make it, you’re out. If one or more of your teammates is critically injured or dies, you’re out.”

That woman had no business looking so pleased about all this.

“The trial will last five days.”

Now that was a news people had things to say about.

“Five days? How will we eat?”

“You’ll have to provide for yourself. We didn’t pack you picnics, jeez.”

“What if we’re too injured to continue?”

“Examiners will patrol the forest. It makes for less fun, but well, it is the will of the bosses to limit casualties this year. Of course if you receive any form of help from them, it will disqualify you immediately. If you feel the need, you can always cry for help, and maybe someone will come and save you.”

Her smile was even wider now.

“Just state clearly that you’re giving up, and you will be heard.”

The same sentiment traveled through the crowd. "Who would do that?" Most of them would sooner die of perfectly treatable injuries than of the shame of being rescued. It was the same as the first task, in a way. A way out, but at the cost of their dignity, of the respect of their team.

It only promised for fun debate amongst them, Naruto thought bleakly. Oh, well. They just had to stay in one piece.

Above the murmurs and interrogations, another voice rose, clear as a bell despite its low, syrupy tone.

“Is killing other participants a motive for penalty?”

All eyes turned toward the ninja. Naruto couldn’t tell if they were a boy or a girl, face hidden by a large bamboo hat and an abundance of long, flowing dark hair.

“ Needless killing won’t bring you any bonus, that’s for sure, and just because you’re the last one standing doesn’t mean you’ll be promoted. That being said…”
Anko grinned. From under their hat, the stranger answered in kind, darting the tip of a pointy tongue between their lips.

“No. No penalty.”

It was almost a physical thing, the feeling that swept over them, crashed into Naruto. Elation, satisfaction, outrage, fear. But that one ninja…

“Very well then! Pesky details are out, time to fill in some consent form stating you’re aware of the risk you’re taking – I wouldn’t want to take responsibility for your death. Then you’ll be handed your scroll and gate. Have fun!”

Most looked skeptical about that but they complied without complaints. The other Konoha rookies went into motion too, but Naruto was rooted on the spot, staring after the long-haired stranger.

There was something, something…

“Naruto?” Sakura asked, waving a hand in front of his eyes. He put out a blind arm to stop the first one that was walking past him. It was Shikamaru. Whatever.

“Don’t go near that one.”

The others stopped too, followed his gaze. Kiba snarled.

“Yeah, no shit.”

“I mean it. Don’t go near him.”

“Like that Kabuto guy?” Shikamaru asked.

“No. Not like that.”

He could tell Kabuto meant them no good, but it was nothing compared to what he was feeling now. He was used to negative emotions, feelings of anger and fear, resentment and thirst for revenge, desperation, hatred.

This was nothing like it.

There was no feeling involved, nothing personal. The stranger had asked what killing would cost them, but Naruto was convinced they didn’t care about the answer either way.

A predator.

A predator, that’s what they were. And everyone else was a prey.

“Don’t go near him.”

Hyuuga Neji scoffed in disdain, but Sakura caught Tenten’s gaze, and the girl gave the smallest nod. The others would listen, even if they didn’t want to.

They handed out their sheet, they went to stand in front of their gate, a “Sky” scroll safely hidden among Naruto’s sealing scrolls. Izumi was the one who would open the lock for them. She gave them an encouraging smile, but she didn’t look much more confident than they were.

Scared, boy?
There was no need answering that. The beast knew of his emotions and thoughts, he could tell.

*Good. Not so dumb then.*

Izumi opened the gate, the h-hour upon them. In front of them the massive forest filled the entire space, buzzing with life and threats.

“Let’s go,” Sasuke said, resolute.

It was only five days.

“I still don’t think this is right.”

Hayate had stopped counting how many times Tenzo had said something along those lines since they had left Konoha, but now that they had reached their intended destination, eyes on the remote house at last, Yugao couldn’t help but snap back in frustration.

“I told you you were free to refuse the assignment. If you were so against it, why did you come?”

His eyes stayed riveted to the small house when he answered gravely, “I wasn’t going to let that happen without being here. But I still think it isn’t right.”

“The Hokage’s suspicions are legitimate. This isn’t unprompted.”

“If she’s so sure of herself, why the secrecy? Why not bring it up to the clan heads, make it official? It thought we were done with this kind of… things.”

He had a hard time keeping the disdain from his voice, as he gestured vaguely to the house and what they had come to do here.

“She didn’t want him warned. In case there is indeed a traitor among us.”

“Having justification doesn’t make it right.”

“I know, alright? I know. I share your reluctance Tenzo, I do. But I have no doubt the mission would have been approved by the majority anyway, and maybe it’s not the right way to do it, but it *is* the right thing to do.”

That point, Tenzo certainly wouldn’t be the one to dispute it. Hayate preferred to stay out of the debate – he was following Yugao’s gut instinct more than anything. She trusted the goodwill and intentions of the Godaime, and that was enough for him. She had to know that, or she wouldn’t have asked him to come, despite him not even being an Anbu. But for such a mission, absolute trust prevailed over ranks.

They trusted Tenzo too. He would argue, maybe, but he wouldn’t ever betray them.

“Let’s watch for a while, get a sense of what is going on. The Anbu stationed here on guarding duty aren’t aware we are coming. I’d rather avoid knocking them out if we can, but we can’t afford to discuss with them either. We can’t leave him any leeway.”

Tenzo agreed, albeit reluctantly. In a way, their opinions were in the wrong order – Hayate, who had seldom completed any mission that had tested his morality and sense of duty, had an easier time swallowing what they had been sent here to do than Tenzo, who had done only that for years. Maybe it was because he had been convinced that these days were truly over – he wasn’t even an
Anbu anymore.

Still, Hayate believed Yugao had made the right call by asking him. His presence was legitimate in regard to both his experience and his personal stake in the affair.

“Who’s here then?” Hayate asked to keep them on a professional track, away from the morality debate, at least for now.

“Uchiha Kamui and Inuzuka Hokuto, with her dog of course. They’ve been here for about three weeks. They’re supposed to be relieved at the end of the month.”

They focused on the house. They had climbed high on a luxurious tree that hid them from view while allowing a clear image of the modest residence. Well, it was modest for a house.

For a prison, it was a luxury.

They wouldn’t be in this situation if the traitor had been dealt with from the start. The Godaime shouldn’t have had to handle this. It was one of the last acts of the Sandaime, and unfortunately, it was the one that was weighing on them now, the one they had to be the consequences of.

Why, why had he let Danzo live?

Shinobi had been put to death for far less than the man’s crime, despite their records and past deeds, despite everything. Some things just couldn’t go unpunished. Hayate wasn’t an advocate for mindless violence, but he also understood how it felt, for all Danzo’s victims and for everyone else too, to know that he was still alive somewhere, living a captive but easy life.

Something that would soon come to an end.

It should have been public, fully endorsed. Instead, it would be a stealth assassination, a dirty work done after the facts, in secrecy. That didn’t sit well with him either. But bringing him back to the forefront and to anyone’s mind was out of the questions. Especially if, as the Godaime suspected, he still had allies inside the village.

“Look.”

Danzo walked out of the house to stand on the terrace, where a ninja landed a few seconds later, bowed, and handed him a sealed scroll.

“Isn’t that…”

“Yes,” Tenzo whispered, disbelieving. “It’s Hinoe.”

Former root member, and far from the surveillance he was supposed to be under.

They watched, bewildered, as Danzo sat at the table in front of the house with a brush and some ink. Yugao fetched a pair of binoculars from her pack.

“What is he doing?”

“I think he’s… copying something. The other scroll. It’s…”

Hayate caught the binoculars in extremis, as Yugao’s lost her grip on it with a shocked gasp that sounded like she had been punched in the throat. She recovered quickly and snatched it back, frantic. To make sure.
“What is it? What do you see?” Tenzo asked, a rare trace of impatience in his usual calm tone.

“I can only guess he’s copying a handwriting.”

“Why?”

She put the binoculars down to look at both her companions.

“Because he’s using a Sharingan.”

Chapter End Notes

It never occurred to me before that me foretelling shit in my endnotes could bother some of you (I got a comment in that sense recently). Sorry about that. I like the rambling though, so I can only advise you to skip if you don't want spoilers of any kind! You won't miss anything haha.

I said at some point that Danzo wouldn't come back to fuck shit up plot-wise and I stand by this. I'm about to deal with him permanently :)

The scene where Team 7 meets Lee is still one of the funniest to me in the anime, it cracks me up every time. I almost feel bad about changing it, but I have to commit to my choice of tone. But seriously, that shit's hilarious. We will expand on the other teams next chapter, notably on Íno and Shikamaru's particular brand of interpersonal issues. And the kids will run into our resident creep, of course.

Once again thank you all so much for your comments, reactions, thoughts and compliments. I do this all for you, you are awesome.
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Two hours into the second trial and it's already chaos.

Chapter Notes

I thought this one would be shorter. I was wrong. There's too much happening! What a mess. I'm tired so the notes will be short at least, and also maybe I didn't proof it as much as I should have... Sorry about that.
I wish I could write as fast as I plan stuff in my head.

Hope you'll enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They were barely twenty minutes into the forest and had yet to exchange a word. Naruto was the first to break their tense silence.

“I need to pee.”

Sakura could have killed him.

“You can’t be serious,” she hissed as they came to a halt in a small clearing covered with dead leaves and fallen branches.

“What? We left after the exam and came right here. I can’t help it. Relax.”

She had never felt so on edge in her life, it was as if the slightest disturbance would tip her over the edge and make her snap, and his casualness only made it worse.

But she just had to “relax” right? Just because they were stuck in hostile territory for the next few days with no food or shelter and surrounded by about fifty people out there to maim them didn’t mean they couldn’t be chill and go pee behind a tree like stupid kids on a field trip.

She could have killed him.

“Well go on then,” Sasuke said, better than her at keeping his annoyance in check, but annoyed still. She was aware that not taking anything seriously was Naruto’s own way to deal with this kind of stress, but she just couldn’t deal with it now, couldn’t indulge in his stupid bravado. They were in danger – they couldn’t afford to joke about it.

Naruto trotted away without a care in the world.

“Are you alright, Sakura?” Sasuke asked as soon as they were alone. His relaxed pose was misleading – he was on high alert, sharply attentive to their surroundings.
“Why do you ask?” she retorted, unwilling to appear so vulnerable at a time where they needed strength most of all. He didn’t catch the bite in her tone though.

“You look…”

He assessed her up and down, looking for the appropriate word, before settling on a lame, “tense.”

She couldn’t help but scoff.

“Must be the tension.”

Once again the sarcasm fled over his head, or maybe he was keeping it straight on purpose? He never knew when to leave things alone.

“We’ll be fine. We just have to be careful.”

“You don’t know that.”

She couldn’t believe it. Wave Country was fresh in her mind, how things could go so horrifically wrong in just a few seconds, how much stronger people there were in the world. In their little lives, in their own kingdoms, they would be fine, maybe. But out there?

People died during that exam. Somehow it was only hitting her now.

“You know he’s only playing dumb. He won’t let us down,” he said, missing the point entirely. She didn’t lack trust in Naruto’s abilities and commitment. She knew he wouldn’t put them in danger, no matter how carefree he looked.

“I just wish he took this more seriously.”

“He is.”

“Then I wish he was as scared as I am!”

She cast her eyes down, ashamed of the confession. These feelings were unhelpful, unwarranted, and only made her feel worst about all this. But she was scared out of her mind, didn’t know how not to be, and didn’t understand how they weren’t. Why could they manage that, and not her?

Why was she weaker than them?

“Naruto… he’s not scared by the same things we are,” Sasuke said thoughtfully. “He’s just not like that. He has… different concerns. You know.”

She knew their friend didn’t have the same relationship with life and death and fear and love than they did – he had grown up on his own, and under hostile scrutiny. He also didn’t got hurt like they did, and she wasn’t sure he was fully aware of that.

It would have been comical, the face he did when he realized normal people couldn’t walk away from some injuries he would shrug off as if it was a papercut, expect it was always guilt and regret that followed immediately after, as they were forced to interrupt their training to patch up the one he had roughed up a bit too hard. He had gotten better at this, but it was always an afterthought. He would probably never grow to be careful about his body the way regular people had to be.

There was something else though, that Sasuke was saying.

“Are you also…”
He looked away, stubborn.

“Everything will be fine.”

Sasuke and Naruto were apart from her, because they were strong and very close and they were both boys. But Naruto was apart from Sasuke and her too, because they had a family and a normal life and he was a pariah and hosted a demon somehow. And Sasuke was apart from Sakura and Naruto because he was from a prestigious clan when they were just commoners, raised differently and destined to a different fate.

And maybe it was just as well.

At the end of the day, it was still the three of them. Together.

She smiled at him, grateful, to his mild puzzlement.

“You’re right.”

She was scared and she felt helpless, but she wasn’t. She had her sword, her genjutsu, her training and her mind, and she had her teammates too. They only had to get through those few days, and they would be safe on the other side of the line. It would all be fine.

“I’m feeling much lighter,” Naruto exclaimed as he came back from the bush he had hidden behind. She grimaced.

“Spare us the details please,” she scolded, even if he only did it to gross her out. He dangled his dirty hands in front of her and made for touching her as she recoiled in disgust.

Sasuke stepped between then and punched him in the face, hard enough to send him flying.

“What the hell Sasuke! What are you doing!”

“That’s not Naruto!”

Not-Naruto was getting up, wiping blood from his mouth with a dark look on his face.

“What are you talking about?”

“You’re wearing your weapon pouch on the wrong side,” Sasuke deadpanned with no room for doubt. Sakura followed his gaze, as did not-Naruto, and sure enough…

“But that’s such a rookie mistake!” she couldn’t help but exclaim.

She pinched her lips as the expression on Not-Naruto’s face got even darker, cursing her big mouth. But really, it was. A classic mistake they all did on their first attempts at transformation jutsu, when they were facing their target and ended up rendering a mirrored version.

Still, she wouldn’t have noticed right away.

“I guess there’s no need to keep this up then,” Not-Naruto said, and it was a relief to see him change back into the Ame nin he was supposed to be, because she didn’t care for Naruto looking at them like that. The man had some kind of respirator in his mouth, with goggles and a uniform that covered most of his body. She theorized on some capacities for poisonous attacks, gas maybe?

“Where is the real Naruto?” Sasuke asked angrily. It only earned him a disdainful scoff.
“Who knows! Which one of you has the scroll?” the man shouted as he charged both of them. They jumped, each to a side – as expected, he followed her, the weakest looking, the easy target. She was past being upset about it. In a real fight, any advantage was good to take.

She slowed down enough that he thought he would easily catch her, and was focused enough on her that he forgot to account for Sasuke – until there was a fire jutsu speeding toward him. He was blown off of her heels, but he didn’t let that distract him, and aimed straight for the other boy.

Her teammate avoided a kunai easily but realized too late it came with an explosive tag. She let out a worried yelp as he flew backward, the foreign nin hot on his heels, another kunai in hand.

But they were close enough to her now.

Sasuke hated when she did that, but he had better aim than her, and she was better equipped for close defense. She drew her sword and signed over the handle.

“Substitution!”

She found herself right in his place, and he in hers. She deviated the enemy’s kunai with her blade, hoping the confusion would be enough to…

A kunai embedded itself deep into the man’s shoulder. Sasuke was as efficient as ever.

“You fucking brats…” the man spewed, trying in vain to take out the blade – it was too deeply stuck and too far to reach, and his hands were slippery with blood on the handle. He must have realized the position he was in suddenly, with both Konoha nin closing in on him, because he reached inside his weapon pouch to take out a kind of smoke bomb Sakura had never seen before.

She threw herself on Sasuke and dragged him forcibly away despite his protest, just fast enough that they avoided the purple cloud that sprung out of the bomb, enveloping the wounded nin. Just a whiff of it brought tears to her eyes and made her cough up around her irritated throat. Her instinct had been right about the man’s get up.

“What are you doing?” Sasuke protested, tugging against her grip but following willingly enough – he knew to trust her judgment at least. They stopped on a high branch, hidden from the ground by its luxurious leaves. She had never seen any like this.

“I’m pretty sure that was poison,” she explained between heavy huffs, trying to catch her breath.

“But we could have asked him where Naruto was.”

“Not if we were unconscious!”

Sasuke pinched his lips, recognizing she was right even if he didn’t like it.

“We can’t go back,” he said grimly, looking back to where they had come from. “That man’s team is probably around.”

She waited for him to say something else, to offer a plan maybe, a course of action. Nothing came.

“And you’re bleeding,” he added, displeased. She looked down at her arm, and indeed her forearm was open into a long cut, probably from their opponent’s kunai. She hadn’t even felt it. Sasuke took her arm to inspect the wound, brows furrowed in an upset frown.

“Naruto will find us back, right? He’ll be fine.”
She wished she could have sounded more confident, both for her sake and Sasuke’s. Naruto could take care of himself just fine, but this wasn’t like anything they had ever faced before. They had to do this as a team. They had to be together.

“Oh you lost him then? How unfortunate.”

They yelped – yes, both of them, she would stand by it – and jumped from the branch to get away from the ninja that had just materialized there. She recognized the creepy one that had asked if killing was allowed to the proctor. The one Naruto had warned them against.

“Will he come to your rescue, if I make you scream loud enough?”

They were one hour into the one hundred and twenty of the second trial.

“I’m lost.”

One didn’t grow up entirely on their own without developing a habit of voicing out most of their thoughts aloud. Naruto liked to nurture plants because they brought some life into his, and because they gave him someone to talk to. He had tried to befriend stray animals wandering around his neighborhood, but strays were too wary, too hurt, and if he managed to pet them and slip them a bit of food sometimes, they wouldn't approach him on their own.

It looked like it was the same here. He had a vague awareness of animals roaming the woods around him, but even wild beasts knew to stay clear of him.

Wasn’t he on the top of that chain, after all?

But he was also lost.

He had just wandered a few feet away to do his business in peace, but after walking back for fifteen minutes in the opposite direction with no trace of his friends, he had brilliantly concluded that he was freaking lost, with no means to find his way back to the rest of the team. Screaming after them seemed ill-advised considering the number of hostiles that could be within earshot. For now he had resorted to walk around aimlessly and tell himself from time to time…

“I’m freaking lost.”

He was looking for inspiration and trying to remember one of Sakura’s many rants about the fine art of infiltration missions in hostile territories. It's not that he wasn’t interested in what she said, but she tended to ramble on and on without taking a breath, and by the time he made sense of one sentence, she was done with the next. Plus he had a shitty memory. So, no help on that front.

It came to him just like that, the way ideas sometimes sprung in unprompted, seemingly from nowhere. There was something he could do find his way back. Or more specifically, there was someone who could help.

He knew the small seal by heart now, as well as the hand signs. He nicked a finger with his teeth – always sharp, sharper than average, or so he had been told.

“Invocation!”

His guest popped out in a puff.
“Hello, Naruto! It’s nice to see you!”

“Akito?”

The small pale fox smiled brightly, pleased as punch for some reason. Naruto tried to hide his disappointment.

“Akira’s not with you?”

Akito pouted, saddened.

“He’s busy with elders. They all are. I was so bored… Can’t I help you?”

“No, no, it’s not that!” the boy replied quickly, unwilling to dash Akito’s hope. “But… are you sure you’re allowed to be here? On your own?”

It was always surprising, the expression a fox’s face could convey. Who would have thought.

“Yes?”

Akito was a very bad liar.

“Please don’t send me back! I’m sick of being on my own…”

From what Naruto had gathered, there weren’t that many fox spirits in their mountain, and they were often caught up in their own business, whatever it was. There were even less young ones, though Naruto had to wonder what “young” even meant for them. Either way, with Akira growing into a more prominent position in their hierarchy, Akito was often left to his own device.

It was probably a bad idea, but Naruto didn’t have the heart to turn him away.

Plus he was kind of out of options here.

“Okay, listen. I’m lost in this forest and I do need help to get back to my friends, but it’s dangerous out there. If you want to help me, you can stay, but you’ll have to be careful ok? Akira will have my head if anything happens to you…”

Akito huffed.

“I may be young but I’m still a fox spirit y’know! I bet I’m stronger than you!”

“We’ll see about that. So, can you help me?”

“Sure!” Akito said, prideful. “But first, we need to get out of that genjutsu.”

Naruto tried his best not to look completely dumbfounded.

“What genjutsu?”

“To think we could be at home right now sitting on our asses and sipping lemonade or something…”

Ino punched Shikamaru in the face.

They rolled in the dirt for a while under Choji’s impassive eyes, used that he was to just wait it out.
Ino didn’t feel like calming down though. She didn’t care about the ruckus, that would attract unwanted attention, she didn’t care this was pretty much the least opportune moment possible to do this. She wanted to punch Shikamaru, and she fucking would.

“What’s your problem dammit! Ino!”

“You! You are! You are my fucking problem!”

He wasn’t putting much of a fight, because she wasn’t hitting him as hard as she could have. Still, his lips started to bleed where her fist split it open, and when her fit of rage had passed, he was covered in dirt head to toe and looking a little worse for wear.

She got back to her feet, tried to dust out her clothes. She felt better now, but also terrible, because that was reckless and dangerous and terribly undignified. He was at fault though, she wouldn’t budge from it.

“Why don’t you just leave then huh? Call out and tell them you’re given up. Go home.”

He got up too, properly pissed off now, even if with him it just manifested in an angry frown. Even moving his face was too much to ask of him.

“You know we have to win this thing as a team,” he mumbled, as if she could possibly not know that.

“And since when do you care?”

“Seriously, what’s up with you? Why are you like this lately?”

“Because you drive me fucking crazy Shikamaru! You’re the smartest guy around and yet you’re the dumbest. And the most selfish! Always thinking about your own ass, doing the least you can possibly do. Acting as if there is nothing to be fixed, all is fine, let’s just do nothing at all. And you shit on us when we try to fucking amount to something! You think you’re so smart for managing to laze around while others work, as if we were so stupid for sweating our asses off, but guess what, being a fucking slug is not everyone’s life ambition! You think it’s normal to be so lazy, that it’s our natural state and you’re the only one ballsy enough to embrace it, but it’s not. I want to do things. I want to change things. I want to accomplish things! And you can’t even respect that! You can’t put in a minimal effort at least for my sake! If you truly were any brave, you would have told your parents to fuck off and own up to your ambitions to be a human sloth, and you would have quit the shinobi forces. Then we would have had a spot in this team for someone who wouldn’t be a fucking dead weight!”

Her throat was hoarse at the end of her tirade. Shikamaru was dumbstruck and speechless, a rare occurrence for him who always had some smartass comments to make on the go. She felt her eyes welling up and looked away, wiping them furiously. She didn’t want to cry. She wanted to rage.

“Don’t you think that’s… maybe a little uncalled for?” he said. Luckily for him and his body integrity, he couldn’t fool her into believing that he was as unaffected by her words as he tried to pretend. She immediately felt guilty – it WAS uncalled for, at least part of it, even if it held some truth too. Since she wasn’t answering, he did what he always did in this situation – he turned to Choji for pointers.

For such a clever guy Shikamaru wasn’t so great at interpersonal relationships. He always said people were impossible to understand, especially girls, but she suspected he was actually quite frustrated by his failure at grasping people thoughts process and emotions, he who could
understand everything else.

He had Choji to help with that though. Choji could relate to anyone, put himself in anyone’s shoes, see the world through anyone’s eyes. And he was the kindest soul alive.

The other boy munched thoughtfully on a chip as they awaited his enlightened take.

“She got rejected from the Intelligence Department training program.”

She pinched her lips, offended that he could connect the dots so easily. How did he even know?

“I heard my dad talk about it with yours,” he said, reading her mind better than any mind jutsu ever could.

“But how? Why?” Shikamaru asked, puzzled. Tears were coming to Ino’s eyes again, tears of anger and frustration, and her voice was squeezed tight when she answered.

“They said they would consider it if I made chunin right now, even though most of us Yamanaka start training there after the Academy regardless of rank, because they had “other candidates that would be more suitable”.”

“You’re already the best spy of this village,” he retorted. She couldn’t help but smile – his compliments were always so deadpanned, spoken as a universal truth, since he knew better than anyone else anyway. It was heartwarming.

“Yeah, that’s not what counts.”

“What does then?”

“Can’t you guess?” she asked, irritated. She didn’t want to say it aloud. She didn’t want to think about it. He was being dense though.

“I don’t know. You swear too much?”

She could have laughed, but it wasn’t funny at all.

“I’m a fucking girl, Shikamaru.”

The way he gaped at her proved he hadn’t think about that at all, and it was irrational of her to resent him for it, to be jealous that he could afford to ditch that question entirely. It was irrational, and yet.

“No girl has gotten into the training program in the past ten years. They actually spelled it out to me! Like “it’s a very tough job you know, maybe not all that appropriate for you, and it’s very demanding so it takes a toll on your personal life, think about it, you’re young, you might regret getting into it later”, and yes they made a comment about me being too fucking emotional and I just…”

Again the tears rising and again that intense frustration at it that only made it worse. She was mad because she couldn’t keep them in and she was mad to be mad about it because she was upset dammit and what was so wrong with crying it out? But it was, it was wrong. It was perceived as a weakness, as a fault.

“I mean, are you sure that’s…”

“Yes I’m freaking sure!”
He looked skeptical and she wanted to punch him again. No matter how smart he was, he couldn’t understand things he couldn’t even see. And that was definitely something invisible to him, while it constantly featured in her field of vision.

“Couldn’t your father say something?”

“Oh, he was furious alright. He even took my side, for once. But we’re already accused enough of being favored at the Intelligence Department and of hoarding the whole place, so it’s not like he could make a scandal on my behalf…”

Her father was just as oblivious as the rest. He had been scandalized by the whole thing, because it was cunningness and intelligence that made him value a person and gender didn’t make it to his criteria. He was a minority in this though, and he was only discovering it now.

So fucking stupid, all of them.

“So you’re upset, I get it. What does it have to do with me?”

“You could… You could do stuff. If only you wanted. You could do stuff, stuff that I couldn’t, but you don’t.”

“Just because I can doesn’t mean I have to,” he said tightly.

She had hurt him, she knew it. They had been friends since before they could speak – she could read him like an open book. She had stepped into yet another complicated subject and she really regretted they had chosen now of all time to do this. It was a sensitive issue for him – the burden his abilities put on his shoulders. The idea that he had the moral obligation to do something with the gift he had been bestowed with upon birth, that he was wasting something by not doing it, and worse, that he was somewhat responsible for the things he chose not to get involved in, since he had the potential to solve them, but refused to. She knew him not getting into anything seriously was a form of rebellion against this, about the predetermination genetics dictated. He hated to be forced into anything, and maybe he would have turned out differently if he hadn’t been constantly told as a child that he was “going to do great things” and he had to “exploit that mind of his” and that he needed to “find a good use to his abilities”.

“I know that. But… I’m not asking you to do it for the greater good or whatever. I just wish you could… do it for me. For us. That you could at least recognize it’s not only about you. There are things that you can do, and I can’t, and I’m not just talking about your smart brain shit, I’m talking about you being a fucking guy here. And you don’t have ambitions, but I do, and right now we’re stuck together and… your actions have consequences dammit. When you sit on your ass doing nothing it’s me that you shit on. Just this time, this one time, it counts, alright? It counts that you get into it, it counts that you make an effort. Not for you maybe, but for me it means the world. I need to pass that damn exam. I need to get into Intelligence. I want things to change. But I need your help.”

Silence fell on the small clearing. Ino was exhausted, spent by her outburst. She turned around and started to walk again, trying to bring them back into motion, tuning back into their environment, paranoid suddenly. The boys fell into steps without a word. After a few moments of tense silence she spoke again.

“I’m sorry though,” she tried awkwardly, never at ease with her words after the storm had passed, after she had come down from her anger. “For yelling, and punching you. And for some stuff I said.”
Just because there was some truth in it didn’t make it okay to expose them so bluntly. Despite herself, she fell into the same patterns her father did – he had repeated to her often enough that this capacity they trained for character observation and analysis was to be kept tightly in check, in order not to hurt others unnecessarily. He said it, and yet he did it all the time – the danger was it became second nature to dissect the people around them for patterns, flaws and weaknesses, and it took conscious efforts not to use it against them.

“Yeah, you’re a real bitch sometimes.”

She rolled her eyes – was that the best he could do? His smooth-talking all but disappeared when he was confronted with an emotional discussion.

“You like me anyway.”

He shrugged.

“Yeah.”

She was more relieved by that than she let on. She hated when he was truly mad at her, as she hated being truly mad at him. In that sense she was glad they had yelled it out, even if it wasn’t the smartest thing to do right then.

“I understand what you’re telling me,” he added. “I’ll help you.”

She could have kissed him.

“Okay, I think it’s now a good time to inform you that we’re very likely trapped in a genjutsu.”

The nice moment was shattered as they both turned incredulous faces to Choji, imperturbable as ever.

“What?”

“We’ve seen this huge flower before, right next to that exact tree,” he said, pointing at the ugliest plant Ino had ever seen, bright yellow and covered in warts oozing a disgusting, foul-smelling fluid. Pretty recognizable indeed.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” she accused, scandalized.

“You two needed to talk,” he said simply. She realized that he had probably been monitoring their environment closely while Shikamaru and her were at each other’s throats, making sure no threat came their way as they sorted their shit out. He would think that lightening their burdened heart was more important than getting out of a closed-loop genjutsu.

Her team was the fucking worst.

“Are you sure it’s this way?”

“Yes, yes! It’s very easy to track, just trust me!”

At this point Naruto didn’t really have any choice, so he let Akito guide him through the trees, to where the caster of the genjutsu was supposed to be. He was stuck in some kind of loop – he kept running in circles despite walking straight, and Akito had said that he just had to incapacitate whoever was responsible to get out of it.
Here was to hoping they were on their own.

He had to hurry and regroup with the others. Who knew what trouble they could run into? Naruto needed to be there. He needed to protect them.

“We’re getting close! We just have to…”

Akito was finely attuned to chakra in all its form, but apparently physical attacks eluded him, because he didn’t sense the fleet of shuriken speeding his way. Naruto reacted on instinct – he put himself between the small fox and the pointy objects.

Akito shrieked in distress as Naruto snatched him up to stuff him in his hood, growling in pain at the three shurikens stuck in his back. He turned around sharply, looking for the source, heart speeding up, adrenaline coursing through his veins. “Stay hidden!” he ordered curtly.

From the huge trees and rocks around him emerged the dark silhouettes of a weird looking guy clad all in black, with a respirator in his mouth and a bandage around his eyes. Five, ten, twelve… Clones sprung up and charged him, kunai in hand.

Naruto ducked to avoid the first hit and kick the clone in the stomach – it dissolved into nothing. As did the next, and the next. But when a kunai nicked his face, the pain was real, as was the blood running down his cheek.

“What the hell,” he mumbled as his fists punched empty air. Were those illusions? But they could hit him just fine. Some unknown form of clones?

“They’re not real, they’re not real, Naruto!” Akito exclaimed from his back, poking his head out of the hood.

“Their blades look real to me!”

“But they’re not! I swear!”

So, fake bodies, real blades. There was only one type of clone – so one enemy? Naruto jumped around, doing his best to avoid the kunai. Where were they coming from, where?

“Fuck this shit.”

On such an uneven ground with so many obstacles, laying down a large seal was a pain. He ought to find out how to put up his chakra vacuum seal on vertical surfaces. Maybe he could even make it three dimensional, instead of it being confined to the ground.

For now, the ground would have to do.

He moved around, seemingly at random, trying to lay down the four points of the seal. Kunai kept coming at him, and some hit home too, but he didn’t care all that much. The pain was alright and it would heal soon enough, once he could rip them out. All the better if the enemy thought he was getting weaker and weaker.

Finally he could rally the center of the seal and activate it. With how shaky the laying was, it was much less efficient than usual, but genjutsu was rarely infused with a lot of chakra. The fake clones disappeared.

“Where are they, Akito?” Naruto called, knowing the seal wouldn’t last long. There was a short pause, before…
“Up there, up there!”

Naruto turned to the heights of a tree Akito was pointing at, just in time to avoid taking a kunai to the forehead. Just behind it came the same man, but he was made of flesh and blood this time, when Naruto dodged his extended arm and aimed a well-placed punch in his guts.

Thankfully, there was a reason why the man's strategy was a long-ranged one, and Naruto got the better of him easily enough in taijutsu.

He slumped in the grass as soon as the man was finally beaten unconscious, debating whether or not he ought to finish him. But he couldn't just kill a man like that, could he? He resolved to tie him up somewhere and steal all his shit. That ought to be enough, right?

As he was trying to decide if it was too much to steal the man’s clothes too – he had a cool jacket – a muffled voice came out of his hood.

“’m sorry, Naruto.”

Naruto had kind of forgotten about the little fox. He reached back to get him out and set him on a nearby rock.

“Are you alright?”

The pale orange fur was sporting a little blood, but Naruto was reasonably sure it was his. It reminded him that he still had some wounds to take care of. The cuts and scratches were healing already, but he couldn’t reach some of the shuriken still sunk deep into his back.

“I’ll help!” Akito claimed. He wasn’t too gentle about it, but it beat keeping them there.

“Are you alright? You didn’t get hurt right?” Naruto asked again, wondering if he was going to have the god of foxes on his ass very soon.

“No, I’m fine. You protected me. Thank you. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine.”

“I should have been more careful. It was my fault.”

Once again Naruto was taken off guard by the intensity of the emotions he could perceive in the small creature. Even sitting more or less like a normal fox, without clothes because they had agreed that would really be too freaking weird, there was no mistaking him for a regular one.

“It’s… it’s fine,” Naruto repeated lamely, ill-at-ease with the little fox’s distress. “I’m glad you’re okay. And I’ll be fine. Look.”

He showed him his skin through the holes in his sleeves – yet another shirt ruined. There were no injuries left. Akito wasn’t convinced.

“Just because it doesn’t show doesn’t mean it didn’t hurt. Doesn’t still.”

Naruto had nothing to answer to that.

Didn’t he know it. He reached up absentmindedly to run a finger on the edge of the mask constantly sitting on the side of his head, nestled in his unruly hair. Apart from the marking on his cheeks, Naruto didn’t have any scar on his body, and he never would.
Nothing would ever show. And yet…

He went back to the foreign nin – he couldn’t recognize the symbol on his headband – to pocket his weapons. No scroll, unfortunately, neither form the exam nor for seals.

He felt a presence behind him just as he was finishing up.

“Yo, Naruto!”

Spinning round, he was greeted with the smug faces of team 10, looking fresh out of a fight they had most likely won.

“What are you doing here?” he barked, defensive. Akito was curled around his legs, hair up, as wary as Naruto felt.

“We were looking to get out of an annoying genjutsu,” Shikamaru said as he kept advancing toward Naruto, “but it looks like you beat us to it.”

“Yeah, you’re too late.”

“We stumbled upon his two teammates. One of them was injured, the other was trying to tend to him.”

“And now?”

“Now they’re both injured,” Shikamaru concluded with a shrug.

That was one worry off of Naruto’s mind who had been dreading the team’s reprisal. He wasn’t off the hook though.

Ino went to pock at the unconscious nin, curious, as Choji got one of his usual snacks out of his bottomless weapon pouch, that, Naruto was almost convinced, didn’t contain a single weapon.

“You went pretty hard on him,” Ino remarked without showing much feeling about it, factual; Naruto shrugged.

“I don’t like to be killed so.”

“Fair enough. We found an Earth scroll on one of the other guys, but it’s the same as us. What about you?”

Caught off guard, he failed to answer quickly enough, and his hesitation was all the proof they needed.

Tension soared up as they went very still suddenly, gauging one another. He cursed himself for his misstep, but there was no taking it back now, and there was no telling what they were gonna do with that information. He didn’t want to fight them – he liked Choji well enough, Shikamaru was a good ally to have, and Ino was Sakura’s best friend. Plus, well, there were three of them and one of him, and he had little to no idea about what they were worth in a fight these days.

He wouldn’t hesitate to defend himself though, and it left him queasy not to be able to predict if he was going to need to. They weren’t in bad terms, but this was a tough competition.

Disturbed by the pressure, Akito climbed Naruto’s back to perch on his shoulder, tail curling around his neck as he too stared down at the trio. They looked marginally surprised but did a good job at staying focused. Naruto couldn’t help but tighten his fingers around the scroll in his stomach.
“I wouldn’t have bet on you to keep your team’s scroll…” Ino commented. She had circled back around him to regroup with her team. They stood as a unit in front of him.


“So. What now?”

“Come on, hold still!”

Sakura bit her lips to keep in another whine of pain and Sasuke felt guilty for snapping at her. But she really needed to stay still or it would hurt even more.

Sasuke was in the process of removing dirt from a nasty cut on her arm.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled as he picked yet another rock from the mess of skin and blood.

“It’s o-okay,” she said in a shaky voice. “You’re not… doing so bad.”

“No, I mean… I’m sorry for this. I didn’t know what else to do.”

“Oh. Yeah. Well it worked so… s’okay. Don’t worry.”

She said that, but he felt guilty anyway.

That man who had ambushed them in the woods was unlike any Sasuke had ever met before. They had been ready to engage in a fight, when he had made it clear that he wasn’t going to just let them go. But then…

Sasuke had thought it was an illusion, but it wasn’t. The fear that had gripped him at that moment, primal and overwhelming, the certitude that had possessed his mind that they were both going to die right there and then, it solely came from that man, from his desire and determination to crush them. He had paralyzed them both just with that, with the sheer power he could yield, and they had found themselves unable to move, unable to do a damn thing. Preys faced with their predator.

Sasuke was still gripping Sakura's arm then, fingers bloodied by her wound. He was out of ideas. And pain was a good wake up call. He had mustered up all his strength to dig his fingers into her wound.

It had worked indeed – the pain to snap her out of her trance, and her sharp scream to snap him out of his. They had taken off into the woods likes their lives depended on it – and, well, they did. Whether the man was absurdly bad at tracking, or just uninterested in putting much more effort into getting to them, he had failed to pursue them.

They were hiding in the shallow between the exposed roots of one of those massive trees. Sakura was still shaking, silent tears streaming down her face. Sasuke had a manic focus on the task at hand, which was trying to patch up the cut he had widened and butchered with his fingers, unwilling to think about anything else for now.

“I-I didn’t know you could-could do that,” she said, sniffling, a sad attempt at casual. He grasped onto it like a lifeline.

“I asked my mother to show me. She’s not a medic-nin but she’s a decent nurse. I figured it could
He had stored most of his weapon on his leg pouch so that he could fill the one he had at his waist with first aid medical supplies. Bandages mostly, some healing cream and antiseptic. His mother had shown him how to dress a wound, how to stop the bleeding, even the most basic jutsu for closing a small cut, but he wasn’t too sure of this one yet. Besides, this was no small cut.

“T’was a good idea,” she said, a bit sluggish. She was exhausted – he was too. And not because of their earlier fight.

Just the idea of that man being out there still filled Sasuke with dread. What if he stumbled upon another team, some of their friends? What if he found Naruto?

They needed to get back to him.

“Say, Sasuke. Do you know which side I keep my weapon pouch on?”

He raised a puzzled look at the strange question, and had to look back down to check, because he actually didn’t, not for sure.

“That’s what I thought,” she said with an amused laugh. He didn’t get what she was trying to say, and she just smiled at him when he tilted his head questioningly. Maybe she was more worn out than she had thought.

He didn’t get to enquire further though.

“Sakura? Sasuke!”

They jolted up – Sakura hit her head against a tree root.

It was Naruto’s voice.

He wasn’t outright shouting, proving he could use his brain from time to time. He was hissing angrily, frustrated.

“Come on, I know you’re around here!”

And how exactly did he know that?

“Stay hidden,” Sasuke instructed to Sakura. He raised a finger in front of her mouth when she looked like she was going to protest – if this was yet another trap, they needed to be smart about it.

“Hey,” Sasuke called, noncommittal, as he exited their hidden spot. Naruto relaxed visibly as soon as he spotted him, and Sasuke almost gave in to the urge to run to him, just to check if he was okay, if he wasn’t hurt.

“Stop,” he said forcefully when Naruto made to come closer.

“What?”

“Stay back. I don’t know if it’s really you.”

Naruto looked hurt for a brief moment, but then he sized Sasuke up and down, took in his worn-down look maybe, the cuts and bruises their mad dash through the forest had left on his arm and legs, and he relented.
“Ask me something then. Something personal.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know! Aren’t you the smart one?”

Sasuke grasped for something, and he would blame his poor state of mind for the question he settled on, because he was looking at Naruto and it was the only thing he could focus on.

“Where did you get that mask?”

Naruto let out a huff as if he’d been punched.

“Right down to it I see… Well, I stole it. From a Kiri nin that I met in Wave Country, and killed. Good enough for you?”

“You didn’t… that’s not what happened, Naruto!”

His friend smiled bitterly.

“It is. But at least now I know it’s really you, Sasuke.”

Sasuke wanted to argue further, because yes Haku had died because of Naruto, but it wasn’t intentional, and it’s not like Naruto wanted to steal from him, and he was still torn about it and he shouldn’t have been because it wasn’t his fault dammit, and it was unfair, and…

Before he could get into it, Sakura had sprung up from her hideout to throw herself at Naruto. She grabbed his face between her hands, close enough that their noses were almost touching.

“Are you alright?”

He remained frozen, as usual when confronted both with physical contact and open worry for his wellbeing. And as usual, he brushed it off.

“Yeah, heh, I’m fine. What about you? What happened to you?”

“We ran into… trouble,” Sasuke said, unwilling to get into the details now. “Where were you? How did you even find us?”

He couldn’t keep the suspicion from his voice, wondering if trusting that it was Naruto was a mistake after all. He got an answer, but not from his friend.

“I helped! I found you!”

Sasuke and Sakura dropped dumbfounded eyes on the literal fox that had poked out of Naruto’s hood, and talked.

“What is that?” Sakura shrieked. She was close to her limit for the day, Sasuke believed, and wouldn’t take much more surprises like this.

“That’s Akito,” Naruto said as casually as if he was introducing a schoolmate. “He’s with me. I summoned him,” he added as an afterthought because at least he could infer that this really was something that warranted some sort of explanation.

“You summoned him,” Sasuke parroted dumbly.
“Yeah.”

How he hated when Naruto did that, when he acted and sounded like *they* were the ones being dense when *he* was the one making no sense at all. He had no heart to get into an argument right now though, or even to investigate that particular turn of event. Frankly, he didn’t care.

“Whatever. Let’s just…”

The pressure dropped on them like a ton of brick.

“Thank you, children. I knew you’d lead me to your little friend.”

It was the same ninja from earlier. He licked his lips with his pointy tongue, looking delighted to see them, elated really.

“Uzumaki Naruto. I was just looking for you.”

They were three hours into the one hundred and twenty of the second trial.

The telltale signs of a migraine were always the same, unchanged and inexorable since she was a teenager, and yet after thirty years, Tsunade still thought that maybe it would go away if she just ignored it. Sprawled out on her couch with the Hokage hat on her face to block all light, she cursed herself for ignoring the building pain, like she always did, promising that she wouldn’t make the same mistake next time, like she always did, and knowing she totally would, like she always did.

She had reattached limbs and restarted hearts, but all her medical knowledge was useless in the face of one simple headache. Granted, these days it was just useless period.

Thinking about yet another issue that she had to solve only made the pain worse. She stubbornly insisted that there was no pattern to the crisis, no discernable cause, when Shizune insisted that it was most surely stress-induced, coming when Tsunade was overworked or had trouble sleeping. Which were both a constant lately. If Shizune walked into the office right now, she would no doubt make that “disappointed but not surprised” face she so often did. She berated Tsunade constantly to go to bed early, to no avail.

At least the medication was finally starting to have some effects. About time, because the office would soon be swarming with the shinobi she had summoned here. Just when she managed to get a few minutes to herself at last, it had to be ruined by a fucking migraine.

Well, she hadn’t been able to relax anyway. When it wasn’t work, it was personal matters that drove her insane. She had managed to devote exactly zero time to finding out more about Naruto and his clan, partly because her sensei, who would have been the best one to interrogate on the subject, was making himself awfully scarce these days. It was even her own fault – they had agreed that she needed to come into her role without looking like he was constantly behind her, that a clean cut would help put the rest of the leaders at ease. And he was all too happy to stay holed up in his house, she suspected, tending to his flowers and watching the clouds pass. She couldn’t begrudge him that peace, after the decades he had spent putting his own desires last.

But she needed to talk to him. About that and everything else. She needed to feel like there was someone to catch her if she stumbled, that she could rely on her old mentor, all while being frustrated at herself for it. She had never liked to ask for help, even less to depend on it.

And rumor had it – rumor being the Anbu eyes ferreting all over the village – that his health
maybe wasn’t so great. Which brought front another batch of problems that she needed to deal with.

Like the visit she had paid to the Konoha Hospital, that she regretted bitterly. She would have rather stay blissfully oblivious to *that* particular pile of garbage.

There was not a single medical instructor worth anything in the village. It wasn’t much of a surprise – she was largely self-taught in her field because expert medic-nin were so scarce, even in her time. She had been pretty much the only one to advocate for more of them to be formed – well, she and Dan. It stood to reason that the idea had been abandoned as soon as they had both disappeared. This was probably her most bitter regret about her running away.

That and Orochimaru, of course.

The hospital was understaffed with underqualified people, and she knew what had to be done about it, but she didn’t know if she would have the strength. The visit, that was a simple courtesy tour of the building, had left her shaking and nauseous. She didn’t dare imagine what would happen if she had to step into an operating room.

But she would have to, right? Anko’s trial for the chunin exam was in full swing and she could only imagine the kind of injuries that would need treatment at the end of it. And how could she say no? How could she refuse to ease the pain, to save a life?

It was easier to claim that she didn’t owe anyone her painfully acquired knowledge and skills when there weren’t dying kids involved.

Shizune knocking on the door was a relief in the end – she was better not left with her own thoughts.

“They’re waiting for you,” the young woman said from the door. “Yugao and her team were just spotted at the gate.” Her brows were creased in worry but she didn’t comment on Tsunade’s classic migraine pose. She occasionally knew to pick her battles.

Tsunade rose, stretched out as far as she could without straight up dislocating something, and went back to sit on her chair, before thinking better of it and deciding to sit on the edge of the desk, so that it wouldn’t be a physical barrier between her and the rest of the assistance. So that she would seem more accessible maybe, less removed.

“Let them in,” she told Shizune, as ready as she could ever be.

It was all of the clan heads and a lot of jounin too, all those who weren’t held up somewhere else, namely on the chunin exam, as examiners or as anxious jounin instructors waiting for news on their younglings. Anko and her fiery temper being absent was probably for the best, but she wished Genma could have made it. She liked the unperturbable man and his patient yet intransigent handling of all kind of bullshit that drove her through the roof.

They all spilled in, sporting various degrees of curiosity and annoyance on their face. Curiosity won out though, as they tried to figure out why she had gathered them here.

“Hello everyone, thank you for coming. We’ll be beginning shortly, as soon as…”

As if on cue, three silhouettes puffed into the middle of the room, just in front of her. Yugao took the kneeling position accustomed to Anbu members, although she was dressed in a jounin uniform, as were her two teammates, who knelt too, but it had more to do, she thought, with the gravity of the situation. She had left one of her slugs with them to get the quickest possible report on the
situation, and the news they had given her the previous day, before taking off… It called for some solemnity indeed.

“Hokage-sama,” Yugao began, head bent, eyes to the floor. “We have come back.”

“And we are grateful for it,” the Godaime answered reverently.

It was a bit of a ritual, one that she appreciated greatly – before business and gruesome details, it was nice to acknowledge that not all was so damn bleak. They weren’t hurt beyond superficial cuts and bruises. Small mercies to greater dread.

Yugao reached into her weapon pouch and took out a body scroll sealed in black, the mark of an enemy life being taken. She held it out to Tsunade with both hand, presenting it as she would an offering.

“Hokage-sama, we bring you back the corpse of the traitor Danzo.”

The reaction was immediate. Surprise, indignation, incredulity, relief. In the second she had before the room descended into chaos, she held a hand up, preaching for some silence.

“I have gathered you here,” she said, clear and loud for all to hear, “so that you would be witness to this.”

“To what? You dispatching assassins after Danzo without informing us?” Shikaku summed up, deceptively emotionless.

“Yes,” she admitted without preamble. Blunt honestly usually worked in her favor, both because it was appreciated and because it left them surprised enough they forgot to protest.

“I began to suspect that Danzo, or someone else, was tampering with the reports we were getting from the guards in charge of his surveillance. I couldn’t risk alerting any potential ally of his.”

I couldn’t trust any of you, she didn’t say. They could piece it together.

“Since when?” Shikaku asked, implicitly designated to carry on the discussion on behalf of his fellow shinobi.

“About two weeks.”

“And what tipped you off?”

She allowed his harshness for the sake of keeping some control over the whole situation, even if she didn’t appreciate being interrogated in such a manner. She had chosen how she would handle this, and now she had to see it through.

“The handwriting was the same. But… There are ways people talk, that are hard to reproduce. I happened to read back on old reports – it seems that the change occurred precisely with the first one after I was appointed. I can’t believe in a coincidence.”

And she had been right, she knew that now, but honestly, she would have preferred not to be.

“So I ordered Yugao to form a team and go look into this.”

“You asked, and we agreed,” Yugao cut in. She met Tsunade’s eyes, steady and sure. “You left us the choice, and we chose to do it.”
Tsunade wouldn’t have mentioned it. She nodded gratefully – it seemed like that woman had definitively decided to trust her.

“We can infer the conclusions of your investigation,” Shikaku deadpanned bitterly.

“What people?”

Inuzuka Tsume stepped forward, face set in a dark, intense frown.

“The way people talk… What people? Hokuto was supposed to be there.”

“With Kamui,” Fugaku added as it dawned on him. Tsume addressed Yugao next.

“They didn’t come back with you.”

It wasn’t a question, and Yugao didn’t answer. She didn’t need to.

Out of her pouch, she took out two more body scrolls, sealed in white.

“The Gods be damned,” Tsume cursed in a low breath, eyes wide as she took in the slow movements of Yugao getting up to go back on her knees in front of the head of the Inuzuka clan, handing solemnly the scroll with both hands.

“We return Inuzuka Hokuto, and her dog Yasha, to their family,” she said in a strangled voice. Tsume took the scroll with both hands, speechless. Yugao got up again and again knelt, a few steps to the left, in front of Fugaku.

“We return Uchiha Kamui to his family.”

She didn’t move again though. Tsunade could only admire her fortitude, as she raised her gaze toward the Uchiha leader, determined to face him.

“By our estimation, both found their death at least two weeks ago. Be informed that Shimura Danzo was forging Uchiha Kamui’s and Inuzuka Hokuto’s handwriting by… by using Kamui’s Sharingan. We have left them where they were, so that you would be the one to give them back to him.”

After the briefest pause, she added a soft, barely audible, “I’m sorry.”

Tsunade closed her eyes, willing herself to stay strong as shock gasps escaped the parties present. Fugaku was livid, as were his two lieutenants by his sides. Uchiha had been chased and killed for their Sharingan before – the eyes made them stronger both by their abilities, and by the necessity of defending themselves from the envy they brought on the clan’s members.

Had Danzo been waiting for this, hoping that an Uchiha would be sent to his doorstep? Had he even engineered for it?

Yugao came back to her position in front of her Hokage, because there was her place, in front of her master and between her two teammates, but also because it had to be easier for her, to face Tsunade instead of the grief and rage of the families she had just brought death to.

Tenzo went on in her place.

“Danzo was aided in this ordeal by Hinoe of the Root, who revealed himself still loyal to his former master. We return him to the village, alive, for questioning.”
He presented a fifth body scroll, the only one that was sporting two seals – one to insure it closed, the other to keep its prisoner unconscious. Tsunade took it, before turning it back to Yamanaka Inoichi immediately.

“I leave it to you.”

“You can count on me, Hokage-sama.”

“The bodies will go to the hospital for autopsy. I will see to it personally. You are to send one of your own people to attend, Fugaku. Both jounin will then be returned to their clan and family for their funerals, to be seen properly from this world.”

It didn’t feel like she was the one doing the talking. The person that was in charge of her body and voice right now, it wasn’t really her. It was Leader Tsunade, efficient and emotionless, who wasn’t affected by the death of shinobi so young they were children to her, barely starting out in life and already gone before everyone else. That person could keep giving orders and planning their next move, while Regular Tsunade just wanted to break a sake bottle on her own head, so that she would either drown in the alcohol, or simply pass out.

Regular Tsunade would have her chance, but later.

“Every former Root members will have to be interrogated again, as well as the jounin in charge of their surveillance. All their comings and goings, who they met, where they went. This can’t, won’t, happen again.”

“It shouldn’t have happened at all.”

The first words Fugaku managed to get out were tightly wounded and sharp like a blade. She thought he would launch into it, give in to his anger, but it was Tsume who took the torch and lit it out.

“It was their first solo mission as jounin. Their first assignment of import. And they were so disappointed, because it sucked to be looking after one boring old man, because nothing would happen there...”

Hokuto and Kamui were from the same genin team. They had been close since they were children. What Tsunade had spotted in their mission report was the sudden lack of dirt and spelling mistakes on Hokuto’s, how they had gotten longer and more wordy where she used to keep it so short, because she obviously didn’t want to do them. What was missing were Kamui’s digressions about the weather, the food, or the pretty flowers they had spotted nearby.

They were not twenty

“This shouldn’t have happened. Danzo should have been dead long ago. We should have made sure that he couldn’t ever get up to his old tricks again. This is our fault.”

She was clutching the body scroll tightly, but careful not to break the seal, to disturb the young woman resting inside. The Inuzuka clan was a close-knitted bunch, more so than any other clan. They saw all their children as their own, and were fiercely protective of all of them.

“This is our fault,” she said again.

“It’s not,” Fugaku retorted.

Tsunade had feared they would get there.
“You all brought those concerns to me, and I agreed with you, but still I did nothing.”

“This is not about you and you know it!” he exploded.

She did know. Of course she did. She didn’t understand what had possessed the old man, how he ever thought this would end in anything else but disaster. Wasn’t he the one who knew Danzo best? How could he believe the old fool would stay still, be satisfied, would accept his fate as a distant hermit?

Fugaku and Tsume would pin the death of their young on the Sandaime, and how could Tsunade blame them?

“This won’t go unpunished, Hokage-sama,” Tsume said.

There was the hint of a threat in her voice.

“It won’t. But…”

“There’s no but! This will be dealt with right now!”

“No it won’t!” Shikaku retorted, getting between Tsume and Tsunade. Fugaku stepped forward to stand by Tsume’s side as Inoichi got closer to Shikaku. They seized each other up, cold fury against implacable conviction.

“Do you intend to stop me, Shikaku?” Tsume asked, not bothering keeping her hostility at bay anymore.

“I do. We can’t move now, Tsume.”

“Do you care so little…”

"Do not put words in my mouth! I feel your pain as if it was my own. I knew both of them, and I know this pain too! But you can’t afford the luxury to let it dictate your actions. Clear your mind, Tsume. The village is swarming with foreign nin. Dignitaries and other Kage will be here soon too. No matter how much it is deserved and needed, we cannot move now. Tsunade hasn’t even been inducted to the people yet, and as far as the village is concerned, this transition is to be peaceful. This would weaken us too much both in front of the other countries and our own people. Tsume, we cannot move now.”

Tsunade looked at them, all of them, wondering what they were thinking, who they would side with, what they would do. She didn’t know them well enough to guess their thoughts, foresee their actions. She was so tired. She couldn’t step in right now and she prayed, she prayed they could trust each other enough, could influence each other enough to solve this, to reach a compromise. She couldn’t order anything without explicitly endorsing one side and alienating the other. She didn’t even know what she herself would choose. Shikaku was right, they couldn’t afford the scandal, they were under too much pressure already. But her heart was closer to Tsume’s – she burnt for justice to be served, punishment to be held, for action, to move against the inertia threatening to swallow them whole.

Sometimes it held onto nothing. Fugaku’s barest move, to lay a hand on Tsume’s hand, the one still clutching the scroll. Her attention turned to him and they shared a thousand words in a silent gaze, eyes searching.

In a second, it was over. Tsume fell to the floor like a puppet whose string had been cut off. Hunched over herself, she pressed the scroll to her face, and she cried.
Shibi joined her on the ground and she cried harder as he draped a heavy arm across her back. Fugaku turned back to the two other Uchiha, and each rested a comforting hand on his shoulders. He looked down, leaning toward them ever so slightly. Shikaku rubbed at his tired eyes and Inoichi wrapped his fingers around his arm, squeezing lightly. They exchanged a loaded look. Each of them subtly got closer to the ones they were closest too, seeking comfort, support, some strength.

Tsunade remained very, very still.

It lasted a mere minute. As quick as she had broken down, Tsume pulled herself back together, and she looked fiercer than ever when she got up and turned back to Tsunade, even with her face wet with tears.

“After the exam then” was all she said. Tsunade nodded.

“You have my words.”

She needed to talk to Hiruzen. She needed to tell him. She dreaded moving against him, tarnishing his image, but a part of her, the part that was full of bitterness and resentment, the part that wished her pain on others, wanted to see him suffer the consequences of that decision, of the trust he had wrongly placed in Danzo. She wanted to finally see him admit fault, to hear him say that he had been wrong, that it had been the wrong thing to do, the wrong choice to make.

She wanted him to realize that love simply wasn’t enough sometimes. As she had, long ago. That loving people didn’t mean they would be saved.

“Fugaku, Tsume, you are excused from this meeting, as are those who have urgent matters to tend to. For the rest, I would like to talk right now about the investigation we’re gonna need to conduct into our own forces, so we can…”

In a corner of her eyes, she saw Shizune straighten up suddenly, turning worried eyes toward the forest. What now? she thought despairingly, even if she could feel it too, albeit faintly, since she was no sensor.

Faint, but present, and all the others felt it too, coming from the edge of the village. From the Forest of Death, if she had to guess.

Now, what kind of chakra was that?

Chapter End Notes

There's is too much plot going on, what am I even doing.
My first human OCs and they're freaking dead what is this? I don't know. I'm hungry.
Tell me what you think! Love u
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Trying to make way through the Forest of Death. Not doing so great.

Chapter Notes

I'm all over the place. I really shouldn't be writing fics right now, I have a shit tone of stuff I should be doing instead but... yeah. You know how it is. I have the feeling I didn't put enough thought into this and that it will only brew issues that I'll have to deal with later. Meh. Let's go anyway.

Once again thank you all for your feedback, I'm beyond grateful for it all.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sakura couldn’t move. She just couldn’t.

She had tumbled into that damp hole after a massive snake summoned by their attacker had chased them away from him and Naruto, and as it went after Sasuke, she had fallen behind.

Now she was holed up in some bushes, and she couldn’t move.

She wanted to. Maybe. She had to anyway. She had to find her friends again, she had to help them. The man had made it so that he would find himself alone with Naruto, and who knew what he wanted with him? As for Sasuke, he was getting hunted down by a snake the side of a shopping street. She needed to move, she needed to go look after them.

But she couldn’t, she couldn’t. She was paralyzed, she was stuck. She didn’t want to go out there. She didn’t want to be attacked again.

What sense did it make, why did they have to get through this? She understood the dangers of their lifestyle, she understood about war and enemies and missions, but this wasn’t it. This was just an exam.

What sense would it make to die here?

Or maybe she wasn’t as tough as she believed herself to be. Maybe she just wasn’t cut out for this. If she was she would be able to move. She would be able to get over it.

Instead here she was, curled around herself and trembling all over. How pathetic was that?

There was a scream.

It was so unexpected in the false silence of the forest and the spiraling of her own thoughts, she was almost offended by the interruption. It was a female voice, most likely, crying out in pain and surprise not too far from here. One lone scream, and then nothing.
But Sakura was already on her way.

She didn’t spare a single thought to the very real possibility that this was a trap, that she was walking straight into it like an idiot, that now wasn’t the time for pointless heroism, that she ought to stay put and ignore it. She couldn’t. She had to move, she had to do something. She had to help, somehow.

She burst into a small clearing to come face to face with a girl about her age, with long hair a shocking red and her glasses askew on her nose. Her face was scrunched up in agony, as she battled weakly with a bear trap that had closed its barbaric teeth on her leg.

Despite the pain, she put her guard up as soon as she spotted Sakura, three long needles slotted between her fingers, ready to strike. Sakura held her hands up, trying to appear non-threatening, as she approached the other girl slowly.

“I’m here to help, I promise. I’m not going to attack you.”

The girls scoffed, disbelieving, and gripped her weapons tighter, but she was in too much pain to be a real threat. And, well, she couldn’t move, caught in the trap, the metal teeth sunk deep into her left calf. Without the leg protectors she was wearing, it would have broken the bone in half.

Sakura kept edging closer and the girl kept tensing more and more until Sakura was kneeling right by her side, trying to get a look at the device. The girl just gave up then, too worn out to reject the help.

“I can’t get it to open,” she admitted weakly. She had tears streaks down her cheeks, although she was fighting not to cry now. Sakura wanted to tell her it was okay, that she’d been crying too, and she wasn’t even hurt. She kept the words in, focusing on the trap instead.

“There’s a lock, right here in the mechanism. Hold on.”

She took two kunai out of her weapon pouch, only to turn back to a needle millimeters away from her eyeball.

“It’s… it’s just to try and pry it open,” she said in a breath, staying as still as she could lest she found herself blinded by a wrong move. After an awful moment of complete silence and immobility, the girl slowly retracted her hand, and Sakura focused back on the trap, gripping the kunai hard to keep her hands from shaking.

She inserted one blade between the two jaws, the other into the gear that kept them shut. She had to rewind in manually, teeth by teeth – if she let it go, the trap would close again around the girl’s leg.

“Okay. Okay. Don’t move.”

Slowly, slowly, she forced the trap open, inch by inch, using one kunai as a lever and the other to lock it open step by step. The girl groaned and moaned as the metal slowly left her abused flesh, until finally, finally, she could take her leg out. Just in time, because Sakura couldn’t twist her arm anymore, and the second she let go of the pressure, the trap snapped shut again with a morbid crack, loud in the still air of the forest.

Sakura turned to the girl, ready to assist, but discovered it was no use – the stranger’s hands were glowing green against her leg, and the skin was slowly knitting itself back together, flesh coming back to its place as blood dried between her fingers. After a few minutes, she looked exhausted but there were only scars where the wound had been.
“Cool,” Sakura couldn’t help but whispered, awed.

“Thank you. For your help,” the girl said curtly. Sakura couldn’t tell if she was embarrassed, or angry or ill-at-ease. The situation didn’t really call for casual and relax, and she hated that. That girl wasn’t supposed to be her enemy, even if Sakura didn’t recognize the music note that adorned her forehead protector.

“It’s no big deal,” she said lamely.

“It is. How can I repay you?”

“You don’t have to…”

Just as she was saying it, her vision blurred, and her head swayed around for a second. She would have tumbled forward without the girl catching her.

“Hey, what’s wrong with you?”

“Sorry, sorry, I’m… I’m just tired. I’m almost out of chakra. I just need to… need to rest. A little.”

Not that she could do that.

“I can help,” the girl said.

“What?”

“I can help. I can give you chakra. It will be my repayment. Here.”

She stuck her arm under Sakura’s nose and rolled up her sleeve.

“You just have to bite.”

Horrified, Sakura squinted at the pale skin of the girl’s forearm. It was ridden with bite marks, old and fresh, most deep enough to have drawn blood.

“What is that?” she exclaimed. “Who did that to you?”

“What? It doesn’t matter! Just do it, you’ll feel better!”

“There’s no way.”

The girl frowned, inexplicably angry.

“I’m not trying to poison you or anything, I just want to help you back, come on!”

“I’m not going to bite you! That’s crazy! You shouldn’t let people do that to you!”

The girl’s eyes widen and she stared, dumbfounded. She straightened her glasses several times, a look of confusion of her face.

“You need chakra…” she tried again, less sure of herself now.

“I’ll just… have a snack and nap or something. It’s… it’s fine. I don’t want to hurt you.”

Was it that weird, what she was saying? The girl was gaping at her like she had grown a second head, like she wasn’t making any sense.
A rustling sound coming from the bushes distracted them from the building tension as they both squared up, ready to fend off a potential assailant.

It wasn’t an enemy though. It wasn’t even a person.

“Sakura! I finally found you!”

It was Naruto’s fox.

“Huh… Akito?” she said, unsure. The fox lost its panicked expression just the time to look pleased that she had remembered.

“Yes! Come on, come on! Naruto sent me to find you!”

“Is he alright?”

The fox’s expression was answer enough – what a weird day.

“It’s… Naruto? As in Uzumaki Naruto?”

Sakura had forgotten about the girl. She frowned at her, suspicious.

“What of it?” she asked curtly. What was it today with people going after her friend? Weren’t things hard enough that they needed even more enemies on their heels?

The girl recoiled at Sakura’s unfriendly tone and backed up quickly.

“It’s nothing,” she mumbled. Sakura didn’t have time to dig into it.

“Can you take me to him?” she asked the fox.

“He said to find sake first!”

She paused, confused, wondering if it was supposed to be a joke, but the animal looked completely serious.

“Sake?”

“Yes?” Akito said, unsure. “Your other friend?”

Sakura really couldn’t be blame for the noise she made.

So hard she was laughing that she almost lost her balance, bend over around her aching belly as she shook allover with unrestrained laughter. She had to sound a bit manic, but that day had been so awful and she just had to let go.

“It’s… It’s Sasuke, Sasuke!” she managed to explain once she was a little calmer, although she still felt like giggling at the mishap. She couldn’t wait to tell the boys – Sasuke would be mortified, Naruto would love it.

She had to get back to them.

“Lead the way then Akito,” she said as she got back to her feet.

“Wait! Sakura, isn’t it?”

The girl got up too – she winced a bit when she set her injured foot on the ground, but overall she
looked like she could walk just fine, which was impressive seeing the state her leg was in just a few minutes ago. She stood straight though, determined, facing Sakura head on. She was just a bit shorter. She adjusted her glasses once again.

“Yes?”

“I’m… I’m Karin. And I’m in your debt.”

Sakura waved a hand around, dismissing.

“It’s okay, really…”

“No, I am. I won’t forget it. I’ll repay you somehow.”

“I… You don’t have to. You kind of helped me too.”

Karin raised an eyebrow, skeptical.

“How?”

“I was feeling… pretty bad. But it helped to come here. I’m glad I helped you.”

Again that look on the girl’s face, puzzled and surprised and just a bit complacent, as if Sakura couldn’t possibly be telling the truth.

“All the same. I owe you.”

Sakura shrugged, not about to get into a fight over a favor owed, or not.

“Good luck getting back to your team,” she said as a goodbye. Akito took off through the trees, Sakura just behind him – she didn’t hear the girl’s answer.

Naruto had never felt like this before.

Not faced with Mizuki, not faced with Haku and Zabuza, not with that foreign nin earlier. They had wanted to kill him, but no more than he wanted to kill them, or anyone else – it was born from the necessity of getting rid of a threat, there was some logic to it, a reason.

Here and now, in front of that stranger and their… strangeness, Naruto just knew he was in danger, in a very different way that he had been before. The ninja didn’t have to fight him, or kill him, maybe didn’t even want to. And yet there was no telling if they would do it anyway.

Naruto was alone. The ninja, from yet another village he couldn’t identify, had decided that Sasuke and Sakura were in the way, and had summoned a giant fucking snake to chase after them and send them away. Naruto had been powerless to stop it or follow them, and now he was alone again, and faced with someone all his instincts were screaming at him not to fight, but that he was burning to fight anyway. He had the urge both to preserve himself and to prove that he was the stronger one here.

“Now that we’re alone, Naruto, let’s chat, shall we?”

“People who don’t tell me their name don’t get to use mine.”

Just because he was backed into a corner and in serious trouble didn’t mean he was going to play
The ninja laughed, a mean, grating laugh that almost made Naruto regret opening his mouth at all. Maybe he ought to stay silent after all.

“Fair enough. My name is Orochimaru.”

Naruto had never heard of them.

“What do you want from me?”

“Oh, nothing at all, for now. You’ll soon realize the question is what should you want, from me.”

Naruto didn’t get to parse out that nonsensical answer – the very next second, he took a heavy punch to the gut that sent him flying against the nearest tree. He heard the bark crack behind him. Falling to his knees on a branch below, he coughed out blood, seized with nausea.

“But if you must know, I’ve always wanted to study a jinchuuriki, and I heard only good thing about Konoha’s. Come on, Uzumaki Naruto. Show me what you’re worth, and don’t disappoint me.”

Naruto was ready for the next blow, even if he could only fall back on defense. The ninja’s movements were weird, almost inhuman, legs and arms and neck extending and chasing after Naruto, always so close, always right there. Naruto couldn’t escape them.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” he exclaimed. At this point he was ready to do anything so that this Orochimaru person would leave him alone, turn away. Naruto was already feeling on edge, cornered. Already feeling the demon get agitated in his cage, begging to be left out, to take care of their enemy.

No. No!

“I’m a scientist you see. And jinchuuriki are some of the greatest mysteries of the shinobi world.”

“I’m telling you, I don’t know what you’re talking about! You have the wrong person asshole!”

Naruto was jumping from branch to branch, but he stopped when he realized he wasn’t being pursued anymore. The foreign nin had stopped a few meters behind and was looking at him with something akin to surprise, but mixed with a dangerous sort of delight that made Naruto dread their next words.

“Could it be that you don’t know what jinchuuriki are, Uzumaki Naruto?”

And Naruto recognized that tone. He was suddenly thrown back two years ago in the forest, running away, running, running, but unable to escape Mizuki’s voice, implacable, merciless.

"Tell me, Naruto, how do you think it's possible to kill a Tailed Beast?"

“I’m not interested in what you want to say to me.”

“Oh, is that the truth now?”

No, no, it wasn’t. He knew the pain it would most likely bring and yet, yet he wanted to know. He needed to. Know who he was, what he was, where he came from.

“Tell me, little boy,” Orochimaru asked calmly, pedagogue. “Have you ever heard about the power
of human sacrifice?”

He knew he ought to stop listening, and he knew he wouldn’t.

“Katon! Great Fire Dragon!”

At long last, the blast was enough to stop the giant snake in its track. The animal engulfed in fire shrieked in agony, until life had left its body and it stilled, burnt and broken on the forest ground.

Sasuke dropped to the floor, exhausted. That jutsu burnt way too much chakra, and he should have been able to fight off the beast with something else. He was aware that he had been panicking, unable to think clearly as the snake chased him like a mouse and drove him further and further away from his friends.

It didn’t matter now. The snake was dead and Sasuke still had some energy to spare. He got back to his feet and looked around him – at least the path of destruction left by the giant creature made a pretty easy trail back to Naruto and their mysterious assailant.

Sakura caught up with him on the way there.

“So you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine, I’m fine. You?”

“I’m okay. We need to find Naruto.”

“I’ll bring you to him!”

Sasuke had no energy to spare at pondering why they ought to follow a talking fox around, and just let it take the lead. They could hear the rumors of a fight, of branches snapping, bark exploding. Sasuke picked up pace, gripped with a very bad feeling about all this. That stranger was so strong, and when Naruto was backed into a corner…

They needed to reach him.

“There, look!” Sakura said, pointing up at the roof of the forest.

The area was devastated, upturned trees, broken branches, dirt and splinters flying everywhere. And up there on a branch stood the foreign nin, holding Naruto with his… with his freaking tongue.

They leapt up as the man readied his hands in a way they recognized easily from when Naruto did it – he was calling up a seal. Naruto’s hoodie was lifted up around his middle, showing off his stomach and the intricate seal that stood there. Sasuke had never seen it before.

“Let’s see what happen if we mess with that a little,” the man said. “I’m hoping for a good show, Naruto.”

He slammed the seal on top of the one etched in Naruto’s skin. The boy cried out as he tumbled backward and for a moment he didn’t move, looking like he was…

But then it happened again. The exact same sensation as that day on the bridge, the air charged suddenly, heavy and dense like it was solidifying around them. Naruto sat up just as Sakura and Sasuke landed on the branch behind the foreign nin. Naruto was grinning around sharp, pointy
teeth. The marks on his cheeks had deepened, and his eyes were a bright, bright red.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” he said.

Sasuke had his Sharingan activated, and as such, he had the time to throw himself into Sakura to push her out of the way, as Naruto charged the man. They crashed against the trunk of the tree, went straight through it, and crashed against the next one behind it. The foreign nin was still smiling though, still looking pleased with himself.

“I don’t see why not. This is perfect.”

Fast as lightning, he slipped out of Naruto’s grip to reappear a few branches away. Naruto followed, but when he punched the tree hard enough to dent the trunk, the man was already gone. Naruto’s hand was dripping in blood, skin torn and bones showing. He didn’t seem to notice.

He was slipping away.

He scanned the area around him, looking for his enemy, and completely ignored his two friends standing there. He wasn’t himself. He wasn’t there at all.

“Naruto! Naruto, stop!” Sasuke screamed, trying to get his attention. It didn’t please their opponent at all, and Sasuke was thrown away by a snake springing out of his sleeve where his arm ought to be. Sasuke collided painfully with a trunk, Sakura just behind him to check on him as he coughed out his lung. Naruto screamed, enraged, exploding with unfamiliar chakra that knocked them back with the force of it.

“Be careful boy,” the man purred. “You wouldn’t want to hurt your little friends.”

Of course it only served to enrage Naruto even more.

He obliterated a rock on which the sound nin had perched briefly, and yet another tree. He was destroying things at random now, his enemy nowhere to be seen. At this rate he was going to bring the forest down on them. What if there were other people in the area? What if someone got hurt? This wasn’t what Naruto wanted, but he wasn’t in any condition to stop himself right now. And if adults got involved, the proctor or the supervisors, if someone found him like this…

Sasuke had to do something.

“I have to try and stop him,” Sasuke declared firmly. Sakura shook her head, disbelieving.

“How?”

“We’ve been working on something.”

“And did it work?”

He couldn’t say yes and not be lying, so he didn’t answer. She wasn’t fooled.

“Sasuke…”

“I promised him, ok? I promised I’d stop him.”

They had to jump further away when Naruto toppled the tree they were perched in. There was red chakra oozing out of his body like red molasses, getting more and more opaque. Soon they wouldn’t be able to see him through it.
Sasuke just needed to see his eyes. To meet his gaze. And then, then, maybe…

He had managed to get in, a few times. But never for long. And always to be cast out by the brute force of the demon living in Naruto’s insides, who laughed and taunted and whom Sasuke had grown to despise.

The next time Naruto got close to them, still wreaking havoc on the forest even though their opponent had all but vanished, Sasuke jumped him. He grabbed his face between his hands, holding tight as he forced their gaze to meet, despite the red chakra floating around, menacing, despite the red of Naruto’s eyes, not dark and bloody like the Sharingan red, much brighter, violent.

Sasuke barely put a foot down in the cave that he was already thrown back out.

Naruto shoved him away, but he didn’t resume his rampage. He gripped at his head, tugged at his hair in a way that had to be painful, hunched over himself, stumbling like he had been stabbed.

He raised his head and for the briefest moment his eyes were blue again, and he looked so angry and so scared, and he pleaded.

“Sasuke. Sasuke.”

The red won him over once more. He howled.

“Dammit!” Sasuke cursed as he had to jump away, the red chakra swinging around, almost tangible.

“I need him to stay still!” he screamed at Sakura so that his voice would carry over the sound of cracking wood, exploding rock and the wild beast growls escaping Naruto’s throat. He sounded like he was in pain. His hands were in ruins. Someone was bound to come see what the ruckus was about. They had to do something.

“I can do it,” Sakura said firmly, drawing her sword. Sasuke’s eyes widened. She rolled hers.

“I’m not gonna hurt him dumbass! Come on!”

Gone were her exhaustion and the defeat in her eyes despite the tears track still stark white lines through the grim on her face, gone too her worry and fear. They would come back soon enough, he supposed, but for now she was focused on their objective, and it was enough to keep her upright, keep her moving. Sasuke drew from that too. The day wasn’t over, the fight wasn’t over. It couldn’t just stop here. They couldn’t lose now.

Couldn’t lose him. Not now, and not ever.

“Stay close,” Sakura said, and she jumped.

She landed on a branch just as Naruto did, and he seemed confused for a moment, as if he didn’t expect to see anyone there. Sakura wasn’t confused, and she didn’t hesitate.

She charged him, sword drawn up and aiming straight for his head in an obvious move. He ducked easily, and Sasuke was spirting after them, a warning on his lips.

The tip of Sakura’s blade caught the flying hood of Naruto’s sweater, just before sinking deep into the trunk behind him. Naruto was yanked backward, pinned against the hard wood.

“Now, Sasuke!”
A good thing his body could move without his mind, because he was a little dumbstruck. She had timed that perfectly. She had known how Naruto would deflect, had known she could catch him that way.

He felt bad for doubting her.

Naruto was trashing around and he wouldn’t be held back for long. Sasuke grabbed his head again, locked their gaze. He put all his focus on the swirling arcana of his Sharingan, all his will, all his strength.

He pushed against the maelstrom inside Naruto’s head, against the red chakra, against the wailing. He pushed, pushed, pushed.

It wasn’t enough. He wasn’t strong enough. He needed more. He needed…

That last time, he had been too caught up in their fight against Haku to notice it, to feel the change, the shift. But this time, so hyper aware that he was of his eyes and their power, he could feel it, almost physically. The two tomoe shifting around, spinning, to give room for a third one, to evolve to the next stage. It felt like his vision expanded and narrowed all at once. Wider and more focused. Sharper and more sensitive.

He couldn’t see a thing, in the cave, but he didn’t need to. There was the cage, and there was the chakra that should have been trapped in swirling around him. Naruto was nowhere to be seen, but that didn’t matter for now.

Get back, Sasuke willed. It felt like he was screaming but he knew he wasn’t, he wasn’t even moving, his body locked as he dived down, down, down.

The beast was enraged, but not at him, not really. It seemed more… confused than anything, circling around, howling. Like it couldn’t even found the way out, like the door was open but it was still chained, still tied down.

Get back, get back!

His forces were abandoning him as the Sharingan drew more and more from them, consuming his chakra at an alarming speed. Three tomoe was nothing compared to the lone two, and he had already burned up more than was wise earlier in the day.

BACK!

There was a shift. Something subtle, but it was there. For the briefest moment, the massive presence of the demon subdued, bended.

For the briefest moment, it couldn’t fight back.

Sasuke shoved in all the strength he had left, willing the monster back behind its bars, willing whatever was happening to end, for things to return to normal, for Naruto to return to him.

He was pushing so hard that he crashed when, without a warning, suddenly the beast was gone. Chakra receded. The storm had passed, vanished in an instant.

Sasuke didn’t have the time to formulate a single thought before he passed out.
Maybe she should have made it mandatory to incapacitate the team from whom they stole their second scroll. Or maybe she should have insisted they ensured there was as few winners making it to the Tower as possible.

Anko tsked, annoyed, at herself, and she couldn’t enjoy the last of her dango as much as she would have liked. Had she been too soft on them? She should have hardened her rules seeing how many of those fuckers Ibiki had let into the second trial. *He* was getting soft, that was for sure. What happened to “it’s not my problem if none of them get promoted”?

Genma and the others thought she was being too harsh, but they were just idiots. Had they forgotten their own chunin exam? Granted, a lot of them had bypassed it and made the rank on account of their time at war – promotion was easy to get by then. But that’s exactly why they had to be tough on the kids. If there was no war to forge them, Anko’s trial would have to do. Better they died or gave up on the shinobi life here, than later during a mission or a battlefield, by being too weak or, gods forbid, chickening out, and bringing their teammates down with them.

She scoffed. Too harsh? When the trial used to be bringing five foreign forehead protectors to the feet of the proctor? Were they forming ninja or schoolteachers here?

She jumped on her feet, deciding now was a good time to head toward the Tower and monitor how things were progressing. If none of them made it in under twenty hours, she would be tempted to call the whole thing off and fail all of them. She should have make it two days just to spice it up, give them more of a sense of urgency. Dammit.

Kotetsu, who was supposed to patrol the perimeter of the training field to make sure no one entered it – or tried to escape – appeared in front of her just as she was about to leave.

“Anko! You have to come and see. We found… we found something.”

“What? What is it?”

“What? What is it?”

“Three dead. They’re candidates, for the exam. And… just come.”

The chunin’s tone and his wary expression, out of place for someone usually pretty laid back, had her falling into his steps without comment, matching his hurried pace. He led her to as small stone altar tucked away between the trees, not far from the main entrance to the Forest of Death, where Izumo, Kotestu’s usual partner in crime, was waiting for them with a pinched expression and worried eyes.

Three corpses, laying around in distorted positions that would have had them scream in agony had they not be dead already. But she barely notice that, just as she ignored the blood sprayed on the grass and the holy statues. Right now she couldn’t have cared less about bad omens and affronts to the gods, because she was much more concerned with earthly threats, and this one, this one…

“They’re from Kusa. We got their identities from their pass, seeing that…”

Seeing that they didn’t have a face.

It was gone, the flesh smoothed out like it had melted, a blank were their facial features should have been. All three had suffered the same fate.

Izumo said something at her side, but she couldn’t hear him over the rush of her blood in her ears, over her own spiraling thoughts.

She would have recognized this handy work anywhere.
“Show me the passes!” she yelled, snatching the sheets from a confused Izumo. On the first one, the picture of an androgynous man with a knowing smirk stared at her, accusing.

He had even talked to her. Just before the beginning of the second trial…

“Is killing other participants a motive for penalty?”

He had had the nerves to… And she had eat it up. How? How had he masked his presence so well, how hadn’t she recognized him?

What the fuck was he planning?

Why was he here? How? Her mind was whirling, overwhelmed, as she tried to piece out why the fuck he would enter the chunin exam like this. What had he come for?

As if on cue, a wave of chakra rippled through the air, thick and heavy with murderous intent, straight from the training ground. Anko was thirteen the last time it had resonated through Konoha, and it wasn’t a sensation she wasn’t about to forget.

The Kyuubi host was about to lose it.

“Is that…”

“Kotestu, contact all the examiners patrolling the forest,” Anko cut sharply. “Tell them we have intruders in the exam that are to be located, but they can’t engage with him in any way. Have them locate Uzumaki Naruto and report on his status. Izumo, go to the Anbu headquarter. Have them send two… three teams to the forest. I’m going after them now.”

“We have to inform the Hokage. Do you recognize this, Anko? Do you know who we are after?”

Anko pressed her lips closed tightly. Of course the Godaime had to be informed, if she hadn’t sensed it already. But had she known fucking Orochimaru was back in the village, she would have done something. So she didn’t know, for now.

It was just Anko.


The two chunin hesitated, clearly doubting her words. She snarled.

“That’s a fucking order! Go!”

They disappeared in a puff. She took off to the Forest.

The Kyuubi chakra was more muted there, on account of all the shit that already permeated the foul air of Training Ground 44, the poisons of the plants and the hunger of the beasts. But it was unmistakable for those who had felt it before. The kid had to be here somewhere, and Orochimaru was too. That couldn’t be a coincidence.

“Next time,” he had said to her, just as he left, as he turned his back on the village, on her, “next time I leave this place, I won’t leave anything standing behind me.”

Was he here to make good on his promise?

Now that she knew to look for it, the trace of his chakra was unmistakable. She hated how attuned to it she was still, after all this years, how familiar it felt.
How fucking comforting.

Dammit. She was so sure she was past all this.

Soon enough following his own chakra started to lead her away from where the demon’s was coming from. It should have been her priority, she should have gone and check on the host boy, try to stop him if she could.

She turned her back on it, set on Orochimaru’s trail.

She knew about Naruto by Izumi mostly, since the girl never shut up about her friends and her friends’ siblings and her friends’ siblings’ friends, for some reason. And she knew what had happened during their mission in Wave Country, if only vaguely, because Kakashi was many things, but a sharer certainly wasn’t it, and a storyteller either. But the boy losing his grip over the Kyuubi was always a possibility.

And she couldn’t bring herself to care.

Honestly she didn’t understand what the deal was with the kid. Sure, the Kyuubi had brought them death and destruction… just like war had, and foreign shinobi slipping into the village in the dead of the night to carry on the same assassination missions they ordered themselves in the other countries. He was far from being the only monster around, the only freak with dangerous powers and carrying the threat of unleashing it on them. From the way Izumi talked about him, he had it more under wrap than a lot of older ninja she knew. Sure, none of them would be quite as destructive if they snapped one day and went on a rampage… Or wouldn’t they? Teams and clans and villages being wiped out by a few bloodthirsty shinobi was not unheard of.

As far as she was concerned, Orochimaru was the greater threat here. If only because if the Kyuubi was released once again, she was sure they could put the blame on his head.

She had to stop him. She had to. She had to stop him before he killed again, before he moved against the village again. She had to stop him because she had failed to do it before, because she had let him get away and all he had done after that was on her. All he had done before too, because she had been too fucking blind to see anything, too caught up in her adoration for him and the attention he lavished on her, that had been nothing but a lie, a scam. She had to stop him before he did to someone else what he had done to her. Her mark was burning in the crook of her neck. Was he still doing that too? Had he perfected it, did they survive now? Did they manage to control themselves before killing two members of the medical staff looking after them?

Anko picked up pace.

She had to stop him. No matter the price.

Sakura watched, anxious, as Akito touched his paws gently to Naruto’s, then Sasuke’s face. Nothing happened, but he looked back at her with an air that said “it’s done” – and how was a fox communicating that? She grabbed Sasuke’s wrist and lifted it into the air, before letting it go. It fell back limply by his side and she breathed out a sigh of relief, although she tried to be subtle about it, not wanting to upset the fox or make it look like she didn’t trust him.

The boys’ weight was back.

She could recognized that she had been properly incapable of any form of grounded reasoning when, a few minutes ago, she had let Akito do… whatever it was he had done to them. She was
sitting between her two unconscious teammates on a ruined battlefield that promise to be swarmed with more shinobi very soon, and probably not friendly ones, she was scared and exhausted and she had to move them both somewhere more secure, but there was no way she would be able to carry them both on her own. That’s when Akito had chipped in.

“I could take their weight,” he had said.

What did that even mean? She had no idea, but she had agreed anyway, because why not? Not a single coherent thought was forming in her brain at that moment. She was talking to a fox.

So he had touched their forehead, and he had taken something from them. It was invisible, but when she had hauled them on her shoulders, they weighted nothing at all. It was like transporting two feathers.

She was freaked out, but at that point it was just adding on past her tolerance limit, and she couldn’t care all that much. She was still relieved that, now that they were relatively secured, hiding under huge roots behind some bushes, Akito had reversed whatever he had done, and her teammates where heavy again.

What a weird, weird, weird day.

She wanted nothing more than to pass out too and be done with it, but she couldn’t. She was too high-strung to so much as close her eyes, and it was too dangerous. They weren’t safe here. She had the horrible impression that they would never be again. She would never relax again. She would always live with that fear.

Yet as soon as she sat down, after securing their surroundings and making the two boys as comfortable as could be, she immediately dozed off.

“I will stop you.”

“Come now, Anko,” Orochimaru said, complacent. “You know you can’t.”

It wasn’t him. It wasn’t his face, his body, it wasn’t his voice either. And yet she recognized him, if only in the way he looked at her, talked to her, in the sweetness of his smile and his tone she knew were fake but got to her all the same, in the way he said her name. “Come now, Anko, don’t be so hasty. Come now, Anko, I know you can do better than this. Come now Anko, don’t disappoint me.”

“Come now, Anko, you deserve a reward.”

He had never been parsimonious neither in reprimand nor in praise.

“I can, and I will.” Or I will fucking die trying. She wouldn’t let him get away. Not this time.

She slid three kunai in her hand, but he knocked them out of her grip with his tongue before she got a chance to throw them. She could match him on this though. She still used the snake techniques he had taught her, even if it was disgusting to those who saw it, even if it earned her scorn and distrust. She would fight with everything she had at her disposal, no matter where it came from. She wasn’t about to get picky and principled about the way she would win.

The snakes sprung out of her sleeves, tangled tight around the outstretched tongue. She pulled with all her strength, bringing him crashing down into her body. She took advantage of the confusion to
She planted it into their joined hands.

The pain didn’t register. She had repeated this string of actions in her head a thousand times, as she laid awake at night dreaming of the day she would have a chance to get back at him. Her mind was already focused on the next step, on forming seals with the help of his other hand. He recognized it immediately.

“Suicide? That’s your solution, Anko?”

“Shut up!”

But before she could complete the jutsu and finally send them both to their grave, he dissolved into her hands with a laugh.

A fucking clone.

“This jutsu is forbidden, you know.”

She spun around to catch him sitting calmly a few trees away, as if they were merely conversing and not trying to kill each other.

“You’re the one who showed it to me.”

“And it warms me to see you’ve been following my teaching.”

She winced, anger rising like the tide, anxious to make him shut his mouth, to punch his satisfied smirk off of his face.

A small flicker of his hand in the air, and she was sent down to her knees by the pain suddenly radiating from the seal on her neck, flooding her body and mind. She gritted her teeth hard enough to break them, determined not to let out a single sound. She sat straight despite the agony, to look at him.

“Why did you come here? What do you want?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know, Anko.”

She screamed, she howled and raged and it was as much the pain as the frustration, the anger, the hatred churning in her guts as her former master just stood there, so close but out of reach, set on inflicting her more pain, and not even because he was after her, or because she was in his way. She wasn’t, not really. But she would be a collateral in whatever plan he was scheming, she and every single person she knew.

Unprompted, Izumi’s smiling face came to her mind, her optimism and blind hope in what the future had in store for her. She thought about how easily young people could be folded and bended into shape, could fall prey to those who just paid them a little attention, who pretended to show them the way. How Izumi looked up to her, Anko couldn’t bear it sometimes. Couldn’t bear the power the girl’s admiration put in her undeserving hands. Orochimaru had wrapped Anko around is fingers so easily, and doing the same to the girl would be so easy too.

“Kekkai Genkai are not so easy to get a hand on these days you know,” he added after a while, never one to skip on talking, knowing he had time, because she couldn’t fucking move and who knew how long it would be until someone find them? “Closely guarded, even in a place as badly
protected as here. So I’m trying something a little less… elegant. Man-made, but just as efficient, I’m sure.”

The air around them unclogged suddenly. She had completely forgotten about it until it was no longer there, the oppressive heat of the Nine-Tails chakra. Orochimaru clicked his tongue, displeased.

“Huh. I didn’t think he would come down quite so fast. I’ll have to tease him a bit more maybe…”

“What did you do to him?”

“Me?” he laughed. “Believe me, I hardly did a thing. It was all on you.”

Not her, she understood. You all. You, the village.

“You should keep a close eye on him, Anko. After all, this place was never very welcoming to monsters now, was it?”

That reputation, he had passed it down to her after he was gone. Snake girl, little monster. Freak.

She couldn’t count the number of times she had thought about leaving it all behind, fucking off to a place where those whispers wouldn’t pursue her. Only the repulsion of following into his footsteps and comforting them in their opinion of her had stopped her.

Was that what he was trying to achieve here?

“You won’t take him.”

“No, I won’t.”

He was grinning, satisfied.

“I won’t have to.”

“Orochimaru… I swear…”

“I’m sorry, my dear. This was very nice, but I have to go now. Don’t spoil my fun, will you? If the exam is interrupted, I will be very upset.”

“Wait!”

Another careless flick of his hand. The seal flared, the pain spiked up to impossible heights, and she blacked out for a second. When she came back to herself, he was gone.

.

“Wake up!”

Sakura jumped out of her own skin and hit her head against a tree root. It took her an alarmingly long time to place where she was and why. She cursed herself for falling asleep, and even more when she realized that the color of the sky wasn’t the sun setting, but rising. The entire night had passed.

It wasn’t Sasuke, nor Naruto who had woken her up. It was Akito, who was still shaking them to no avail. They wouldn’t budge.
She didn’t feel rested in the least, and she wanted to cry.

“Someone’s coming,” the little fox said.

She couldn’t keep in a strangle sob.


“I’m, I’m not sure. No more than five? And they’re very close.”

Sakura took in a shaky breath. Now wasn’t the moment to freeze. Her teammates were still out. It fell onto her to protect them. She tightened the strap of her sheath on her chest and crawled closer to the entrance of their hiding spot to try and get a look of their surroundings. She didn’t have to wait long.

“Don’t put up the brave act. Just give us your scroll.”

Three people. A team from that village with the music note as their symbol. The one who had talked had his face covered by bandages, except for one of his eyes, and his sleeves were so long they almost dragged on the ground – hiding weapons probably. There was another boy with a mean looking face and a girl with long dark hair brushing her calves. They had to be a couple of years older than Sakura’s team. And they had made short work of her flimsy hope that whoever had found them would be a friendly bunch for once.

“I’m not gonna do that,” she declared, voice shaking just a little. They hadn’t come all that way to just give it up now. She could protect her team, and their scroll. She could.

“I think you will.”

The second boy took a few steps forward, eager for a fight, but his teammate stopped him.

“Wait, Zaku. Look.”

First layer was a failure, but she knew that already. They spotted the freshly upturned earth immediately, but at least it brought them in the right spot for second layer. She cut the wire attached to a root behind her. A good thing Sasuke was always carrying an absurd amount of cable, and that weird little knife specifically designed to cut them off.

The huge branch tumbled toward the group, but before it could crash on their face, Bandages put his two hands against the wood, and promptly made it explode.

“Is that all? This is pathetic, honestly. Don’t underestimate us.”

She was aware of that. She had put the traps together hastily, and it was a job best done by two people, or three. Or six. At least she had remembered that old mantra from Infiltration & Ambush class. Three layers minimum.

She cut the second wire.

The one named Zaku spun around, and managed somehow to blast away most of the shuriken speeding their way. Most, but not all. None caused any fatal damage, but at least they drew blood.

It wasn’t going to win her the fight though. And they were angrier now.

“I’m gonna kill you, you bitch,” Zaku promised. She drew her sword with a slippery, shaking hand as they stalked closer, closer.
Her other hand was reaching behind, shaking Sasuke’s limp body, trying to wake him. She couldn’t do this alone. There were three of them! She needed help, she needed…

There was a yell, a crash, something spinning. The three foreign nin took a foot to the chin and went flying.

“And you, don’t underestimate us.”

Dumbfounded, Sakura recognized the ugly green jumpsuit first, of all things.

“You’re… What are you doing here?”

“Well, I came to help, of course!”

Of course, Rock Lee said, as if it was obvious. It really wasn’t.

“But why?”

“I… I was very rude to your team. I’m here to make amend. And besides…”

He turned around just enough that their gaze could meet without keeping his eyes off his enemies. He was blushing lightly.

He mumbled, but his usual voice was so loud that him turning it down just made it regular loud, “… you’re very cute.”

Sakura spluttered, blood rising to her face at top speed.

“Wh-What?”

“When you two are done!” Bandages thundered. Lee turned back his full attention to the other team. He was standing right between them and Sakura, she could barely see them beyond the barrier of his body.

It was comforting.

“My friend is not at the top of her form,” he said. “I will be your opponent, if it’s alright with you.”

The three ninja scoffed, mocking.

“Zaku, we take the clown,” Bandages said. “Kin, go get the scroll.”

Sakura got to her feet. As Lee stood as a shield to her, she too had to stand as a shield, Naruto and Sasuke still out cold on the ground with the little fox curled up next to Naruto’s face, frightened but unwilling to run away. She could relate.

It was still two against three. Lee proved to be very strong, when he managed to… rip out some roots straight from the ground to stop his opponents in their track. It gave them a pause, at least, so she wasn’t the only one astonished by the feat. He was fast too, and his hits looked painful.

But he was only using taijutsu, and the two others seemed to have… something else. Bandages swung without his punch connecting and yet Lee stumbled as if he had been hit. The boy said something about sound, vibrations, and it sounded interesting but Sakura had her own problem to deal with.

She raised her sword to face that Kin girl.
She was awfully limited in her movement. She couldn’t dodge and jump as well as she wanted because she couldn’t move away from her spot, lest her teammates be at the mercy of the girl. They were defenseless, it would only take a second. So she fell back on defense, and the girl was strong and relentless, having a great time pushing Sakura around.

And she couldn’t help it, when she saw Zaku charging at Lee from behind, the boy already in a bad shape and too distracted by his other opponent. She moved, sending a handful of shuriken just to slow the other boy down, to stop him. He cursed, redirected his sonic attack to deflect the shuriken. It was enough to give Lee a little time.

Kin too.

She dived toward the boys and there was no time, no time. Sakura leapt, got in front of the other girl, was too close to do anything about the kunai flying her way but let go of her sword and grab the blade with both hands.

“What the… What’s wrong with you you stupid…”

It was a spectacular bad move and she was very scared she was just going to see one of her finger fall off, but she didn’t let go. And then, because the other girl had two hands and there was a kunai in the second one two, Sakura did something even stupider. Instead of dodging, she ducked her head so that the tip would collided with her forehead protector.

She was relieved to discover they weren’t called that for nothing.

The blade skidded over the metal and nicked her face but the other girl lost her grip on it in surprise. Sakura let go of the one she was still holding and shoved at her, hard, so that she could take back her sword and…

She couldn’t take back her sword. Her hands were covered in blood and a mess. Kin recovered quickly and drew closer again, her eyes full of rage, and there was nothing Sakura could do but stand there.

What was she thinking? She should have just given them the stupid scroll, she realized helplessly. Lee was on the ground. She couldn’t do anything.

“Enough!”

The entire scene froze.

They all turned their gaze to the edge of the clearing, where right there on a low branch stood…

“What do you want, Karin?” Kin growled, obviously mad for the interruption.

It was the injured girl from earlier. She didn’t seem to recognize Sakura though. In fact she didn’t even look in her direction.

“What do you want, Karin?” Kin growled, obviously mad for the interruption.

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“Master is calling. We have to regroup.”

“Really? Now?”

“Yes, now, Dosu.”

She had gotten closer, and she was smaller than Bandages – Dosu – but she faced him head on.

“We still need the scroll,” he said, menacing. The girl adjusted her glasses.
“It’s been taken care of. This is not what we’re here for.”

“And why should I listen to you?”

She adjusted her glasses again.

“Because I’m the one who will be reporting to him whether you obeyed his will or not.”

They defied each other for a long, tense moment, but eventually, the boy relented.

“Let’s move,” he spat, gesturing at his two teammates.

Kin threw a last murderous look at Sakura before turning away, as did the other one, Zaku, clutching his shoulder victim of Lee’s brute strength.

They disappeared between the trees.

Just before doing the same, Karin turned back to Sakura, meeting her gaze straight on.

She mouthed at her. “We’re even.”

Her eyes flickered behind Sakura for the briefest moment, and then she was gone too. When she looked back, Sakura saw Naruto staring after her, looking very confused. Sasuke stirred too.

“Sakura?” he asked, concerned, as he sat up. “What happened?”

She really, really, really couldn’t be blamed for bursting into tears.

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Rock Lee was pretty banged up, but he would live, according to Sasuke’s admittedly not very professional, but also the only available right now, opinion. He had pried most of what had happened from a sobbing Sakura and a sheepish Lee who was mortified not to have been able to be her knight in shining armor or something. Sasuke didn’t understand everything that went out of his mouth, but he was grateful for him nonetheless.

Had he known this use of his Sharingan would take such a toll on him, he would have think about another option. Not that there were any, but still. Sakura could have just… died. She could have died, and Sasuke and Naruto too, gutted in their sleep, and Sasuke had a hard time wrapping his head around that. They had come so close. Way too close for comfort.

“Give me your hands,” he told her, and just grabbed her wrist since she was spacing out. Her palms and fingers were sporting deep, messy cuts, where she had grabbed a damn kunai in a panic. A few bandages weren’t going to be enough, and they would never get through this forest with her handless.

“Okay, don’t move.”

At least his forced nap had restocked his reserves a bit. He focused chakra in his hand and called it up like his mother had shown him. It was so different from any jutsu they had ever learned, so much gentler than what he was used too. He had trouble keeping it steady, but it worked, and slowly, the cuts filled in until they were fully closed, and if he wasn’t able to erase the scars entirely, at least by the time he was done she could move her fingers again.

“Thanks,” she said, a little impressed. That was one thing going right for the day. Their ratio was improving.
He thought it was about to plummet again when someone else showed up in their corner, but it was Hyuuga Neji and Tenten, from Lee’s team. They frowned at the state he was in, but he was quick to reassure them that team 7 weren’t the ones who had done this to him. And that they didn’t have the scroll they needed. Sasuke couldn’t hold back a relieved sigh when they decided to leave them without a fight.

“We need to move. And to find something to eat,” he said, as they had made a valiant effort at ignoring the embarrassing noises coming out of their stomach until now. “And we need an Earth scroll.”

“I have one.”

Sasuke and Sakura spun fast enough to get whiplash to see Naruto take out an Earth scroll from his hoodie and wiggle it under their nose. It was the first words he had uttered since he had woken up, but he still wasn’t looking at any of them.

“Where did you get that?” Sakura asked, a little hysterical.

“The team that attacked us right at the beginning. It’s actually Team 10 who got their hands on the scroll, but since it was a joint effort and they didn’t need it, they let me have it. Ino said she couldn’t deal with your ugly crying face if you learned they had stolen our scroll from me.”

He put it back, nonchalant, as Sakura strangled herself in her indignation.

“That’s one thing solved then,” Sasuke said, unsure. Naruto’s behavior was putting him off balance – they were used to him being broody or downright antagonistic but this… this was something else.

“Did something happened back then?” he asked. “With that guy?”

Naruto shrugged.

“Nothing happened.”

“How come you lost it like that?”

“I don’t know. I just did.”

“Come on, Naruto…”

He had a look on his face, like he wasn’t really there. So lost in thought he could barely spare one for them or their situation. It was as if he didn’t know what emotions he was supposed to be having, in turn looking confused, furious, bitter, mournful, lost. The fox was sitting in his lap, staring at him with open worry, and he ought to have seen something. Naruto had told him to go back wherever he came from, but the fox had confessed, sheepish, that he couldn’t actually leave on his own. He had to wait for “Akira” to come get him, whoever that was. Naruto wasn’t happy about it, but he was so preoccupied, he had just let it go.

Something had happened, that was for sure, and it meant it could happen again and they needed to know, dammit.

But they would have to argue about it later. That’s all they seemed to be doing, lately. Push it to later, later.

Sasuke wondered though, if later would ever come.
“We don’t know what happened, but it was over before we got there. As per your instructions, we didn’t intervene.”

Tsunade swore she could hear the disapproval in the Anbu captain making his report on the Forest of Death situation. They believed they should have removed Naruto from the trial right away, but she had put her foot down, and down it would stay.

He had hurt no one, had posed no real threat, and had calmed down on his own. As far as she was concerned, it was a non-issue. She wouldn’t single him out, if she could help it, she wouldn’t do anything at all, and she didn’t give a damn about what they thought of that line of action.

Especially seeing that once again, it’s not like they had a choice. Just like they couldn’t treat the Danzo affair openly, they couldn’t let it slip that they might not have control over Konoha’s jinchuuriki. And they couldn’t send all their forces after those intruders lest they exposed the fact that people could infiltrate the village so easily in the first place.

Now she understood why every village fought every time not to host the chunin exam.

“What about the intruders? Did you hear from Anko yet?”

“She fought one, but he got away. She asked that you meet her at the Tower. It seems like she wanted to talk about the matter with you in person.”

“Alright, I’ll be there. Dismissed.”

Shizune was by her side as soon as the man was gone, handing her a fuming tea and a pill for her migraine. Tsunade thanked her a bit too heartily, desperate that she was for any scrap of comfort.

She couldn’t wait for all those foreign nin to fuck off of her village and for that damn exam to be over.

They talked. They said things, they asked questions, they debated, they inquired.

Naruto couldn’t understand or hear them. He couldn’t get out of his own head.

He could only think about the snake’s words. About that story the snake had told him, that no matter how he spun it, he couldn’t even try believing was a lie. About his life, his birth, about the others.

The power of human sacrifice.

Jinchuuriki.
Keeping the scale of Orochimaru's big mouth syndrom for the next chapter. A lot of you can't wait for Naruto to pack his shit and opt out of here, but I still gotta put them all through some stuff before that can happen. We'll have to deal with the preliminary tournament next time. Urg. I won't be writing all the fights, that's for sure, since most of them will stick to canon. Anyway. It's late. I hope you enjoyed. Let me know. Bye.

IF YOU ARE (STILL) BINGE READING THIS, because you're wild, you're about 200k in. It's time for another break! Drink and eat or sleep maybe, or get some work done. You can come back to it later. Take care!
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Preliminary tournament, or well, most of it.

Chapter Notes

Check the flip the coin tag on my tumblr for rambling and fanarts!

Kinda want to get that chapter off my hands, so I maybe didn't proofread it as much as I should have. Sorry about that. I'll probably edit later, don't hesitate to point out mistakes!

Anyway, same issues as always, too much fight scenes, not enough sitting-and-talking. Soon though.

I wanted to thank all of you again for your love and support. This fic reached 2000 kudos!!! I live in the constant fear that you'll all finally get bored of this, but in the meantime I'll keep writing. And probably then too lol. I just love this story ok, and I'm glad someone out there do too!

That's all from me. Hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I’ll tell you a story boy. Figure a storm. A massive, powerful, mighty storm, running across the land, destroying all in its path. There is nothing Men can do against it but wait for it to pass and lament after it’s gone. They might rage at their gods or at the storm itself, but neither care much, do they?

They hate the storm. They hate it with a burning passion, with all the strength of their grief and frustration at how it renders them powerless.

But then Men think, and Men find out they can do something about it. They find a way to put a leash around the storm. To tie it down, or to cage it, or to shrink it into a harmless, manageable size. Men are happy – no longer would the storm come and lay waste to their homeland. They still hate the storm though.

And then Men think some more, as they are so tragically bound to do. Isn’t it a waste, that caged storm? All that power, all that destruction, couldn’t it be put to better use? And of course by better use, understand against someone other than them. Some other Men, who are not the same you know, they are different, they live elsewhere.

So let’s find a way to unleash the storm.

And they do. Men always find a way. And so the mighty storm that once brought them such misery
is now a weapon to use against their enemy, it's now reduced to just another tool at their disposal, to bend others to their wishes, to stray the course of a war, to change history.

There is just one catch - it has to be chained to a person. The cage has to be a body, a life offered to reign that power in, to permit its use. Well, it's not much of a catch at all. Just a small price to pay.

And now figure that there isn’t just the storm. There is the raging wildfire, there is the flood, unstoppable and ravaging, there is the tsunami, the very sea descending upon the land. Nine of them, in total. And each little group of Men has its own. Its own catastrophe, its own destructive weapon.

Now they’re stuck, you see? If they use theirs, the others will too, and then what will remain? So they keep it tightly bound to their human prison, while dreaming of the day they can set it free again. It guarantees the peace, in a way, even if it’s a shaky, despised peace.

The weapons remain hated, but this hate soon shift to the prison as well, because aren’t they one and the same after all? And if the prison protests, rebels, if it tries to escape, or dies, they can always find another one.

And that, my little fox, is the story of you Jinchuuriki.

The voice was haunting him.

Low and sweet, syrupy, almost cajoling. That Orochimaru took pleasure into tormenting him, that was for sure. But they were also telling the truth.

Naruto was sure of it.

And this certitude didn’t come from him, not entirely. But the Beast was musing too, and the rage and resentment sitting at the bottom of his stomach, Naruto could finally give it shape and form, could understand its roots. The storm, caged. To protect, at first. And then, to attack. To obey, always.

And there were others. Eight others.

One of them was here, somewhere in this forest. One tail, Nine tails. Another natural disaster chained to an unwilling child, another weapon to be both used and rejected by its village.

Another just like him.

How could Naruto be expected to give a damn about what was happening around him, about the agonizingly slow process of making their way through the thick of the forest, about this stupid exam, when he knew what he knew? It felt so meaningless, even cruel, in the grand scheme of things.

Were they ever going to tell him?

Were they ever going to stop pretending like he was just another citizen of the village, just another ninja, with the same rights, the same future? Because he wasn’t. It was all a lie. Things would never get better.

He would never be free.
“For your own good”, they had said. “For your own safety, to protect you.” But that wasn’t it. They needed him, needed them. This was the reason, for the life he had lead, for his very existence.

To fight their war.

What was war even like? What use did it have?

Would they unleash him upon their enemies, if they could?

“To save the village,” the Third had said, but that was a lie. It wasn’t an accident, it wasn’t by chance. It was all planned. They were always going to do this, to him or to someone else. They would again, after he was gone. They had already, to another before him.

How had they died?

They stumbled upon a Suna team, desperate after losing their own scroll, and managed to come out on top. They stumbled upon a Konoha team, and agreed wordlessly to ignore each other and go their own way. They stumbled upon an Ame team, wild-eyed and terrified, who warned them to stay away from “that monster and his sand”.

Who’s the monster, Naruto thought. What’s a monster even.

The way they had looked at him – the grown-ups in the Hokage’s office after Mizuki’s death, Kakashi-sensei on their way to Wave Country. The suspicion, the worry, when they were all guilty of the same crimes, when they had all killed before. But he wasn’t the same, was he? He was different from them. Always has been, always would be.

Akira came to fetch Akito, fuming with both outrage and worry. Akito felt guilty, about not having been able to help more. Naruto was pretty sure he completely failed at reassuring him, at thanking him too.

They caught fish in the river to appease their raging hunger, they kept to the shadows of the trees to stay out of sight and out of the hot sun’s way, and it could have felt like just some kind of extreme camping trip, if it wasn’t for the blood drying on their clothes, the bandages around their hands and limbs, the exhaustion. The fact that Sasuke and Sakura kept talking to him, kept trying to reach out, to make him say something, to make him tell. They knew something had happened, and faced with their concerned expression, he was tempted to spill, more than once.

But there was a voice in his head stopping him every time. It sounded like the snake’s.

What if they already knew?

Sasuke’s parents were prominent shinobi, his father was someone important, close to the Hokage. They had to know. It made sense.

So did Sasuke too? And Sakura? Did they know? Had they hid it from him? Had they been told more than him, like everybody else in this village?

Could he trust them?

The way Orochimaru had talked about it made one thing very clear – most of them who knew about it didn’t think there was anything wrong with it. The system worked, he’d said. Everyone was content with it. It did guarantee the peace. At the small price of one life ruined.

One sacrifice, the power it had…
Maybe his friends would agree. Why not? They all did. Maybe they would think he was selfish, to feel wronged, to believe it was unfair, to be so angry. Maybe he ought to be grateful that he had been allowed that much, to walk free, to live a life.

Maybe they would turn, at long last, against him.

Another part of him was convinced it was absurd. That they weren’t like that, that they would never. But that part didn’t win. The risk was too high. He was too scared of the answer. He was consumed by a rage that wasn’t his own, but that he could no longer shut down.

He kept it all to himself.

And he kept a hand on his stomach.

There was something wrong with the seal.

.

It had been a shock, for sure, when the first of them had been summoned. It was barely two hours after the beginning of the second task, most of the chunin in charge of the various teams weren’t even back at the Tower yet. What was the point? The record was four hours and some, and the average time was closer to twelve.

Izumi was already there, because she was nothing if not thorough. At first they had thought Inuzuka Hana had been summoned because one the teams had had the brilliant idea of opening their scroll in advance – happened all the time. But when she had come back, dumbstruck, it was to tell the gathered chunin that the team she was in charge of, three young genin from Suna, had made it to the Tower, scot-free and fresh like they had just taken a stroll through the park.

That was more than fifteen hours ago – they had waited, but the performance was truly exceptional, and no other team made themselves known in such a way. About five of them were knocked out by their chunin because they had opened the scroll too early. For the rest of them, they just had to wait.

Izumi had managed to get Konoha’s Team 7. She preferred to think it was because she was Anko’s favorite, and not because everything pertaining to Naruto was deliberate instead of left to fate, like it was for all the others. Around hour six, Anko had burst into the Tower looking agitated and weakened, but she had locked herself into the control room before Izumi had the chance to ask what was going on. She had heard Naruto’s name, from some Anbu escorting her mentor. The wait had been harder after that.

Hana could have left, since her work was done for this task, but she wanted to know how her brother was doing, and so she had come back on day two and kept Izumi company. Izumi liked the other girl – they had crossed path at the Academy a few times, and they had done a few missions together since under Anko’s command, before the Inuzuka girl had been definitely detached to the police force. She was famous in the Uchiha district for getting along so smoothly with Uchiha Fugaku, whom no one would ever describe as easy to work with. Just for that, Izumi admired the girl greatly.

They were eating a late lunch on the second day when the Godaime herself appeared in the Tower.

All chunin present scrambled to their feet, attempting a salute with their mouth full and uniforms dotted with rice. She dismissed them absentmindedly. Just before going into the control room though, she approached them both.
“Are you done with your duties here?” she asked without meeting any of their gazes. She seemed far away, mind occupied elsewhere.

“I am, but Izumi is not,” Hana replied, casting an uncertain glance to the side. Izumi shrugged. She didn’t know what this was about either.

"Hana, go back to your clan, and tell your clanmates to do the same as soon as possible. Same goes for you, Izumi. Sort things out with your team and meet back with your clan heads.”

“What’s happen…”

The woman had already turned their back on them.

Hana apologized and left in a hurry to collect the few other Inuzuka chunin present. Izumi went to do the same, but it was precisely the moment Team 7 decided to activate the summoning seal from their scroll.

Izumi had it all down, the congratulations, the whole speech, but she was thrown off the loop by what had just happened, and the scene greeting her in one of the entranceways of the Tower did nothing to ease the confusion.

Sakura and Sasuke both had a scroll in hand and were staring at her, wide-eyed and weary. They looked exhausted and in pretty bad shape. It took a moment for Izumi to spot the third member of their team.

Naruto was crouched in a corner, back to his friends, his mask glaring at her. He got up slowly and turned, but he stayed where he was, at the other end of the room. He seemed ready to burst out of his own skin – his chakra was all over the place.

She had to wonder if she had done something wrong, from the way he was looking at her. She quickly inferred that she wasn’t the target of his ire, not really.

“Congratulations, you three. You passed the second task.”

Sasuke and Sakura dropped, they crashed on the floor like they had been dying to do just that. Sakura’s face was swollen in places, her arms and hands bandaged. Sasuke looked on the verge of passing out. And Naruto…

Naruto stared. He had no wounds but his clothes were in pieces, and he was staring, hard. Looking for something. Probing.

“The… the task is still ongoing,” she said, uneasy. “You can rest for a while in the room behind you. We’ll come fetch you when it’s over.”

You’d thought she had told them they had a five-kilometers track to run in order to reach a damn sofa, with how they sighed and dragged themselves out. She wanted to ask what had happened, what the problem was, exactly, why they were so quiet, why Naruto looked ready for murder. Instead she let them go, deciding she wouldn’t get anything from them in the state they were in.

Only when she turned around did she realized they hadn’t even talked about the message, the riddle that their scroll was supposed to complete. The board was set above the door, the classic precept inked on it in careful strokes. It was still the words of the Third Hokage – there had been no time to change it.

*If Heaven you lack, gain knowledge, be prepared. If Earth you lack, gain power, steel yourself. If*
Earth and Heaven. Body and Mind. It was a bit pompous for her taste, as it usually was with the Third. He was rather old-fashioned. She wondered when the transition would be official, for as little as he was seen around the Hokage Tower lately, he was still Konoha’s leader in the people’s eyes.

The old saying summed up the requirement of the exams pretty well in the end – be smart and strong and maybe you’ll make it through. Of course the other lesson was “obey your orders or you will fail” – open the scroll before the right time and be disqualified. It was pretty literal too, for it was often crucial the messengers do not be aware of the message.

She wasn’t sure it was the lesson the kids had learned from this though.

There was a kunai embedded into the Sandaime’s signature.

“And you really have no idea who they were?” Tsunade asked again. She was so skeptical, Anko was sure she was going to call her out on her bullshit, to claim that she was lying.

But when she repeated a firm “no”, feet firmly planted on the ground and hands clasped tight in her back so that she could control her trembling limbs, hide the pain still radiating from the mark, Tsunade only gave her a long, scrutinizing glare, before dismissing the subject altogether.

“Dammit. As if we needed this, on top of everything…”

Anko had heard briefly of the mess with Danzo from one of the Anbu. The timing was terrible indeed. But Anko wasn’t the Hokage, and as such, she didn’t have to care about every single problem in the village.

Just the one.

The cursed mark was burning, burning, and only her iron will kept her upright in front of the woman. The Sandaime could have done something about it, but the Sandaime wasn’t there.

To him, she would have talked about Orochimaru.

But to Tsunade?

Who could say how she would react? Come to think of it, maybe Anko wouldn’t have told even him. She had never questioned her leaders before, never thought they could fail her. But his friendship for Danzo had blinded Sarutobi, and wouldn’t it do the same to Tsunade with Orochimaru?

Anko would stop him no matter what. She didn’t need Tsunade’s sentimentality in the way.

“It’s not like we have a choice,” Tsunade sighed after a pensive silence. “The exam has to proceed.”

As if on cue, one of the Chunin in charge of monitoring the second task knocked on the door.

“21 participants made it through. There are a few more still in the Forest, but it’s confirmed that there is no more scroll in circulation for them to succeed…”
“No need to drag it out then,” Anko settled. “The second task is officially over. And we’re going to need some intermediate selection…”

Couldn’t they have been more efficient? Seven teams, what was that? So few of them had stolen more scrolls than necessary to cut the numbers? Pathetic.

Anko gathered the examiners and the jounin instructors here to watch their team, and they followed Tsunade down to the training room of the Tower, where the ones who had succeeded in bringing back both scrolls and all their teammates alive were waiting. Some had had more time than others to rest, but they all looked tired and fed up already.

She couldn’t wait to see their face when they would understand it was far from over.

“First of all, congratulations, all of you, for completing the second task. Although you had a rather soft go at it, and you will regret it soon.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” a blonde brat with a displeased frown shouted from the first row. Anko recognized one of the youngest Yamanaka, if only because they were often warned against her wandering ears and eyes among the jounin.

"It means there are only ten slots available in the third task. So we’re gonna have to trim that group down a bit. Right now.”

Various protests erupted among the group. How it wasn’t fair because they were exhausted, poor them. She scoffed.

“Shut up, all of you! You should have thought about it when you were lazing around the Forest of Death! If you don’t think you’re up for it, feel free to drop out now and stop wasting everyone’s time.”

She didn’t expect anyone to take her up on the offer, but it looked like someone really had no pride whatsoever. And a Konoha genin at that.

“I’m afraid I’m at my limit,” the young man said. “I withdraw.”

“And you are?”

“Yakushi Kabuto.”

Anko clicked her tongue but dutifully crossed the name from her list.

“Very well, you’re dismissed. That makes an even number of you, so at least you won’t have to fight twice. Thank your weak-willed friend for that.”

The boy smiled, unfazed, and simply walked away. What a disgrace.

There was a small commotion among the group. It was Kakashi’s team, unable not to make itself known in some way. The three kids seemed in dispute, two against one, hissing angrily. In the end the two relented in front of the unyielding host boy.

Anko had heard enough about how annoying that kid could be.

“Anyone else?” she asked, just to be sure. The Uchiha and the girl glared at their friend, but he didn’t budge. They shook their head.

“I will leave the next few words to the Hokage then,” Anko concluded, stepping back. Tsunade
barely hid a sigh.

“I hope you understood the purpose of the two trials you just overcame. It was meant to test capacities we expect from chunin, as well as to push out those who couldn’t make the cut. The final trial is a lot different. You won’t only be judged by your peers. You will be scrutinized by envoys and spectators from all your villages.”

The aspiring chunin shared questioning looks and excited chatters. Glory and fame made a fool out of anyone.

“They will judge how worthy you are of their business. They will judge how much stronger or weaker you are than the other villages. This is a competition, and this is what marks the difference between a strong village, a strong nation, and a weaker one.”

Anko wondered if she was the only one who could catch the dispassion in Tsunade’s tone. She didn’t know that woman that well, but enough to infer that she didn’t think much of that particular line of thought. Chunin exams always went that way though. It was a display, as much an advertising strategy as a warning. “This is how strong we are.” “This is what we are made of.”

“Others beware.”

“Anyway, that means we can’t just send anyone in to fight in front of all those people. If you want to prove yourself to the world, you will have to win the next fight.”

In a puff of smoke, Genma appeared in front of her, respectfully kneeling.

“I’m here to oversee the preliminary tournament, Hokage-sama,” he said in his usual laidback tone. He always looked careless, an airhead. Anko supposed a lot of people had been fooled by it, had thought he would make an easy target.

People who hadn’t lived to spread a warning.

“Go on then,” Tsunade said.

“Hello everyone. I’m Shiranui Genma,” he said louder, addressing the gathered crowd. “Follow me.”

They moved the group to the Tower’s huge arena. The remaining candidates cast curious looks at the room, the platform circling the area for observation, the paved ring, the massive hands sculpted in stone at one end of the room, set into the ram seal. Tournaments of all sorts were held here, but today it would be without much of a public. That would be for later, and for only half of them, or less.

“A fight is won if your opponent is dead, unconscious, unable to keep fighting, or if they give up,” Genma said. “I reserve the right to stop a fight if I judge the outcome already decided. I advice against trying to argue with me.”

Unconcerned and relaxed as he looked, no one missed the threat, and no one dismissed it either. At least they weren’t completely stupid.

“Well, without further ado…”

The panels on the wall opened to reveal a screen where the names of the participants were flashing rapidly, waiting to settle and seal their fate.
“Keep an eye on Naruto,” Anko heard in her back, Tsunade whispering to Kakashi and Tenzo before taking her leave. The boy was agitated and jumpy. As distasteful as it sounded, she couldn’t help but see a restless beast in a too-tight cage. She felt bad for wishing to see where it would lead, but it was only logical, after all. If Orochimaru was here for him, then he was the one she needed to keep an eye on.

Sasuke was the first to go, against an older genin from Konoha named Yoroi. Sakura was a bit worried for him, because their trek down the Forest of Death had really taken its toll on him, but she needed not to worry. Unfortunately for that Yoroi, his specialty was chakra absorption, but with Naruto’s habit to suck up chakra into his scrolls at every turn, Sasuke had built up quite the resistance to it. He fell back on taijutsu, which he excelled in, and he seemed to channel all the pent-up worry and frustration that had piled up during those tense few days. He won his match easily enough. It didn’t bring him much joy – Naruto was still avoiding his gaze.

They had tried to talk him out of staying for the tournament, to have him withdraw, or at least tell Kakashi about what had happened in the forest, about whatever was making him sweat and lose focus like this. It wasn’t mere anger that made his eyes flicker red and his nails break the skin of his palms, but he assured them he was fine and had refused categorically to leave or warn anyone. There was no threat of his that Sakura would heed, but going behind his back would brew nothing good. If he said he would be fine, they could only trust his judgment.

She was split between wanting all of this to be over and wishing her turn would never come. She wanted to sleep for ten days and stuff her face with her mother’s crepes, and the thought of being forced to fight for her life again to achieve that was depressing.

It didn’t even occur to her to just give up though. She wouldn’t lag behind. Never.

She was ashamed how little she paid attention to the next matches. Shino fought one of their attackers from the forest, Zaku, and more or less obliterated his arms from the inside – it was a little pleasing, a little. Next came another ninja from Konoha, against one from Suna named Kankuro. He fought with disgusting, creepy puppets, of all things, and sent his opponents unconscious and broken to the infirmary.

They all turned their attention back on the screen, but Sakura was so out of it, she didn’t even recognize the names for a second.

Even if one of them was hers.

Haruno Sakura
Vs
Yamanaka Ino

She stood stunned as Ino, next to her, stared with equal disbelief at this dumb screen. It was hard to tell really, if this was better or worse than the other alternatives. On one hand, she was reasonably certain that at least Ino wouldn’t try to kill her for real.

On the other hand, she had zero wish to punch her closest friend in the face right now.

They spared together of course, but it wasn’t the same. Training was about improving themselves, not winning. The stakes were the same for them both, the reward was the same.
But here, one of them would get to move onward, and the other just… wouldn’t.

“Let’s go, Sakura,” Ino probed gently when the audience started to rustle with impatience. She followed, a bit numb, and they both went down to the arena.

“Ready?” Genma asked, although it didn’t sound much like a question. In fact he didn’t wait for any answer from them, and simply commanded, “begin.”

Nothing happened. Until Ino screamed.

“Sakura!” She jumped, startled – Ino was angry now.

“Now is not the time to give up! Don’t you have a goal? Don’t you want something?”

Laying in Ino’s bed, playing with her long, pale hair. “I don’t want to be left behind. What would they do without me? I need to stand by their side.”

She and Sasuke, they had an agreement. Nothing explicit, but it was there all the same. They had to look after Naruto. They had to keep an eye on him, they had to help. She couldn’t let them increase the distance. Sakura didn’t excel in anything, but she was good, at everything.

Good enough.

“I have to win too, do you understand? I’m not gonna go easy on you,” Ino said, parting her feet, taking her stance. Sakura followed. When she was lost and unsure, it was always the best way to go – just follow Ino. Follow her lead. Let her guide Sakura.

Ino was right. They had to fight for what they wanted. She wanted to make the highest ranks in Intelligence, and Sakura wanted to protect her team. One of them had to lose, that’s just how it was. They could win next time. As long as they kept trying, they could always make it.

Being friends didn’t mean that they couldn’t fight each other. It meant they would be okay, even if they did.

“You better not,” she finally answered, and she meant it.

One of them had to lose. And one of them had to win.

Sakura kept her sword sheathed, for now – swords were to make sure enemies wouldn’t follow, but Ino wasn’t an enemy. They were familiar with each other moves and style, although the context made the outcome of the fight unpredictable. Sakura had made great efforts in the past few years, and Ino no longer stood so far away beyond her. She was confident she could hold her own against her friend, and she would prove it.

Above all, she needed no to fall prey to Ino’s Mind Jutsu.

They started moving at the same time.

Ino was always going soft on her during training, and Sakura hated that. She hated that she had never grown past that scared little girl that needed protection in her friend’s eyes. When they were kids, Ino was Sakura’s hero, her knight in shining armor. But they weren’t kids anymore.

She could protect herself. She had to, if she then wanted to protect others.

She concentrated chakra in her feet to leap at Ino, faster than she ever could with the physical limitations of her body. But refined chakra control could compensate for a lot of things. Her fist
caught Ino by surprise.

Ino got back up, wiping blood off her mouth with a grin.

“Alright, alright. Let’s do this, Sakura.”

It was a bit of a blur after that. They focused on taijutsu and projectile weapons, since their respective skill in ninjutsu were rather ill-suited to frontal combat in an open, barren landscape. The Mind Jutsu were still a concern in the back of Sakura’s mind, but it was hard to imagine Ino would be able to use it in such circumstances. She needed Sakura immobilized for that.

They went for the same punch and each blocked a fist just before it connected to their cheek. They found themselves locked in the hold, trying to push against each other to land the hit, to get the other to back down.

To no avail. They were of equal strength. Ino huffed in frustration.

"I shouldn't have made you do all those push-ups!"

“I can do more than you, Ino-pig.”

“You wish, ugly.”

Sakura’s mother always scolded her when she heard how she and Ino talked to each other. Sakura didn’t find it that weird though – there was no heat in the words, no cuts. It was as affectionate, as intimate as if they had been nicknames, pet names. Sakura didn’t heart the insults her mother did in them.

“Damn, we’ve talked about it, Sakura,” Ino lamented after a few more seconds. Sakura frowned, puzzled.

“What?”

“You need to expand your focus.”

Ino’s smile was triumphant.

Something moved in Sakura’s back.

Shit!

She had been told before that her attention was too narrowed when she was engaged in a fight.

“Mind Jutsu! Mind Transfer!”

The clone she was wrestling with dissolved into her grip just as Ino took over her body.

Ino had tried it out on her a few times, to train it, but Sakura would never get used to the terror of suddenly losing the reign over her own body, of her mind being pushed back in a corner, trapped and powerless.

“Try to fight it,” Ino had said once. “Come on, try.”

It could be fought, or so she had said, but Sakura had never succeeded. Ino’s presence was overwhelming, bright and larger than life, Sakura felt dwarfed by the strength of her mind.
The worst thing was that she could still feel. Ino raising Sakura’s hand, opening Sakura mouth over the words that would write her off the competition. She could still see through her eyes, hear through her ears.

Hear Rock Lee yelling encouragements, tell her not to give up. See her friends and classmates up there on the platform. Her teacher, her teammates.

Naruto and Sasuke, staring at her.

Sasuke had won his fight, Naruto surely would too. Only her then? Only her to lose here, to be stopped while they moved on. Only her to sit in the audience during the last trial while they fought down there in front of all those people. “They’re from the same team? Where’s the third member? Oh, she didn’t cut it.”

She didn’t cut it.

She didn’t want to become a chunin. She wanted to become a chunin with them. She wanted to keep up. Maybe she would make it next time, but where would they be by then? The distance wouldn’t grow. She wouldn’t let it.

Besides, she couldn’t leave Sasuke to deal with Naruto alone. He was too easy on him, too forgiving. Who would yell at Naruto and shake him in all directions to keep him out of his own head, if not her?

She couldn’t just lose.

Get out.

She wouldn’t. She wasn’t a whiny little girl anymore. And the prospect was far scarier thinking about the life awaiting them. If she was captured, if she fell prey to this kind of techniques from an enemy, would she just lose too? Would she have to watch, helpless?

No way.

Get out.

Not Ino, not anyone. She wouldn’t let them do this to her. It wasn’t desperation she felt, it wasn’t hopelessness and regret.

She was fucking enraged.

GET OUT.

She pushed, with all her might, with all her will, with all her need to prove herself, to rise above, to keep going. She pushed, pushed, pushed. “Ino, what’s happening?” she heard from Shikamaru, somewhere above them. The words had stilled in Sakura’s mouth. Ino couldn’t go on.

GET. OUT!

She pushed, and Ino stumbled.

Sakura didn’t waste any time, didn’t pause to marvel at her success, to wonder how she had done it, if Ino was alright, what was happening. She spun around and drew her sword in one swift motion, and before Ino could recover from the trip back into her own body, Sakura had her blade pressed against her throat.
They were both breathing heavily, exhausted and hurt, but they didn’t falter. Ino stood straight – Sakura did too. They stared at each other, unblinking, emotions raging.

Until Ino sagged down with a frustrated sigh and a bitter smile.

“Well, damn, Sakura.”

It was over.

“Winner, Haruno Sakura,” the proctor confirmed.

Sakura lowered her sword, blinked dumbly at Ino’s sour face. Ino punched her in the arm, too hard for it to be entirely friendly. She was radiating disappointment, but she waited, when she saw Sakura wasn’t moving, for her to wake up and follow her back to the platform.

One to lose, one to win. It was hard to watch the low line of Ino’s shoulders, her eyes cast down, fists clenched in simmering anger.

“Ino, I’m…”

“Don’t.”

Ino’s voice was cutting, fierce, and she was angry, but when she looked back at Sakura, she didn’t direct that anger toward her.

“Don’t you dare. We move forward, Sakura. Always.”

Sakura nodded. She wanted to provide comfort though, she wanted to hug her friend and ease her pain, but it wasn’t what Ino needed right now, especially not from her. Ino went to her team. Sakura went to hers.

“Congratulations, Sakura,” Kakashi said warmly, eye smiling. Sasuke smiled too, the faintest thing. Naruto smirked.

“Didn’t expect anything else.”

She wondered if it was true, if they hadn’t thought too that she wouldn’t make it. It didn’t matter. It didn’t matter what anyone else thought if at the end of the day, she remained the one standing.

The tournament resumed after that.

Tenten lost, quite painfully, against the girl from Suna, Temari, who took way too much pleasure in it for Sakura’s taste. Lee was heartbroken, but his teammate would be fine. They moved on to the next.

Shikamaru, against Kin, from the forest too. He won with his usual phlegm and convoluted strategies – another one that felt good to Sakura’s vindictive heart. Strange how scary they had been, the three of them back in the Forest, but here in one on one, it was a different story.

Unfortunately, Sakura knew that in real life, the Forest’s situation was the likeliest scenario. Where else but in exams and tournaments would they ever have such fighting conditions? It was still nice to see her classmate take the win against the enemy.

Although when Choji’s turn came next, he lost to the third member of this team, Dosu, and came back dejected and disappointed, just like Ino.
Next up was Naruto. And he was fighting Kiba.

Sakura cursed that damn screen. Couldn’t he have been set up against one of those insufferable sand ninja, or one with the music note of their forehead protector? Naruto wasn’t in his normal state.

Fighting could be good actually, could help him get rid off some of his aggression, but she feared how he would react in combat. And Kiba was their friend, sort of. He was obnoxious and kind of gross, but they were of the same promotion, they were bound at least by that. Sasuke’s face didn’t betray much, but she could see the concern on his face, even if they denied anything was wrong when Kakashi-sensei asked, behind them, if there was a problem.

“Be careful,” she said to both Naruto and Kiba before they climbed down. She didn’t want to watch them hurt each other.

A concern they didn’t seem to share if the look on their face was anything to go by. Naruto looked the same as usual – ready to fight anyone and everyone – and Kiba seemed equally eager for it.

Why did boys have to be like this?

They faced each other in the middle of the ring, Kiba flanked with his dog as always, Naruto feigning nonchalance in front of him. He had his back to Sakura, but the unmoving face of Haku’s mask was staring at her from the side of his head.

Genma looked at them in turn. “Alright, are you ready to…”

“You bastard tricked Hinata during the first task!”

Sakura sighed. So that’s what this was about.

Naruto shrugged, even if Sakura was sure he wasn’t that proud of this stunt. Naruto wasn’t above playing dirty, but he wasn’t one to step on others to succeed either. He was within his rights here though – there was no playing fair at completing a mission.

“So?”

“So I’m gonna beat your ass down, asshole.”

Naruto rolled his eyes, and of course Kiba had to provoke him, to rile him up even more than usual. Couldn’t he have kept his mouth shut for once? Especially seeing that Hinata hadn’t seemed that bothered by it.

Then again, her two teammates taking her defense because she never did herself was a common sight. Hinata bore everything in stoic silence, but that couldn’t be said about Kiba, and even Shino could be quite vindictive in his protectiveness of her, though he was way more subtle and refined about it than that stupid dog boy.

“Come at me,” Naruto snarled.

Sakura had a bad feeling about this.

He had told them he would be fine, because he didn’t want to be sent away, didn’t want to be slapped with a seal and be examined or questioned, but Naruto wasn’t feeling like himself at all.
That wouldn’t have been a bad thing, except he was feeling worse. He was angry. He didn’t even get why.

Breaking Kiba’s face was just what he needed right now.

“Begin!”

“Beast Path, Passing Fang!”

Fast.

Kiba slammed into him with brute force, an elbow digging into his abdomen, knocking the breath – and some blood – out of him. He was sent flying, crashed heavily on the floor.

Why were all those people so fast. Couldn’t they calm down a little.

“He’ll be down for a while, proctor,” Kiba said smugly. The others whispered among themselves, disappointed by such a swift ending. How dare they.

“Not so fast.”

Naruto honestly couldn’t tell if the hit was supposed to lay down a regular genin. Maybe it was. Sakura would have stayed down, maybe even Sasuke, he was still too soft, couldn’t take a good blow to the guts without throwing up. It hurt badly, but it was fading already.

“You should bring Akamaru in, Kiba, if you hope to win this,” Naruto taunted. Kiba scoffed.

“As you wish!”

A smoke bomb exploded at Naruto’s feet – Kiba took the opportunity to set his dog on him. Naruto could only try to dodge in the fog, as claws and fangs nipped at him, trying to get him off balance. Naruto escaped the smoking cloud, only to fall right into the path of Kiba’s foot. He ducked, just as Akamaru charged back toward him. He jumped to Naruto’s face, intent on napping his nose or gauging his eyes out, who knew.

Instinct took over. Whose instinct? Hard to tell.

Naruto slapped the dog down and closed his own jaw around the back of its neck.

His nails had grown sharp again. His teeth too. He shouldn’t have been able to keep his hold on the dog, and yet… He tasted blood, along with the disgusting fur. The dog yapped, distressed, trapped.

“Akamaru!”

Kiba tossed something to him. A pill? Naruto couldn’t see.

He was busy trying not to snap his jaw for good.

The need was overpowering, to just bite down hard. It was a relief when the pill seemed to give the dog an extra burst, and he freed himself from Naruto’s grip to go back to his master. His fur had turned red, the pill, probably. But the blood on his neck was redder.

“What’s wrong with you?” Kiba hissed, as if he had room to talk. There was blood on Naruto’s lips.

He wanted to taste more.
“Whatever. I’ll end this!” Kiba promised. Naruto could barely hear him, see him, a red haze clouding his vision. Akamaru jumped on his back.

“Transformation, Beast Human Clone!”

Akamaru metamorphosed into another Kiba, both with bulging eyes and grinding teeth. “War drugs,” someone said from the platform. Was that what it was?

“Beast Path! Fang Passing Fang!”

Both of them charged this time. Naruto avoided only one, took the second hard in the side, didn’t have much time to get back on his feet before they were on him again. Kiba’s techniques were usually like this – he turned feral, beast-like, drool dripping from his long, pointy teeth, pupils narrowed like a predator’s.

*What Beast? This? This, a Beast? Let me laugh.*

It was like instinct against, this answer from his body, from his chakra. Teeth growing, nails turning to claws. Naruto growled at yet another hit, pain radiating from his abused body, anger too. Things that always made it harder to keep it in.

He coughed out blood. Kiba and Akamaru kept dancing around him, he couldn’t think, couldn’t see, but he was mad, oh, so mad.

They stepped back, both sporting matching grin of satisfaction. Did the dog learn to act like this? Like his master?

“Didn’t have enough yet?” Kiba taunted, pleased. Could the dog talk?

Something caught Naruto’s eyes then, something that had nothing to do with the fight.

Straight in his line of vision, above him on the platform.

Gaara.

His eyes were blown wide, his hands gripping hard on the railway. Anger? Excitement?

The same bloodthirsty rage overclouding Naruto’s mind?

*Blood, and death. To all of them.*

Kiba and Akamaru charged him again. One time too much. He snapped.

The chakra charge was enough to give them both a pause. Enough for Naruto to ready his hand, to turn to one of them, it didn’t matter which one, to aim at the chest, seal at the ready.

“Fuinjutsu. Heartbreak…”

“NARUTO!”

“NARUTO!”
He faltered. His voice stuttered around the seal he was going to pronounce, and just for a second his gaze broke away and he looked up at Sasuke.

Sasuke saw many things – confusion, hurt, anger too. It lasted a heartbeat, maybe less, but it was enough. Kiba took the opening as it was, and using Naruto's momentum against him, he punched him down, hard. They heard the sinister crack of a jaw breaking. Sakura gasped in horror as Naruto's face smashed against the hard ground.

He didn’t move after that.

Genma approached, to assess. He knelt down to Naruto’s head, shook him a little.

“’m fine,” came the muffled groan, straight from the broken pavement.

“I don’t think you are.”

“Just gimme a sec. I’m fine. I can still fight.”

“Sorry kid, it’s over.” Genma stood back up. “The winner is Kiba.”

The boy erupted in cheers, pleased and proud, as tension dropped in the arena. From their corner the medic-nin started to move, stretcher and first aid kit in hand.

They didn’t even reach the middle of the room.

Naruto sprung back to his feet and punched Kiba’s boastful smile off his face.

Kiba tumbled backward with a painful cry and he stayed down on his ass rubbing at his sore jaw with a murderous gaze.

“I told you I could still fight,” Naruto deadpanned.

His mouth and jaw were smeared with blood that trickled down his neck and onto his forehead protector. He smiled, black, white and red – some of his teeth were missing. There was another crack, louder this time. The other probably hadn’t caught it, but Sasuke knew it was his jaw, snapping back into place.

It wasn’t anything happy, that smile. Not anything friendly either.

He took a threatening step toward Kiba.

In an instant, Kakashi stood between the two of them.

“That’s enough, Naruto. It’s over.”

For a terrible second, Sasuke thought Naruto was going to lash out. But in the end, he only shrugged, and, foregoing any medical aid, he took the way back to the platform.

Sasuke watched him approach them, tried to find what to say.

“Naruto, I…”

He trailed off. How could he say it? “I thought you were going to kill him”? “I had to stop you”? What would be worse, that Naruto wasn’t going to do that, to use that seal, to aim for the heart, or that he was? Naruto had lost his fight because of him, was out of the exam because of him, and yet Sasuke couldn’t regret or apologize. He just had to. It was his role, to stop Naruto, wasn’t it?
His friend faltered, when their eyes met. He lost his crazed expression, he lost his knife-sharp smile. He looked at Sasuke and he was lost, and he was hurt, and he was scared.

But he said nothing. He turned to flop down on the railway, stating clearly that the matter was closed. Sasuke settled beside him but didn’t manage to catch his gaze. On his other side, Sakura was frowning deeply.

“Moving on to the next fight,” the proctor said. Kiba had gotten back up too, and Sasuke tried to tune out his boisterous preening. He had to know he didn’t win fair and square. But maybe it was for the best, that he didn’t realize Naruto could have very well be going for the kill.

The screen started to flash once again – Sasuke had almost forgotten the day wasn’t over yet. Wasn’t it enough trials already?

_Hyuuga Neji_

Vs

_Hyuuga Hinata_

Obviously not.

_I wasn’t going to kill him. I wasn’t. Was I? Weren’t you? Shut up. You sure wanted to. I wasn’t going to. Isn’t this how it works? I’m not like that. Humans are all the same. They all deserve to die. Shut up, shut up!_

He didn’t know. What was he going to do, when he had aimed his hand at Kiba’s chest? He had always had a hard time parsing out the Fox’s intentions from his own, but never like this. He felt like he had back in Wave Country, when poison was coursing through his vein and he couldn’t tell if he was even master of his own body and mind.

That pure rage and hatred, could they really be his? He was angry, that was true. But Kiba had nothing to do with it.

_They’re all in this though, they’re all accomplice, they’re all guilty…_

Those feelings weren’t his. It wasn’t him. It didn’t come from him. The rage, the hatred sipping into his skin, suffusing his mind, they weren’t his, but he was powerless to stop them. It was hard remembering that he was supposed to, when it echoed so well with the darkest recess of his own mind.

It was the seal, he realized with no small amount of fear. Orochimaru had done something to it, back in the Forest. Naruto had felt it clearly, even though he couldn’t pinpoint what it was exactly. But it was changed. Altered. Where he used to be able to just turn his back on the cage’s door, to shut out the hissing voice and the glowing eyes, they were everywhere now, coming from every direction, inescapable.

He had to tell Sasuke. They were in this together. Sasuke had to know. But Naruto couldn’t talk, at war with his own mind. Or well, not his own, not really. The demon was laughing. The lines were blurring.

At a loss, he chose to focus back on what was happening outside of his own head. Hinata was facing his cousin, according to the gossip flying around him. The third member of Rock Lee’s team
– a beautiful, cold boy, whose face was set in a resigned scowl. He had the eyes of his clan, white and mysterious, just like Hinata’s. Naruto always wondered if they saw the world differently through those eyes.

“Hinata is from the main branch, while Neji is from the secondary branch,” Rock Lee was explaining. “The relationships between the two are… rather strained. The secondary branch is subordinate to the main. They are… meant to serve.”

“What makes one Hyuuga from one branch or another?” Sakura asked, curious.

“Huh, well. Birth?”

No wonder the boy looked so bitter. A fate sealed at birth. Couldn’t Naruto relate to that.

“Give up, Hinata. I’m not bound by my oath here. I may very well kill you.”

The girl said nothing – of course she didn’t. She didn’t talk surrounded by so many people. In class, they had never heard the sound of her voice, and a good portion of their classmates believed she was actually mute. She wasn’t though – she had greeted him, a few times, when they run into each other in the forest. It was always a whisper, barely audible above the rustling of the leaves, the sounds of woods. Naruto could respect someone who chose not to speak, instead of saying things that were useless or untrue. For how much he talked himself, he didn’t spew much more truths than she did.

“You don’t belong here. You held on until now for your team and it’s admirable really, giving how weak you are, but it’s time to leave now. This is not your place.”

It was hard to tell if the words were affecting her. It always was – she was so closed off, expressionless, she never let anything slip. She had to suffer though, from the loneliness, from the harsh words thrown at her, calling her weak, weird, scary, creepy.

She never reacted to any of it. The others called her “doll”, but not in a nice way.

“You’ll never change, Hinata. No matter how hard you train, no matter your effort. How we were born, so we remain. Me, beneath you, always. And you, weaker still, valueless.”

Hinata was among the best of them at taijutsu, but few actually were aware of it. She was so shy, so reluctant, she often underperformed in training, unwilling to fight and hurt for nothing. Naruto had fought her though. He had seen.

“No amount of effort can ever change one’s fate.”

Now that was enough.

“Hinata, why are you waiting around instead of shutting that piece of shit’s mouth?”

Despite his nonchalant tone, Naruto’s voice rang clear across the arena. The Hyuuga boy turned to cast him a scorching glare with his pearly eyes – Hinata’s were widened in surprise.

“He’s really annoying. You’re not gonna lose against that, right? You’re not just gonna do nothing.”

He stayed focused on her, ignoring the indignation around him, the urges to stop being so impolite, to shut it. Esteemed clan members weren’t supposed to be addressed like that, or something.
Naruto couldn’t have cared less. He wouldn’t let anyone spew such nonsense, try to assert that their future was set in stone, that they could do nothing against it, couldn’t fight it.

It wasn’t true. It wasn’t.

Hinata didn’t reply or nod, didn’t even blink. But she raised a hand in front of her, the other close to her chest, elbow drawn back. She flexed her legs.

Ready to fight.

Neji scoffed, enraged.

“As you wish. But you’ll bear the consequences of your choices.”

It was an argument thrown around often in the Uchiha clan. Be it young members complaining about the elders and their strict rules, or a taunt to an accusation of unfairness, or when the weight of the expectations placed on their head by their family name became too much. It was said in good humor or subtle insult. It was said often enough.

“At least we’re not as bad at the Hyuuga.”

Sasuke was well-versed in the old clan’s practices, as he was in every clan of the village, and of some others too from an early age. He knew the reasons for the implementation of the system and its upholding, in theory, but in his heart he couldn’t help but find it horrifying.

For him, it would have meant being born beneath Itachi. Not that he wasn’t, but it would have been a fact, set in stone, never to be challenged. He wouldn’t have been allowed to chase after him, to try and surpass him. He would have had to just bow and bear it, to defer in all matters, to just accept his inferiority as a fact.

He could understand Hyuuga Neji’s anger.

He didn’t know if his would have translated so violently though.

It was hard to marvel at the elegant style of the Hyuuga’s taijutsu – a compliment all Uchiha reluctantly granted to their rival clan, if only not to appear dishonest – with how painful each blow seemed, with the wet, bloody cough crowding Hinata’s throat. The seal they put on the members of the Bunke was designed to prevent this kind of things, but this was an official fight set within the boundaries of their duties as shinobi. As such, Neji could do as pleased. Could unleash without restraints.

The result was quite awful to watch. Sasuke didn’t think much of Hyuuga Hinata, but she didn’t deserve this.

Sasuke had activated his Sharingan to follow their movements. Even if, unlike them, he couldn’t distinguish their tenketsu, he could still tell when they hit them dead on. Well, when Neji did. Hinata, despite her efforts, couldn’t do the same, and she was growing weaker by the second. Soon she wouldn’t be able to move at all.

“Is that all the heir of the Hyuuga clan can do, Hinata?”

It was sort of impressive, to be able to be so taunting, so cutting, with such a serious, blank tone.
She fell to her knees, got back up. Neji laid her down flat on her back and she spat blood on the tiles, but she got up again. Even her gasps of pain were silent. Her voice wasn’t here.

At Sasuke’s side, Kiba was becoming agitated, as was his dog. He had advised her not to fight her cousin, to opt-out of the fight if it came to this, but now he couldn’t just tell her to give up. He was worrying his bottom lip enough to draw blood. Next to him, Shino had his arms crossed on his chest, a white-knuckle grip on his sleeves.

“I’ll show you your fate, Hinata.”

It wasn’t about fate though, was it? Sasuke disagreed with him, but then again, Sasuke could try to surpass his brother, if he wanted to.

He supposed that for Neji, it was easier to think that it was impossible, rather than to remember it was simply forbidden.

“The title you bear, the role you were given, you hate them as much as you hate yourself for not living up to them. And you know, deep down, that you can’t change it, any of it.”

“At least we’re not as bad as the Hyuuga.” The mantle of the Head of the Uchiha Clan wasn’t passed down from parent to child, officially. It had happened before simply because leaders groomed their own children early on to take over after them, but it wasn’t the law, it didn’t have to be. For the Hyuuga, however...

Hinata got back up again, for some unfathomable reason. Sakura looked away, unable to keep watching, as Naruto stared, intent, unblinking.

Would Neji be able to kill his cousin, Sasuke wondered.

“It’s not…”

An unnatural silence dropped like lead over the arena, when Hinata’s voice breached the constraint of her throat. Clear as crystal despite how small it was.

“It’s not my fate I will change, Neji.”

She gave a sort of strange smile, bloody and clouded. She was half-unconscious already.

“It’s yours.”

Neji threw himself on her.

A heartbeat later the four jounin instructors present had jumped in to stop him. Kakashi-sensei and Kurenai, the girl’s teacher, along with Asuma and Gai, and the proctor Genma too.

“All of you, just for me? For her?” Neji spat, acidic. “We don’t all get treated the same, do we?”

He wasn’t wrong.

Others could have their arms ripped off or die, but Hinata was still heir to her clan, for now. No doubt that they would have intervened on Sasuke's behalf too, if the need had arisen. For Shikamaru, for Ino and Choji… But not for Sakura, or Rock Lee or Tenten.

And for Naruto? Who knew.

“It’s over, Neji. Calm down,” Gai said, soothing.
“Are you disappointed, sensei? Did you think I would pass up the chance?”

So he would have killed her after all.

Kurenai broke away when Hinata collapsed to the ground. The medic-nin rushed in, fussing over the unconscious girl. She was carried away on a stretcher.

Neji didn’t look remorseful.

“If you hate it so bad, why don’t you just fight it?” Naruto asked out of the blue.

Neji raised his eyes to him, gaze hard.

“Why do you think?” he asked back. Sasuke knew, the adults too, most likely, but it wasn’t over advertised either. The members of the Bunke were never seen outside their compound without their forehead protector.

“My guess is that you’re a coward, but I could be wrong.”

Sasuke hissed, elbowed Naruto in the ribs so that he would shut his mouth. He didn’t know what he was talking about.

Neji saw red, not one to let such an insult unanswered. He was haughty and prideful despite his status. Sasuke remembered having to accompany his parents to the Hyuuga’s as a child, for one diplomatic thing or another, remembered thinking maybe he would be able to make a friend out of that dignified boy.

Remembered being told it would never come to be. There was no need. He wasn’t worth it. Remembered being stirred toward Hinata instead, but she was even shier than he, and dull too. Even then, Neji was already wearing a bandage around his forehead, and sharp resentment on his proud face.

Neji reached up without looking away from Naruto’s inquiring gaze, until he could untie his forehead protector.

There it was, a cross in pale green etched dead into the middle of the boy’s forehead, surrounded by lines running to his temples.

The fame Hyuuga seal.

“We obey,” Neji stated. “Or we die.”

After a beat, Naruto had the gale to laugh.

“Is that it?”

Neji looked ready to burst with indignation, ready to strangle Naruto with his bare hands, and Sasuke thought about stepping in, but Naruto tilted his head, considering.

“I could help you out you know,” he said pensively. Neji frowned.

“What?”

“There is no such thing as an unbreakable seal.”

There was a shift then. Nothing visible, not really, nothing Sasuke could put his finger on. But the
look in Neji’s eyes changed as understanding dawned on him and for the briefest moment something passed between the two boys.

The moment was broken by both their jounin instructor appearing behind them to put a heavy hand on their shoulder.

“That’s enough, Naruto”, Kakashi warned, as Neji’s teacher, Gai, stirred his student away. They didn’t break eye contact immediately though. Sasuke shook Naruto’s shoulder to get him out of it. This wasn’t the kind of trouble he couldn’t afford, the kind of mess he could get involved in. This fight wasn’t his. If Hyuuga Hiashi heard about this…

Naruto flashed him a distracted grin, as if that would alleviate Sasuke’s worries, before following everyone else’s eyes back to the screen, although there were only two names left. Sasuke couldn’t wait for this damn day to end. Only one more fight to go. Maybe it would be over quickly.

Rock Lee

vs

Gaara of the Desert

Chapter End Notes

So yeah, Naruto is heavily influenced by Kyuubi’s own resentment here. Generally speaking he always is, more than in canon, since his own anger allows the fox closer to the surface. Did I ever mention that somewhere? I can't recall lol. But yeah I figured Oro's tampering with the seal was a great opportunity for some good old feral Naruto content.

You know what comes next, right? One of the most if not the most epic fight of the whole show... That I won't be writing in details cause yeah no. But it's an important moment for both Gaara, Lee, and our boy Nart. And then we will finally be done with this leg of the Chunin exam. We'll go back on politic, clan business, and kids meeting in the forest in secret.

Also Ino and Sakura's fight didn't end in a draw because I'm not a coward.

I'm glad I got to get into the Hyuuga a bit. Rest assured that we'll revisit the topic! I hope you enjoy this chapter, please let me know!
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Between trials.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your comments and support, I know I say it a lot but you know what I'll say it some more. Thank you. I think this is the longest yet! We're reaching a leg of the story I've been dying to share with you... Hope you'll like it!

WARNING - this chapter deals with loss and grief. Sorry about that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It’s started as soon as Gaara appeared, in a swirl of sand, in the middle of the ring.

A rush of unbridled excitement washed over Naruto, quickening his pulse and shortening his breath. He stayed slouched on the railway in his nonchalant pose, but inside, he was boiling.

Was that what Gaara had felt when he had watched Naruto’s fight against Kiba? Naruto understood the look on his face now.

Before Lee got down, Kiba stopped him by the arm. He murmured a rushed warning to the other boy, that his adversary was no ordinary genin, no ordinary person even. Naruto clicked his tongue. Anticipation was rising inside of him, stirring his core. Gaara too seemed moved by the perspective of a fight, and it was as if those desires resonated together – to fight and to witness, just like during Naruto’s own match.

Show me, he thought. Show me. Show them.

Gaara didn’t look at him, but it felt like he was answering all the same, as sand started to filter slowly from his gourd, dispersing in the air around him. Lee caught the cork just before it could collide with his face, looking calm, far calmer than his opponent.

Oh, well, Gaara did look calm. No emotions showed on his face. But Naruto could feel.

“Begin!”

Lee was on him in an instant. Naruto had never seen anyone move so fast. His movements were impossible to follow, as he leaped and kicked at Gaara.

No blow hit their target though. Gaara didn’t move an inch – he didn’t have to.

The sand danced around him, and Lee didn’t manage to even touch him.

He moved back to think about another strategy, under Gaara’s unmoving glare. He wasn’t
moving, nothing showed on his face. And yet...

Naruto squeezed his hand tight around his wrists, digging his sharp nails into his skin.

_Show them._

“You can take them off, Lee!” his master said to the boy who had perched on the sculpted hands for a reprieve. The man gave a huge, confident smile, as he assured Lee that he would allow it. They were obviously close, and not only because they looked weirdly alike. Naruto couldn’t help but think about Kakashi, who had come to stop him twice today.

Under his leg warmers, Lee revealed a pair of training weights that he happily got rid of. His master explained that Lee was a taijutsu master because he could use no other form of ninja art. Naruto was reluctantly impressed, even if he didn’t care about that guy at all.

His eyes moved back to Gaara, waiting in the same spot. He was far from being as detached as he looked. All his attention was focused on his opponent.

His prey.

Lee dropped his weights.

A shiver ran up Naruto’s spine when they crashed on the ground in a loud, destructive bang. How was it even possible, how could the boy move with those tied to his ankles? The boy jumped a few times, overjoyed.

“That’s better!”

He moved then.

If Naruto had had a hard time following him before, it was impossible now, and the sand didn’t manage to do it either. Naruto’s focus was as intense as if he had been the one standing in there, surrounded by sand and by the green blur of the other ninja. His heart was hammering in his chest as he wondered where next, where next…

Up.

Lee kicked down and this time, there was nothing stopping him from catching Gaara dead in the face.

He leaped back, charged again. Appeared in one spot, then another. Stroke again.

Gaara rolled away.

Naruto was vibrating out of his skin.

Gaara’s excitement was only growing, as he got back on his feet, eyes wide and smile even wider. Things were getting good now. The hunt was starting, now.

_Show me, show me. Show them._

The skin of his face cracked to reveal a mask of sand protecting his real body left unblemished. Lee cursed, frustrated, when he realized he had achieved nothing yet. The sand poured into Gaara’s skin to form another armor, and Naruto couldn’t help but lean further in, drawn in by the outpour of bloodlust and rage.
How he had wanted to fight and display, earlier against Kiba. To take revenge, for whatever, he couldn’t even articulate it. But it was the same for Gaara now, the urge, the urge, to fight and destroy, to draw blood, to hurt.

Lee untied the bandages around his hand. The Lotus Flower, he called it, and it ended with crashing Gaara into the ring, hard enough to break it down. But it was no use, no use. The clone of sand dissolved and finally, it was Gaara’s turn to display his own brand of violence.

Lee gasped in pain as sand blasted him against the wall of the arena. His movements were sluggish now, impaired by the damage he had done to his own body. His head was bleeding, his hands too. The sand drank it all up. Naruto could smell it.

More.

The ring was half-destroyed already. Sand chased the Konoha nin around, scrapping and slicing but never injuring too much. Teasing, almost. Like a cat playing with a doomed mouse. Lee kept dodging as best as he could, but he was growing weaker as more wounds appeared on his body, through the slashes in his uniform.

More.

What could mere genin do against them demons? Lee still had something else in store though. Naruto heard the others talk about gates, one, two, five, about body limitations and how to break them, but he could barely understand, and he didn’t care.

It would be of no use. In the end…

There was pain though. Lee moved faster than ever before and the sand couldn’t follow, couldn’t protect, and there was pain, pain, and rage, rage. As a last resort, Gaara called up all the sand he had left, including the one forming his gourd, to envelop his body and cushion his fall, as Lee collapsed painfully a few meters away, no longer able to move.

Who did he think he was?

Kill him.

Gaara was done playing.

Kill him, kill him.

The sand rose again, creeping up to Lee, an unstoppable force. Naruto almost wanted to follow it, wanted to get closer. The sand would obliterate the boy, become his coffin, and then it would do the same to all the others. There was no stopping them.

There is no stopping us.

Lee’s previous outcries were nothing compared to the sound that tore out of his throat when the first tendrils of creeping sand closed around his right arm and leg and squeezed.

“Sarcophagus of the sand.”

To kill them, to bury them all. All, all, all…

A hand came to rest on Naruto’s arm.

He blinked up to Sasuke’s distressed face and released the bloody grip he had on his flesh under
Sasuke's gentle tugging. Down there the sand kept rushing.

*Kill him. Kill them all.*

*NO.*

That wasn’t it, that wasn’t it. It wasn’t them. They weren’t here.

The sand stilled.

*Not all. Not him. Not them. No.*

Naruto gripped Sasuke’s hand in his own, he knew he was squeezing too hard, but he was drowning and he needed to surface, to come back. He stayed hooked to Sasuke’s dark eyes, to the lines of his face.

*This is what we want.*

*No, it’s not.*

It wasn’t, it wasn’t. That wasn’t true.

*Not them.*

He caught the other two, out of the corner of his eyes. The ones from Suna, the blonde girl and the boy with purple face paint on, looking afraid and lost, focused on their brother down below.

*Not them.*

He couldn't distinguish whose thoughts were whose, whose feelings he was feeling, but he wasn’t the only one, because the anger receded, ever so slightly, so that he could finally think past the bloodthirst, past that overpowering need to bring death and pain to all around them.

*This is what we want!*

*No!*

From the other side he felt only confusion, curiosity too.

*No?*

*No.*

His eyes cleared, and he could breathe again. The sand settled back.

The fight was over.

Life kept going around them. Sakura rushed down to check up on Lee, not before casting a scorching look at Naruto, as did the boy’s master Gai, and the medic-nin with a stretcher and a grim look on their face. The others started debriefing, talking about the fight, speculating.

Sasuke and Naruto didn’t move.

It wasn’t for the death grip Naruto had on Sasuke’s hand, although Sasuke was reluctant to shake it off. It was his eyes, his face. Sasuke’s Sharingan was still up, and even if he made no effort to get
Naruto’s eyes, he could still see the agitation, the chaos, far wilder than usual.

Naruto had been properly ecstatic a few moments ago, had been ready to leap into the arena himself. To do what? Sasuke didn’t want to think about it.

“His leg and arm are beyond saving,” they heard from down below, from one of the medic talking to Gai on the side. “This boy won’t ever fight again.”

A shiver ran down Naruto’s body, head to toe, a low whine sounding from the back of his throat. His fist tightened some more. Sasuke didn’t want to let go still.

Naruto’s eyes broke away when the other nin appeared back on the platform in a swirl of sand.

Their gaze caught immediately. The boy’s teammates talked to him, he didn’t answer. Seemingly, Sasuke tried to catch back Naruto’s attention, to no avail.

He couldn’t get into what passed between the two of them, let alone understand it.

“Naruto…”

“Gather round, all of you. Well, those who can,” Genma called from the ring.

Sasuke cursed inwardly, fed up suddenly with every single person surrounding him. Couldn’t they see some things needed to be taken care of? Couldn’t they catch a break?

They couldn’t. The remaining genin and jounin gathered in the middle of the ruined arena, facing the proctor and his nonchalant face.

“Congratulations to the ten of you who won their fight. I’m going to explain to you the modalities of the next and final test.”

Naruto stayed at the back, with the ones who had failed, lost. Ino was sulking next to him, but he didn’t look that affected. Not by this, anyway.

“As the Godaime told you, it will be another tournament, a public one this time. And it will be held in one month from now.”

“A month?” the Suna girl exclaimed, displeased. That meant a month to stay in Konoha for all the foreign nin – they couldn’t be pleased about it.

Sasuke wasn’t either. That Gaara would be around for a while then.

“A month,” Genma confirmed. "To train and prepare yourself for the event to come."

“If it’s a tournament, there’ll be only one winner,” Shikamaru said. “Does it mean only one of us can become a chunin?”

“No. Winning or losing do not guarantee to pass the exam or not. You will be judged on your abilities and skills. Several of you will make the rank, or none. Of course, the more fights you win, the more chances you get to prove yourself again.”

A lot could be done in a month, Sasuke pondered. They had seen most of the fighting styles of the fighters involved, it would help to orient their training.

“The fights will be determined by a draw. Each of you, take a paper.”
Anko handed an urn from which they each drew a number. The proctor of the first task put their name on a board, according to that number. Despite his preoccupied mind, Sasuke couldn’t help being curious at who he would get to fight first, who he hoped to face in the ring, who he would rather avoid.

For a moment he pondered whether fighting Naruto would be a good or a bad thing, before remembering Naruto wouldn’t be there.

“Here we go,” Morino Ibiki said, turning the board for all of them to see.

Five fights for the first round. Sasuke looked for his name among the ones written on the board – Nara Shikamaru and Temari, Hyuuga Neji and Gaara, Inuzuka Kiba and Kinuta Dosu, Aburame Shino against Kankuro…

His eyes traveled back to the very first pair. He had skipped over it, because the first name was…

Haruno Sakura and Uchiha Sasuke.

Oh.

That was… that was…

His gaze found hers. Her expression was unreadable. What was she thinking about? He had no idea what to say.

“Sakura…”

“Don’t.”

She looked shaken, but determined too, fierce. She raised a hand, spun into a tight fist.

“I’ll be your opponent, Sasuke,” she declared.

Speechless, mind in a jumble, he could only bump his own fist to hers and nod, watch as she turned back to one of the jounin, the one who was teaching her kinjutsu, turned to what she needed to do next in order to fight him.

To beat him. He had no doubt she would try her hardest.

“See you in one month. You’re all dismissed,” Genma concluded, finale.

They got to use a summoning seal to get back to the heart of the village, in front of the Hokage Tower. Sasuke was ready to throw a proper fit had they been asked to trek the Forest of Death back to the training ground’s limits. His thoughts were going a mile a minute, having a hard time focusing on one thing when there were so many to take care of. He needed to train. He also needed to rest and eat and see a nurse probably. He would fight Sakura. Naruto was not okay. Someone was after him.

It was Naruto who settled the conflict inside of him, by grabbing his wrist with an urgent look.

Right. Naruto first. The rest could wait.

“Sasuke!”

His friend let go as they both spun around to see Izumi walking fast toward them, and Sasuke’s frustration at the interruption melted in front of the serious and grim look on her face. Inuzuka
Hana was following with the same expression.

“We need to go home now.”

“You too, Kiba,” Hana said to her brother. Their voice left no room for argument. Sasuke felt like arguing anyway.

“Can’t it wait? Just for…”

“No, Sasuke!”

He startled. He had never heard Izumi raise her voice, snap like this, especially not with him. She bit her lips.

There was red around her eyes, as if she had been…

“What happened?” he asked with a sudden sense of urgency. She shook her head.

“I’ll explain on the way. Come now, please.”

Hana was already ushering Kiba away, after a last charged glance at Izumi. Sasuke turned back to Naruto.

“I’ll meet you later. In the forest.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I will!”

Naruto shrugged. Sasuke sighed, frustrated, but Izumi was urging him on, and he followed her. Ino cast them a calculating look and hurried away too, catching on something he was yet to understand.

Izumi remained silent while they were still within earshot of the other participants and examiners and Sasuke’s frowned harder, unnerved.

“Izumi, tell me what is wrong,” he pleaded quietly.

Her steps faltered until she came to a halt, but she kept his back to him for a moment. When she finally turned to face him, her eyes were shining.

“It’s Kamui. He’s dead.”

Izumi had left after delivering a stunned Sasuke to his parents, who would stand by them and his brother as the Head family mourning the death of one of their own. She had no part in the process until Kamui’s body was recovered from the hospital. She had gone straight home and slept away the rest of the day and night. She was no less tired and rested when she woke up in the early hours of the morning.

She took to wander the streets of the district aimlessly, a little lost, trying to wrap her head around the brutal death of a boy she had known her entire life.

Kamui was just a few years older than Shisui, and he had always been one of the softer ones. When they were younger, Izumi and the other girls her age always blushed and giggled in his presence, pleased with his gentle smiles and easily earned compliments. And now…
She had seen countless friends off to some missions, but he wasn’t supposed to be in any danger. Of course they could never know what could happen, but still… She had waved at him in passing just a few weeks ago, as he was heading out of the village with Inuzuka Hokuto, his usual partner in crime. A lot of rumors made them secret lovers, but he always laughed and said she was even more than that – his dearest friend. Hokuto always had a smile at the tip of her mouth. She was bright and joyful, cunning too, when she wanted to be. He said she was the one dragging him into trouble all the time, but the truth was he never resisted at all.

They were both gone now.

Her steps had led her to the district’s entrance, and she hesitated. She could visit Shisui, just past the threshold, but she felt strangely reluctant to leave the bounds of the Uchiha lands just then. She stood, indecisive, just behind the gates, until she was jolted out of her thoughts by a woman clearing her throat.

“Izumi, is it? Could you please take us to Fugaku?” Inuzuka Tsume said.

Izumi blinked stupidly at the woman before remembering her manners. With a hasty salute she gestured at the woman to follow her. Hana was here too, shadowing her mother, along with another woman and two young men Izumi didn’t know, but who bore the Inuzuka marks on her cheeks too. Izumi walked them to the clan head’s house.

“Do you want to wait out here?” Tsume asked her daughter once Izumi had announced them to Mikoto. Hana nodded quietly. The adults disappeared inside.

An awkward silence descended on the girls.

For how much she liked Hana, they weren’t that close, and Izumi felt clumsy in the face of their grief. At a loss, she gestured for a bench laying outside the house, where older people sat to talk and gossip at the passersby. They sat down, one at each end.

“‘My mother came to ask for a joint funeral,’” Hana declared out of the blue, catching Izumi by surprise. “‘We know you have your rites, as we do our own,’” she went on in a rush as if to justify herself. ‘‘But Kamui and… and Hokuto were very close and since they will both be laid to rest at the cemetery…”

“That would be nice,” Izumi said without thinking, both to cut Hana’s fumbling explanations and because it was true. She didn’t need convincing. Sure, it wasn’t common for people of different clans to be sent off to the next world together, but this was different.

Besides, they were supposed to do better, regarding clans and their secular divides. Something Kamui and Hokuto had done well.

“You do?”

“Of course. I think… they would… They would have liked that.”

She was horrified to feel herself choking up, but in the end it was Hana who cracked first. She let out a strangled sob before raising her hands to her face, trying to hide tears.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she said with a half-laugh. Izumi was stunned – Hana had shown nothing the day before when they had met back at the tower to herd they last wayward clan members, heavy with the news they had just heard from their respective clan heads.

“Were you close? With Hokuto?”
Hana nodded.

“My dogs… the trio. Hokuto’s companion was their sister. We brought them up together.”

“They’re… not here, your dogs.”

“They’re mourning too.”

Izumi couldn’t pretend to get the attachment the Inuzuka formed with their canine companion, but she knew how people could be affected by a pet’s death, and the Inuzuka dogs weren’t mere pets. They were members of their clan and family, brought up alongside their children, lifelong companions.

Hokuto’s dog had died with her human.

Izumi’s throat closed around a sob as her eyes burned and blurred. It was so unfair. And it wasn’t, not really, shinobi died all the time, it was part of their life. But it was unfair still.

They were just so young. And loved.

It wasn’t fair.

Izumi scooted a little closer to put a hesitant arm around Hana’s shaking shoulders.

They waited in silence after that.

Sasuke really wanted to be elsewhere right now, but he also understood how rude that would be to try to escape this situation, knowing that it was a luxury only he could afford.

Kamui’s parents and his little sister surely couldn’t, nor could Inuzuka Hokuto’s mother and brothers, arrived here with her clan head to decide what would be done about the two’s funerals.

Sasuke wanted to be elsewhere, but he bore it all in silence.

The cautiousness and dispassion Inuzuka Tsume and Sasuke’s father used to discuss the woman’s request were negated by how warmly Kamui’s parents reacted to the suggestion that the final burial rites be merged. Kamui’s mother took Hokuto’s mother’s hands into hers, eyes shining but face exempt of tears, as she assured her that it was all her son would have wanted. The two families knew each other well by the sole depth of Kamui and Hokuto’s friendship. They shared the same loss.

Next to Sasuke, Kara kept her head bowed low, eyes spilling tears on her hands and folded knees.

He couldn’t remember the last time he had even interacted with the girl. She had been greatly shamed by his father’s and her own parents’ reprimand, after what she had done to Sakura had come to light all those years ago. She had stayed cleared from them ever since, and Sasuke had carried a dislike for her but this…

This was just too cruel.

Itachi was sitting on the other side, besides their mother, and just imagining himself in Kara’s place, imagining himself suddenly without an older brother, it was just too terrible a thought.

Sasuke didn’t register the dismissal until she got up next to him – it was time for a more informal
and technical talk between the adults, of how things would go in the next few days. The children were sent away.

He walked along the canal with Kara in awkward silence, reluctant to just leave her to her own device but unable to come up with anything to say or do. He wanted to ease her pain, he wanted to change things, so that it didn’t happen, so that Kamui was still alive and she still had a brother. He was mad at his own helplessness – wasn’t there anything they could do? Were they that powerless in the face of death?

“I’m sorry,” he apologized, because he could do nothing. Nothing at all.

"Keep your words," she shot back, biting. He recoiled at her fury.

“Sorry.”

“…”

“I said keep it!”

She was crying again.

He wondered what she was most angry at – herself for breaking down like this, him, for his pointless words and presence, fate and those who had taken her brother’s life, the world at large.

“I’m sorry,” he said again.

There they just stood, face to face, close but not touching, and he wished he could breach that gap, offer comfort, but he just didn’t know how. She didn’t either. They weren’t raised that way.

All he could do was extend a hand. She hooked a finger to his, her other hand trying to stale the flow of her tears, shoulders shaking in quiet sobs.

There they just stood, trying to wrestle grief and loss into a manageable size, so that they could move again, so that they could go on.

Eventually she calmed down a little. She opened her mouth a few times, trying to say something. He waited, rooted to the spot even if he wished he could have just flown away from here and forgotten it all. He waited.

“I…”

Waited some more.

“I need a favor, Sasuke.”

“Of course.”

“…”

“You used to… there will be the vigil. At the temple. Would you… would you play?”

He was surprised she remembered that, or cared. It had been quite some time. Not that it mattered.

“…”

At last, at last, even so small, even so fragile, her face eased, and she smiled.

For hours Naruto skimmed his fuuinjutsu scrolls and stared at his seal, but still he couldn’t figure
out how to fix it.

The difference was easy to spot – there was a new set of signs wrapped around the seal, and he knew it was what was disturbing it, but he had no idea what to do about it.

He needed more material.

He hadn’t been able to get a hand on Sai since the chunin exam though. He had gone to bang at the boy’s door, but there was no answer. Neither he nor Shin had been in when he had visited. It wasn’t that odd – they kept a hectic schedule.

It was still a little odd.

This time when he went, he ran into Ino just coming out of the flower shop, the last person he wanted to see. He was still shaken by her display at the preliminary tournament – he had known about the Yamanaka techniques only in passing, and would have preferred it remained though.

Mind invasion. Why was there even such a thing, why was it allowed. He could never relax in her presence ever again.

At least it was mutual. “What do you want?” she barked, aggressive. Naruto growled in response, displeased.

“I’m looking for Sai.”

“What for?”

“I need some things.”

She frowned, snarled. What was wrong with her today?

“Don’t ask for “things” anymore! It got him in enough trouble as it is!”

“What?”

She pinched her lips tightly, like she had said too much. She had, or she had not said enough.

“What happened to him?”

“It’s none of your business!”

“It is!”

“Why?”

“Because he’s…”

Naruto snapped his mouth shut and Ino crossed her arms on her chest, looking smug. As if to say “see? You can’t even say it”.

But he needed to know what had happened to Sai. And not just because he needed him to get him the scrolls he wanted. Just because…

“Sai is… he’s… he’s my friend, ok? So please just tell me.”

Her arms fell back at her side as she gaped at him, taken aback. He averted his gaze, uncomfortable
under her scrutiny. Was it so extraordinary?

“You know he was… He wasn’t with us. Before. He was doing… something else.’’

Naruto had gathered, yes, if only peripherally. He had no idea what exactly Sai had been involved
in and where he and Shin had come from before they had appeared suddenly at the Academy one
day.

He could speculate though.

“What about it?”

“Something happened. With… the people he was with before. And so they’ve all been brought in
for questioning. And you know he’s been taking a lot of stuff…”

“That was just for me!”

“Well they don’t know that!” Ino retorted, resentful. There was something under her wrath though.
She was close to the two boys.

She was worried, Naruto realized.

His mind was going a mile a minute. Had Sai gotten into trouble because of him? Because of all the
scrolls he had asked of him? He had never questioned too much where Sai got his supplies, but he
had gathered that it wasn’t a very approved process. Still, he had never stopped to think what
position it could put his friend in.

“I’ll tell.”

“What?”

“I’ll tell them.”

Sai couldn’t get punished because of him, he just couldn’t. It couldn’t happen. Naruto wouldn’t let
it.

“Where is he? Just take me there. I’ll tell.”

Ino eyed him skeptically, but why would he have been lying about something like this? She came
to the same conclusion, because after a tense moment, she nodded.

Ino knew the Intelligence Department as well as her own house.

She had always loved to hang out there, even as a small child. At first because clinging to her
father’s leg and refusing to let go no matter where he went was the only way she had found to
spend some time with him, but quickly because she was fascinated by the work they did there.

She loved Decoding and Encryption, the idea that something completely obscure and meaningless
could hold such treasured information, that they could hide in plain sight and unmask in turn. She
loved the messaging system, the spy network, all the communication that passed through the
department. The mission reports, the maps of faraway lands, the notes on foreign customs and
traditions.

Above all, what she had come to love about it was the fact that here, they could fight without
actually punching anyone or getting punched.

Ino loved a good fight as much as anyone, but punching was so inefficient when you could just get people not to do that. If you caught information in time, if you intercepted the right transmission or the right person, you could avoid all this. Avoid people getting hurt or kill, avoid bloodshed and destruction. You could win without a fight.

A physical one, anyway. She was well-versed enough in the Yamanaka brand of nindo that she knew there were a lot of different fights to be had.

Like this one – standing her ground stubbornly as the chunin guarding the entrance to the Interrogation Section refused to let her in while she insisted without an ounce of hesitation that she had to pass, and she would. Naruto was shadowing her, thankfully not saying anything. At least he had realized it was not his place to intervene in these matters.

“Your father said…”

“Intelligence Head Yamanaka,” she said sternly, “has no right to prevent a concerned citizen from checking in on a detained companion.”

Her father repeated often enough that there was no place for any filial bound within the Department, and she wasn’t about to let anyone turn that around now.

“I assure you that your friend is fine.”

“And I assure you that I will see that for myself.”

It was the same argument every time – she had yet to have challenged the complete rotation of the chunin holding this position. But Sai wasn’t in confinement or solitary. She had a right to see him.

“You’re out of line, Ino,” the chunin warned, getting fed up. He had no idea what he was getting in.

“And you’re out of law. If I take it up to the Godaime, who will she side for do you think?”

In all honesty, she had no idea. She didn’t know the woman after all. But she had to hope she was a rule-abiding kind of person, or that she wasn’t immune to Ino’s argumentative skills.

In any case she already had a reputation among the shinobi force, one that the chunin seemed well aware of – she had a high temper, especially when she was bothered for trivial matters. And for all that it meant the world to Ino, this was, in fact, trivial.

Every single member of Danzo’s now-defunct cell was being held and interrogated. What was one girl visiting one of them?

The man was about to abide or argue once more when his eyes fell on something in Ino’s back. Or well, someone.

“You have something to say to me girl?”

Spinning around, Ino came face to face, first, with Naruto who she almost head-butted in her haste. She shoved him out of the way with a huff. Behind stood her father, frowning so hard he would probably still have the mark at home that night, and the Godaime herself.

Ino gulped, but she hadn’t gotten the reputation she had by being a coward.

“I’m requesting permission to visit one of my friends held here. It is allowed by the rules of the
section,” she declared. She always had a talent for looking much more confident and self-assured than she really was. What counted was what others believed after all.

“Ah, the young Sai, isn’t it? Your father told me. Well tag along then, we will start with him. What about you, Naruto?”

Both kids froze, taken aback by the woman’s lack of formality and care. Or so it seemed anyway – she had raised a subtle but unmistakable hand in front of Ino’s father, preventing him from speaking up. She was undoubtedly in charge here.

“Same,” Naruto said through gritted teeth, shoulders hunched to try to escape her prying gaze.

“Very well.”

They followed her past the flustered chunin.

Sai had already been ushered to one of the interrogation rooms, instead of the cell he had been kept in for the past few days. He didn't look any worse for wear than the last time Ino had visited him, but then again how to tell, with him? Had he been hungry, tired or in pain, he would have looked his usual pleasant self.

“Hello again, Sai,” the Hokage said, taking up the chair set in front of him. Ino was quite surprised at her tone – casual, conversational, like they were all sitting at the kitchen table around a cup of tea. She relaxed a little despite herself – she sensed no deception in the woman’s demeanor.

Still, she rounded the table and knelt next to Sai, bold and defiant. Her father looked ready to choke on his indignation, even if he knew how to hide it well. She didn’t care. There was nothing he could threaten her with that would feel worse than risking letting Sai think she was not on his side.


There was a very small modicum of surprise in his voice at this last name.

“We came to talk about the scrolls, again. You need to tell us what you were doing with what you stole Sai, so that we can let you out of here.”

Sai’s face remained unchanged. It seemed that every other person present opened their mouth at the same time to say something – to accuse, defend, ask again.

Naruto beat them all to it.

“It was for me.”

He came to stand next to Sai to look at the woman in the eyes, hands flat on the table. He was rather small – she didn’t have to lift her head much to meet his gaze.

“It was all for me. I asked him. To learn fuuinjutsu. That’s where I got it from. It’s all in the forest, in the clearing. I’ll give it all back, I swear. So leave Sai alone.”

Despite his rude tone and aggressive stance, he looked rather vulnerable too at that moment. Ino had thought he would chicken out, or at least try to bend the truth in his favor. She was quite impressed with the display, especially considering he was already on thin ice with any authority figure, in a general sense.

“That’s where you got all those from?” the Godaime asked, and there was a sense of familiarity
here, in the way she addressed the boy, in the look she laid on him.

“Yes.”

The woman sighed and leaned back in her chair for a moment, considering.

“That still doesn't explain how you got your hands on it, Sai,” she said, coming back to the subject of this inquiry like the rest was already forgotten.

To everyone’s surprise, Sai’s answer was straightforward this time.

Ino was equally marveling and reeling at the loyalty that had been at play here. Sai liked Naruto, for some reason, and he had kept silent for his sake only.

Never selfish enough, that stupid boy.

“It was one of my attributes as a member of Root, to… acquire certain materials, in and outside the village, for my master’s benefit.”

“Including in the Hokage’s library?”

“Including anywhere at all.”

Ino had closed her eyes on it because she too benefited from Sai’s uncanny ability for retrieving about anything and everything from anywhere in the village. She shouldn’t have. She was at fault too.

“Well it needs to stop, Sai. Right now.”

“Yes, Hokage-sama.”

Of course, for Sai, it was that simple. No one had told him it was forbidden, so he had simply kept on doing it. And now he wouldn't ever again since it wasn’t allowed to him anymore. Sai wouldn’t disobey, wouldn’t break the rules, any of them – granted they had been stated clearly.

“In that case…”

The Godaime got up, looking slightly more relaxed now. Ino’s father stepped in.

“Hokage-sama…”

Ino wanted to deck him. Why was he going after Sai like this? Didn’t he know him, after all the time he and his brother had spent at the Yamanaka's? Didn’t he trust him at all?

"The matter is closed. I believe the kids, and I know where the scrolls are. You will bring it all back, Naruto,” she said to the boy, hints of a threat in her otherwise monotonous voice, “and we will go through what you got from them together. Otherwise, nothing points to any more misdoings from little Sai here, and we honestly have much more serious matters pending. Let's get going.”

“What about my brother?”

Sai’s voice and face were the same, and yet they were different too, just barely. They shared the same cell, and Ino had been planning on visiting him next. The Hokage smiled, amused.

“Shin was cleared the last time we spoke to him, but he refused to leave here without you. You’re both free to go.”
Ino let out a relieved breath, the tight coiling of her wound up body unfurling as tension finally sipped out, sapped by a relief that startled her in her intensity. On one hand she hadn’t believed his father would let harm come to her friends. But on the other…

No matter. All would be fine now.

A chunin accompanied them to fetch Shin from his cell. They didn’t hug – even Shin, who was much more open than his young brother, didn’t display his emotions so openly – but he took Sai’s hand briefly, and Ino’s next, and they just shared a look but it was enough to be comforted, to calm their heart.

Naruto stayed out, at a safe distance. Ino almost reached out for him – out of gratitude, out of respect. She didn’t.

They stepped out of the Intelligence Department and it was the first time in her life she was glad to get away from there, to go back home. Maybe she would rob Sai into taking care of the shop with her – he didn’t say, but he always looked a little happier when he watered the plants and put bouquets together. He had a knack for it too.

Just as they were about to round the corner, Naruto stepped into Sai’s space, grabbed at his collar, sticking his face up close enough for their nose to be touching.

“You’re not allowed to get into trouble on my behalf,” he said sternly, low but not low enough that Ino couldn’t make out the words and the cutting edge of his tone.

Sai was unfazed. He even smiled, if barely.

“Thank you, Naruto,” he answered.

Naruto huffed, annoyed? He released the other boy and made to run away – Sai’s quiet voice stopped him.

“About what you asked last time.”

Naruto didn’t turn, but he listened.

“I found her, the woman. But she didn’t have a file, like all the other shinobi. It’s gone. The others bearing the name were only mentioned.”

Tense and disappointed, Naruto only shrugged as a sign of acknowledgment. In a few seconds, he had vanished.

“What was that about?” Ino asked, knowing full well she wouldn’t get an answer. And indeed Sai smiled but said nothing.

What a pair of lunatics.

Ino didn’t even get to tell Naruto that Sakura had been looking for him. And to ask if he was going to the funerals.

There were some of Naruto’s feelings the Demon had no grip on.

His worry for Sai, his disgust at being the cause for his troubles, the need he had felt to reach out for Sasuke after the second task, his desire to know where he had come and who his parents were,
The warmth spreading through him without fail every time he came home late and Shisui had left a bowl out for him to have dinner... those were his, undoubtedly, and they were things the rage seeping through the cage couldn’t touch.

But he was afraid it wouldn’t remain so, if he didn’t fix the seal.

It had shifted, the door, ever so slightly. The paper seal tapped to the cage used to be flat and bounding perfectly the two sides, but now it was a little distorted because the door had been pushed open just a smidge. Not enough that there was even a tear, and yet enough, enough for chakra to slip through, for the limits between their thoughts and feelings to blur even more.

Naruto had to fix it no matter what.

“What is it?” Akira asked, annoyed, when Naruto summoned him in the clearing. He hadn’t even been sure the fox would show up – he was still mad about Akito’s involvement in the whole Forest of Death debacle, and Naruto didn’t expect to see the little fox for a while.

His apology would just have to wait.

“Do you know anything about sealing?”

Desperate times, desperate measures – although he didn’t know what use foxes could do of sealing.

"Are you daft? Sealing is one of our specialties."

Naruto gaped.

“Really?”

“Yeah. Isn’t that why you wanted to contract with us in the first place?”

Unwilling to appear even dumber than Akira already thought he was, Naruto laughed, dismissive.

“Of course. But I don’t know if you’ll be good enough for that.”

It had the intended effect – Akira frowned, displeased.

“Believe me, there’s nothing you human can craft that we wouldn’t know of.”

As much as proving him wrong would be satisfying, Naruto actually hoped he was right, because if the foxes couldn’t help, Naruto didn’t know who he would turn to.

He took off his shirt and called up the seal to the display. The slight widening of the fox’s eyes, the frown deepening on his face were nothing good.

“So?” Naruto asked, unnerved. Akira didn’t look up at him when he answered.

“I’ll be back.”

In a puff of smoke, he was gone.

Naruto cursed, frustrated. Soon he remembered he had to keep his calm though – he couldn’t panic. The injunction was pretty useless and only served to make him panic even more, but still he soldiered on, forcing his thoughts to quiet down, his body to relax. Forcing himself to ignore the Beast’s laugh rumbling in his entrails, delighting at his struggles.
He could have been meditating for a minute or an hour – time seemed meaningless these days, spinning around him without taking him along. There was the characteristic pop of an invocation, and the not so characteristic snap of branches breaking. He blinked, dumbstruck, and he had to raise his gaze, up, up, up, until he met a pair of yellow eyes staring at him calmly.

Fox’s eyes, the size of his fist, belonging to a great white fox that took up the entirety clearing.

Despite himself, he stepped backward, stunned. The fox didn’t move, only following his movements lazily, head resting on its crossed paws, and one of its swirling tails.

Naruto counted six of them.

He flinched when it opened its mouth, convinced he was going to disappear here and then, eaten alive by a giant fox. He regretted staying shirtless after Akira had gone – clothes would have been a deterrent maybe?

“You were right, Akira. He does smell good.”

There was movement at the corner of his eyes, but Naruto didn’t dare look away from the white fox, until Akira came into view between them. He was comically tiny compared to the other, even if he was bigger than a regular fox, reaching up to Naruto’s chest on two legs.

“His chakra tastes good. He has plenty too.”

“And you like him,” the white fox said, amused. The voice was a low rumble, a vibration more than an actual sound, mouth barely moving – Naruto wondered if it didn’t speak directly into his mind.

Akira scrunched up his nose, pouting. He didn’t deny it though.

“You are yet to sign your contract, young one,” the white fox said, addressing Naruto this time. “Is that why you’re here?” he asked, unable to sound defiant even if he wanted to. He could be nothing but humble faced with that creature – could do nothing but defer.

“Maybe. You want our help, with your seal. We won’t grant it, unless you sign.”

“Then I will.”

“You should not be so hasty.”

Naruto bit back a retort. It didn’t matter what it would cost, what they would sky of him. Nothing was worth more than the safety of the seal, the certitude that it wouldn’t come lose without his will.

“I’ll do anything.”

“Is that so?”

Naruto shivered. He was abruptly reminded that foxes were masters of trickery and mischief. Reminded of Tsunade’s warning. “Animals can be rightful bastards.” But what choice did he have?

“I… I need help.”

Naruto bore the soul-searching gaze of the fox for a long time, fighting against the urge to look
down, to escape and hide. He wouldn’t back off, he wouldn’t get scared.

He had one of those even larger curled around his mind. He could handle this.

“Very well,” the fox finally said.

Akira drew a tall scroll from inside his kimono. He unrolled the first few lengths, covered in undecipherable text, signatures, and handprints. Done in blood. Eventually, he reached the last of them, where the paper was still blank, and laid it on the rocky ground.

“Give me your hands.”

Naruto complied, palms up toward the sky. Akira dragged his sharp claws on the rough skin, breaking in, drawing blood. Naruto bit his cheek to keep a groan of pain in, forced his face and body to stay still.

“Your chakra is ours,” the white fox said, solemn. “As is your obedience.”

Again Naruto fought himself over a protest, over bargaining. He couldn’t afford it, and it was best not to anger the creature. He nodded.

“Here,” Akira pointed, guiding his bloody hand to the paper. Naruto’s small hands joined the ranks next to his predecessors, as did his name, scrolled messily with his finger.

“Good,” the great fox said, “and now…”

“Now” was cut short by another apparition.

“Naruto!”

“Akito?”

“Mom, you’re here too!”

“Mom?”

Akira screeched, outraged, and tried to catch his little brother. Faster and smaller, Akito managed to elude him and took off, Akira chasing after him with angry shouts as the white fox watched, half-amused, half-exasperated.

“Mom, did you see! I managed to come on my own! I wasn’t summoned!”

“I see. I also see you’re where you’re not supposed to.”

That sobered up the little fox who stopped in front of his… mother, then, sheepish.

“I wanted to see Naruto’s signing.”

“Well you just missed it,” Akira shot back, smug. He lost the grin when Akito’s face fell, eyes shining.

“But… but…”

“Alright, alright, the scroll is still out, come on! Don’t cry!”

Naruto stood by awkwardly, trying to wipe his bloody hands on his shorts. Akito studied the
signature with attention, but soon focused back on Naruto.

“Are you alright, Akito?” the boys asked. He still felt guilty about the Forest, about the danger he had put the young fox in and his lack of gratitude over his precious help.

Akito didn’t seem to care much though. He didn’t catch the meaning of the inquiry.

“I’m fine! How are you? Does it hurt?” he asked, taking Naruto’s hand in his.

It was almost healed already.

“It’s okay.”

“Is he one of us then mom? Is he?”

Naruto had almost forgotten the white fox, which was a feat, given its size. Her?

She sort of smiled, for lack of a better word.

“He is. I am Akihime, matriarch of Mount Inari. You know my sons, Akira and Akito. They told me lots about you. We haven’t contracted with humans in a long time, but you have charmed them, it seems.”

Naruto blushed lightly despite himself, finding it easier now to look at the big yellow eyes rather than the expression on the young foxes’ face.

“For you seal,” she went on, pointing at his bare stomach with her snout, “yours is a four-point seal, and it was overlaid with a five-point one. That’s why it’s unstable – they act as a repellant against each other. You need another five-point seal of opposite structure to cancel that one. Akira will show you.”

Naruto could only nod dumbly – seals were intuitive for him, but he thoroughly lacked in theory, on account of it being boring, and him being a very, very poor reader.

“We will meet again soon, Naruto. And you’d be best to hold your end of the deal. Until next time.”

Wind swept through the clearing. The white fox was gone.

“She likes you!” Akito affirmed, delighted. “I knew she would!”

“We’ll see,” Akira retorted. “Let’s get to work then.”

As was often the case when the foxes were involved, Naruto elected to simply shut up and follow.

“I’m home.”

“Welcome back.”

Sasuke expected the house to be empty, for his family to be at the temple already – he was caught off guard by Itachi’s muffled voice coming from the bedroom wing.

Shoes off, he padded to Itachi’s room. The door was open – he found him sitting on the floor in his mourning clothes, hair wet from the bath. He had a brush in hand.
They stared at each other, struck with the exact same thought. Sasuke was frozen on the spot though, unable to ask. It had been so long, he had almost forgotten about it, and would Itachi still…

His brother held the brush out toward him.

“Do you want to?”

Sasuke took it with an unsure hand.

He would have been hard-pressed to say when was the last time they had done this. Several years, five, six, more. He used to love it, always running after a freshly bathed Itachi – “let me brush your hair!” – and Itachi indulged even if Sasuke was far from gentle. He liked to do it with his mother too, but it was different with Itachi, special. Somehow it was easier to talk and share when his hands were occupied, Itachi couldn't move, and they couldn't see each other. They would sit on his bedroom floor or his futon and Sasuke would brush his hair again and again, for far longer than necessary, while they talked about everything and nothing, safe in a bubble, just the two of them.

Sasuke was twelve now, Itachi, almost eighteen. A lot had changed since then, not the least their relationship, and yet when Sasuke sat down at Itachi’s back, when he reached out to untangle clumsily the long strand of black hair with his fingers, he felt like he was exactly where he wanted – and needed – to be.

His brother was alive, after all, and as they had found out, it wasn’t something they ought to take for granted.

“They’re pretty long now,” he commented, running his fingers from root to tip. The longest strands brushed Itachi’s lower back.

“I like it like this,” his brother answered mildly.

“Tell me if it hurts.”

They said nothing for a while, but it wasn’t awkward or loaded, wasn't uncomfortable like it had been so often in the past few years. The house was silent around them but they could hear the trees rustling gently and the vague rumor of the district life floating through the open window. Itachi liked to keep the paper rice doors open, despite their mother's protest that he would catch a cold if he slept like this. It overlooked a secluded part of the garden, lush with plants and flowers Itachi liked to tend to on occasions.

Sasuke thought to himself that this moment was nothing special, but it would be worth remembering all the same.

He got lost into the motion and startled a bit when Itachi broke the silence. It was rare for him to initiate a conversation, rare enough that Sasuke’s attention was immediately drawn in.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Hm.”

“It’s… a bit weird, I believe.”

It took a second to understand that Itachi wasn’t gathering his thoughts or waiting for an answer – he was silent because he was hesitating.

“I won’t laugh.”
“I don’t expect you to.”

“I won’t get mad either.”

Itachi didn’t answer. He would either drop the subject entirely, with no hope to be coaxed into talking again, or he would blurt it out bluntly, all at once. It was usually all or nothing with him.

“What would you say, if I told you I was thinking about quitting the shinobi forces. For good.”

The later it was then.

Sasuke forced his movements to remain steady and regular, forced himself to relax and keep his freak out under wrap. Itachi sure knew how to lay them down.

“Are you saying it?” he asked, to buy himself some times, and to get a sense of how far Itachi had taken that reflection, how serious he was about this. Itachi stayed silent for a long time, and Sasuke was sure he was going to deflect too. They could go back and forth a while like this, trading questions and answers without saying anything at all. It drove Shisui crazy.

Today looked like it would be different though.

“I am.”

Well. That was clear at least.

Itachi wasn’t interested in emotional response and empty reassurance. He had asked a question and expected a truthful answer. Sasuke took his time to think about it, while still busying his hands with brushing his brother’s hair.

He was trying to determine if he had seen it coming. In any case, it wasn’t as surprising as it would have been a couple of years ago. Itachi had done a lot of desk duty and small-scale missions within the bounds of the village these past few years, but their father had been hinting more and more at Itachi going back on active duty lately – and Itachi had been getting vaguer at his answers and excuses.

“What would you do instead?”

“I’m not sure yet.”

But he was thinking about it already.

“What do you think I could tell you?”

“That it’s a shame to waste such talent. A shame to turn my back on everything we stand for. A disgrace, a travesty.”

“You’re thinking about dad.”

It wasn’t quite as funny as he wanted to make it.

“That you’re disappointed,” Itachi added. It was hard to read his emotions and harder when his face was hidden, and yet to Sasuke the worry was clear in his voice.

“Would you still train me?” he asked, even if it was irrelevant, but that was kind of the point.

“I would do anything you asked.”
Sasuke needed a minute to come back from that.

“I wish you’d find something that makes you happy,” he eventually said. “I don’t care what it is. I’ll be fine with it.”

Way before understanding how special Itachi stood among the rest of the ninja force, way before registering his position as the clan’s – and village’s – genius, Sasuke was already fond of his brother. He already thought he was the coolest most awesome person around, and him being super good at fighting and shinobi things were just a bonus – or a malus, depending on how bitter Sasuke was about the constant comparison.

“Can I ask why though?”

Not much appealed to Sasuke more than becoming a force that would stand between his village and what threatened it, more than protecting this place and its people. He knew some became shinobi for other reasons – which, he had no idea.

“I don’t want to kill anyone ever again.”

The blunt statement took Sasuke off guard.

“What if someone threatens you? Or someone you care about?”

“That’s not… what I’m talking about.”

Sasuke knew that. He had an inkling at least. He knew what the A in Anbu stood for. But it was a distant knowledge because Sasuke didn't know what kind of person, in this world, warranted to have a death sentence on their head. People so bad they had to be assassinated, there couldn’t be that many, right?

“I understand,” he said anyway. Itachi had been there, he knew what he was talking about.

“Say, Sasuke… Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Why do you want to be Hokage?”

Sasuke hands stilled in their task. Now that he thought about it, he wasn’t sure he had explained it properly to anyone – wasn’t sure anyone had asked. He knew he sounded like dozens of other dreamy kids that threw around that wish with no intention to ever back down their words. It didn’t matter – only time would prove how serious he was about this.

“Dad still thinks it’s to get attention,” Itachi teased lightly. Sasuke huffed.

“I’m not six anymore.”

Chances were their father wouldn’t take it seriously until the hat rested on Sasuke’s head. And even then…

It was scary to talk about it though. As scary, he assumed, as it had been for Itachi to broach the subject of his own future. For the longest time their father had made it look like the future was already set, their path already decided, and for the longest time neither of them had thought about straying from it. Sasuke couldn’t speak for his brother, but he knew what had changed for him at least.
He had discovered his father could be wrong.

And most importantly, he had discovered that there were things far bigger and more important than the clan at play in this world. Sasuke was proud of being an Uchiha, he was, but he didn’t see himself working solely within the boundaries of the clan when there was so much going on outside of it.

“I want…”

How could he phrase it, that urge? Sasuke looked around him and was frustrated by the number of things that were out of his control. That he didn’t know, that he could do nothing about.

Sasuke thought about Naruto. About Haku, the Wave Country and their bridge. About the Chunin exam and the public display it would end up with, about the wariness and distrust of the foreign nin. About Kamui and Hokuto and their mourning family, about Kara and Sakura and Rock Lee in his hospital bed. Money, threats, danger, death, protection.

Surely there had to be a better way. Surely they could do better.

“I want the power to change things.”

“On your own?”

Sasuke felt like it was a trick question.

“If people want to help, they can,” he answered, instead of “yes”. Itachi didn’t press.

Their mother came at the door, cutting the conversation short. Sasuke absentmindedly braided Itachi’s hair down, pleased that he remembered how.

“Are you ready to go? Sasuke, you have all you need?” she asked. She too was dressed all in black, with only the Uchiha fan as a break, on each her shoulders.

Sasuke nodded, pointing at the case he had brought to the music shop for revision.

“Let’s go then.”

They held the wake for three days at the temple, as was their tradition. Sasuke’s dad had tried a comment about how Sasuke had to think about the exam still, but his mother had stopped him with a single glare before he could finish the thought. As if Sasuke could think about his training in a time like this.

Besides, Kara had asked something of him, and he intended to honor it.

So he played the flute during the ceremony where they bind Kamui’s face with a white cloth and gave his eyes back to his family. After their mourning was over, they would be destroyed, but for now the ornate wooden box would stay in his home, close to his loved ones. That’s why they didn’t have a cemetery in the Uchiha district, not even for stele – the body ashes went with the other villagers’, near the monument of Fire. Only the eyes stayed, and the private shrines in each house.

Sasuke played as the others sang. He used to do it often when he was a child, for the sacred holidays and the weddings too, less often for the funerals, as the traditional music was more often
played by a relative of the deceased. His fingers were sure on the holes despite his nervousness and lack of practice – it always felt a bit transcendent, to play in the temple, he always felt a little beyond himself, a little more than his own.

This was the one thing he could do. He would see to do it well.

Had he been older, Kamui’s pier would have been lit up by his children, nieces and nephews. Just a little younger and it would have been his siblings, cousins and friends.

As it was, it was his parents, aunts and uncles who performed the Katon and set the fire ablaze. It would burn for the whole night and in the morning, they would carry the ashes to the cemetery, to be buried under the stele already engraved with his name, next to Inuzuka Hokuto.

It wouldn’t be the whole clan then – it wasn’t even now, at the pier. The clan was big, and death was common. But Kamui was well-loved – there were a lot of people still.

They joined with the Inuzuka at the cemetery the next day. There were others too – jounin and chunin from Kamui and Hokuto’s age, some older who had overseen them during missions or trained them, some younger who had been trained in turn. Kamui had often said he would want to train his own genin team, eventually.

He wouldn’t now.

There were a few other people, clan members, Kara’s friends. Sakura and Ino were there too, others from their years, standing closer to Kiba. Sasuke looked and looked, but…

“He’s not here,” Sakura whispered. “I couldn’t find him.”

She sounded angry. She often did these days, more often than not, when she talked about Naruto, fed up with his mutism and reluctance. They hadn’t seen him in days.

The Hokage was here – she said a few words, voice welling with emotions. They buried the ashes.

Life went on.

“…There is a funeral.”

Naruto had been on the verge of sleep, warmed by the sun in a patch of grass. He leaped to his feet but had to spin around a few times to spot the newcomer. How hadn’t he heard him coming?

Because he had sprung up from a pile of sand, probably. Gaara was standing by a tree, arms crossed and face blank, staring at him.

Despite the rapid beating of his heart and his blurry vision, Naruto affected a nonchalant pose.

“I know.”

“You’re not going.”

He couldn’t tell if it was a question or just an observation. He answered anyway.

“They wouldn’t want me there.”

“Why?”
“I am my own funerals already.”

It didn’t make much sense and yet Gaara nodded, understanding.

“Me too.”

They weighed each other up across the clearing, assessing, searching. Naruto wanted to know more about him and run far away from him at the same time. He wanted to know why those things happened when they were close, and didn’t want to experience it ever again.

“What are you doing here?” he asked after a while, for lack of anything better to say. Gaara kept silent a long moment, face betraying nothing. He didn’t even blink.

“I think I wanted to kill you.”

Naruto purposefully didn’t tense up, didn’t put up his guard, didn’t react in any way, as if faced with a wild animal any sudden movement could set off.

“You can always try,” he taunted, although he really hoped Gaara wouldn’t take him up on the offer. They would draw too much attention to themselves.

And he didn’t want to fight the other boy.

Another pregnant pause, and then sand started swirling again. Gaara disappeared.

“Freak,” Naruto muttered, unnerved.

He hoped the boy would be back.

Chapter End Notes

The scene with the foxes was entirely inspired by this awesome pic. The bits about the funerals were inspired by… this and that. It's made up, not meant to represent any real traditions in any way. I just wanted to expend on that piece of worldbuilding. The clans ought to have their traditions and rituals.
I wrote that Itachi and Sasuke scene ages ago but couldn't fit in until now. I told my sister then that I was writing Sasuke brushing Itachi’s hair and she said "that's how you end up writing 100k words and barely starting on canon events". She wasn't wrong x)

As always, tell me what you think, visit me on tumblr for fanarts, rambling and updates, and I'll see you all soon!
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Tsunade and an old friend. Naruto and a new one.

Chapter Notes

I just realized that this fic is approaching its one year anniversary. When I started it I really didn't think I would stick to it for so long and write so much and go that far into the story. I'm blown away by what it's become and all the support and reaction it gained. I hope I'll keep at it for another year!

Recently I've been posting bits that I made up in my head months ago. It's so nice to finally be able to give it to you! Stories are meant to be shared.

Anyway, I'll stop here with the mushy feelings. I just want to welcome all those who've just jumped on the bandwagon and thank all the others again. I love you all. Here we go.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Alcohol wasn’t as efficient as it used to be.

She wanted to believe her resistance was just that good, but more likely, it was just that the issues she was trying to drown in her bottle of sake were too big to fit in. They hit the bottom and still poked above the surface – there was no submerging any of them.

Tsunade pushed the half-empty bottle away, disgusted.

It was a meager comfort to have discovered that the bar she used to visit to drink away her sorrow when she was younger was still standing, amidst the many changes Konoha had seen over the years. Even the owner, she knew her still. The daughter of the previous one, who was but a child the last time Tsunade had come, and handled the whole business now.

The bar was part of one of the largest bathhouses of the village, and was forbidden to men. Officially to guarantee the clients’ peace of mind. Unofficially, because there were many, many women and girls working at the bathhouse, far more than such a place would need. They appeared out of nowhere, looking fearful and unable to meet anyone’s eyes, until a few months behind the high walls of the bathhouse would give them some modicum of confidence back. Some tried again at life then – some stayed.

If a man came at the door, wrathful and threatening, looking for a wife, a daughter, or an employee, he was politely turned away. If he insisted, it was less polite.

One of Tsunade’s first acts after taking office had been to definitely put the police force off of the bathhouse’s back. The second had been to let them thank her by drinking her weight in sake and
falling asleep in one of the many guestrooms. The bathhouse was supposedly an inn too, but there were never many beds available.

She could count on the women’s discretion, and now that she was the damn Hokage, she had to. She couldn’t be seen staggering in the streets and spilling sake all over herself. She had to do that in private.

Thus, no one knew she came here, apart from the women working the bar. It was no small feat, to lose the Anbu watching over her, and she knew it was mean because they would be running in circles by now, frantic and worried about failing their mission, but she didn’t care enough to step out of the bar and meet back with them.

One, because she was too drunk to stand up. Two, because she still wanted to drink some more.

She had made a list. The paper was crumpled and humid. Too bad the things listed there couldn’t blur out and disappear as easily as ink splashed with alcohol. It was a list of issues that needed to be dealt with, and to be drown too.

There was no particular order – each worse than the next. She had just a short couple of weeks to prepare for the arrival of the Kazekage of Suna and the Mizukage of Kiri, and the handover ceremony that would follow. She needed to placate the clan heads until the chunin exam was over – all internal affairs were suspended for now, to their great displeasure. Former root members still needed to be interrogated, and they had discovered with great discontentment that at least half a dozen of them had still been in contact with Danzo, still willing to serve him. Inoichi had unleashed the Psychology unit on them, hoping they could break through their unnatural loyalty, with no guarantee they would manage it. What would they do of those people then?

There was the thing with Naruto, that she had no time to ponder over while feeling it was crucial. It was something that simmered in everyone’s mind and she knew it. Could he lose control? Should he be contained? She still didn’t know the full story of his birth and family.

Hiruzen had staid nothing. Hiruzen was another problem on the list. She didn’t know what the clan heads would want to do with him. She couldn’t bring herself to visit him.

Another issue that had arisen recently, because of that damn chunin exam – she was needed back at the hospital.

Maito Gai had sought her out. He’d gone to his knees, teary-eyed, and begged her to help his young student, heavily wounded during the preliminary tournament. She had looked into it, briefly. Two limbs out of four were at high risk of being lost completely. No one in the village, and maybe no one at all, would be able to do anything about it.

Except for her.

If she could do it.

She didn’t know which one she ought to tackle first. She didn’t know what to do. She had never felt more alone in her life – she had no friend here. Shizune was a great support, but she couldn’t help – partly because she was too young, and partly because she had too much faith in Tsunade. So much that the woman could never open up to her about all this, couldn’t bear to disappoint her in such a way.

Not that the state she was in now wouldn’t make a fine work of that.

“Mind if I join you?”
Tsunade raised bleary eyes toward the entrance of the private room the owner had graciously put
her in. There was a woman standing there – impressively tall, even more than Tsunade, and
slender, with skin so pale and long hair so dark she looked like a ghost. Her bright, colorful kimono
only reinforced the impression instead of battling it, as if she was trying, without much success, to
appear a little more of this world.

She was also incredibly beautiful.

Tsunade gestured vaguely, in a way that could be interpreted as about anything. The woman chose
to see it as assent and came to sit by Tsunade’s side at the low table.

“You look quite distressed,” the woman said conversationally, without much compassion or care.
Her voice was deep, a little rough. Tsunade thought she might have heard it somewhere. The
woman was familiar, although Tsunade was sure she had never seen her before.

“I am.”

The woman chuckled. Her body didn’t emit much heat.

“Are you in town for the chunin exam?” Tsunade asked. The stranger wasn’t for Konoha, that was
for sure.

“Among other things. Actually, I was hoping I would meet with the Hokage, but it’s not so easy
getting a hold of him it seems.”

Tsunade snorted.

“Is that supposed to be an insult? Don’t waste your time. I’m quite immune.”

“I beg you pardon?”

“Oh come on, don’t play the innocent card. Even if it’s not official yet, surely the news must have
traveled by now.”

The woman raised an eyebrow, puzzled. Her make-up was impeccable, if atypical.

“What d’you want with the Hokage anyway. C’me on, you already stepped into my office, I’ll
open the grievance session just for you.”

Her slanted eyes widened in understanding. For a moment, they did nothing but stare.

Nothing changed. The woman didn’t say a word, she didn’t move. Maybe it was alcohol switching
gears into Tsunade’s mind or maybe she just needed that long to catch up. It popped out of
nowhere, the sudden revelation, the answer to her queasy feelings, to where she had heard that
voice, where she had seen that expression, where she had felt that flavor of chakra. Even muffled as
it was, even hidden so well as to fool anyone… But she wasn’t anyone. She could always tell.

She sat up and grabbed the collar of the kimono to mash her face against the woman’s.

“CHICHI. What the FUCK are you doing here?”

It was nice to see she could still surprise her old teammate. She was far too enraged to appreciate it
though.

“Did you really believe I wouldn’t fucking notice? Who do you think I am? You think you can fool
me? Me? You think I wouldn’t recognize you anywhere, in any form? What the fuck Chichi?”
She only noticed she was shaking her in all directions when she grabbed her wrist to stop her. The only thing that fucker could say was…

“Please stop calling me that.”

Tsunade pushed Orochimaru away and kicked her hard in the thigh.

“Fuck you.”

She downed her last bottle in one go.

“It was you, in the Forest. I should have known. Anko… she fucking lied to me. That fucking…”

She had known Anko was lying through her teeth, but she couldn’t figure out why. She would never have imagined… But it made so much sense.

“Did you come to destroy the village, Chichi?” she asked quietly, drained out. She wanted to cry. She eyed the list – there was no room to add “deal with my former teammate turned traitor and public enemy within the very bounds of the village.”

She could only laugh.

“I wish,” Orochimaru sighed, as composed and chill as ever even after being recognized. “But I don’t have the means, for now. I wanted to rob Suna into doing the dirty work for me… But since Danzo has stopped his activities, Konoha’s relationships with the shinobi world have dramatically improved, by the sheer vacuum of his absence. I imagine you have no idea, but it really did this place the biggest favor.”

Oh, Tsunade had an idea alright. She had seen Danzo’s mission orders. She had seen the reports, the body scrolls, the fucking jars, the stolen jutsu.

“I don’t believe you,” she said anyway, because she didn’t. Orochimaru would find a way.

“Is that why you came back here?” the other asked, ignoring her. “To take over the old man?”

“Someone had to.”

She regretted it every day – but not as much as she would have regretted not doing it. Or so she tried to convince herself.

“What, didn’t your spies told you that?” she joked, humorless.

“They didn’t,” Orochimaru stated, displeased. They had similar problems then. It was hilarious.

“Why did you come then? What do you want?” she asked.

“Don’t worry, I got it already.”

Tsunade startled.

“Naruto.”

Orochimaru failed to stop Tsunade from pinning her on the floor, fist very close to her face.

“I won’t let you have him!”
Orochimaru smiled, all sweet and fond.

“No one has ever followed me against their will, Nana.”

She gritted her teeth, clenched her fist, itching for it to land. The affectionate nickname was biting in Chichi’s mouth, where it had been only teasing and fond, once upon a time.

It was Jiraya’s fault, of course. They were sitting around a campfire one night, bored out of their mind, and he insisted that she was too fierce for a girl, too harsh and mean, and that she needed to soften up a bit.

“You need a cuter name,” he had proclaimed.

She hated that nickname. It was the one older members of her family used to remind her that she was just a child, and it felt mocking, insulting. Even Orochimaru was into this, a double betrayal.

“You too then,” she had said later, deciding she too would give them a childish nickname, and keep it up as long as they would. “Yaya, Chichi.”

But of course Jiraya, that absolute fucker, had loved the idea.

In the end both Tsunade and Orochimaru had paid for their teammate’s idiocy – the usual way of the world.

“Konoha’s mine now, Chichi. As are all its people. I won’t let you harm them. Please don’t make the mistake to think I won’t go against you”

She trusted he would heed her threat. Her plea too.

_ I don’t want to fight you. But I will._

_And I’ll win._

Orochimaru just shrugged.

“Don’t worry. I’ll leave it to you, if you’re so desperate for it.”

Tsunade got up, smoothed her clothes out. She needed to go back.

“Disappear then. Leave.”

“Ah, sorry, I can’t do that yet. There’s one last thing I need to do.”

“Chichi!”

She took a step toward him, but the room swayed suddenly and she fell on her knees, nauseous.

“You… you fucking…”

“Don’t worry, it won’t kill you. You’re stronger than that. But I can’t let you meddle in my affairs, Nana. Sorry.”

She had drunk the fucking glass. She was so fucking stupid.

“You have other things to worry about, Nana,” he said, pointing a finger at the list, amused. “Don’t mess up my business, and I’ll leave your village alone.”
She could only watch him go, helpless, her body refusing to obey as poison numbed her mind.

“Chichi!”

He was already gone.

She struggled to sit upright, cursing and fuming, and only managed to slump on the table, half paralyzed.

“Sawako! SAWAKO!”

The woman came in a hurry but merely raised an eyebrow at Tusnade’s predicament.

“Help me back on my feet. I need to go to the Hokage Tower.”

“Some girls will take you there,” Sawako assured. Indeed, two young women appeared at her back and all but carried Tsunade outside and into Konoha’s streets. Without being asked, they took the smallest, emptiest ones. Tsunade would have to thank them properly later.

After a few minutes she could feel her legs again, and some Anbu finally caught up to them.

“Where the hell have you been?” she chastised, furious and willing to take it out on anyone available. Before she could though, the captain stepped forward. She racked her brain for the name of the one in charge of that team for the week. Was it Kage? All those masks looked too much alike.

“You’ve been unleashing the full scope of your skills to lose us in the village for weeks now, Hokage-sama. Please forgive us for failing to keep up.”

He insisted subtly on the title, and though he sounded contrite, there was a thinly veiled accusation in there too. Maybe they had even given up on trying to locate her when she put up her disappearing act. And she had been glad for it.

She dismissed the girls with a discreet nod, trusting she could walk on her own from now on. She felt how she did when her body was still drunk but her mind was fighting it off mercilessly. It wasn’t a good feeling.

“You’re right,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

A subtle relief fluttered through the gathered Anbu – had they feared her anger? But they had done nothing wrong. She really couldn’t blame them.

She was at fault here.

“Hayate. The Sanin Orochimaru is somewhere here in Konoha. He was almost certainly responsible for some of the havoc of the exam’s second trial. Gather all jounin in service and search the village, but do not engage if you see him. Understood?”

He nodded. The mask didn’t let any emotion show. She could see the appeal sometimes.

It would be useless, for sure. As if Chichi could be caught that easily. But she couldn’t do nothing.

“I’m going back to the Tower. Have Anko be sent to me immediately.”

The woman was already there when Tsunade made it to her office and flopped down gracelessly in her chair. She was still nauseous and dizzy, from both alcohol and poison, the distinction didn’t
matter. Anko looked ready for a fight – at least she knew why she had been summoned.

“You lied to me,” Tsunade accused without preamble. Better to get this over with.

Anko kept silent.

“Why? Why did you keep to yourself it was him you had met in the Forest? What did you hope to achieve?”

Anko startled, as she only now realized how it could look from an outsider’s perspective. She had the gale to look angry at the accusation.

“I didn’t help him,” she spat out, disgusted.

“And I’m supposed to take your words for it? Do you realize what you’ve done? What you could be accused of?”

“How dare you…”


Anko bit her lips, hard. She was shaking with rage.

“Distrust?” she sneered. Tsunade scoffed.

“You’ll have to do better than that, to justify putting everyone around here in danger.”

That was a low blow, for she knew it wasn’t what Anko had had in mind, that she wouldn’t. But she had known Orochimaru was roaming around for days, and she hadn’t said anything. Tsunade couldn’t just let that slide.

"You're suspended from duty, and I forbid you to take part in any search effort."

“You can’t do that!”

“I can, and I am! And you better not disobey me, Anko!”

The girl stepped forward and Tsunade rose to her feet as an answer, leaning on the desk to close the distance between them – and keep steady. Anko’s eyes were ablaze with fury, but she had to know she was in the wrong here.

She balanced for a few more seconds, between exploding and receding, between fight and flee. In the end she stepped back, shark smile on her bitter expression.

“As you wish, Hokage-sama.”

Tsunade knew she had lost then. She had made a mistake, she hadn’t handled that right. Anko shut down on her, retreated.

Resigned, Tsunade let her go.

“Hayate is not coming?”
“He asked me to fill in for him today.”

“Why?”

Yugao smiled, indulgent.

“Can’t you guess?”

Sakura shrugged. She could, sort of. But she didn’t want to talk about it.

“Shall we begin?”

She rose her sword, parted her feet as she had been taught. Yugao did the same – her sword was shorter, but that wouldn’t Sakura much of an edge, giving the gap between their level.

Nothing could give her an edge, really.

Yugao was the first to move, since Sakura wasn’t. They exchanged blows for a moment, Sakura losing more and more ground as she fell back in defense, anxious not to let any hit come through.

Yugao easily got the best of her and ended a smooth move with the tip of her sword aimed straight at Sakura’s throat.

The girl threw her sword in frustration and looked away, face scrunched up to hold back tears.

“What’s the matter, Sakura? Hayate told me you’ve been moody and unmotivated lately. That’s not how you’ll make any progress.”

“It’s no use.”

Yugao picked up the sword, swept the dust on her trousers. Sakura took it back from her hand, ashamed – this was no way to treat the woman’s gift.

“Where is this coming from?”

Hayate had asked too, but she feared his disappointment too much to have been able to confide in him. And now he wouldn’t even come to train her anymore. She had fucked it all up.

“I… I have to fight Uchiha Sasuke at the Chunin tournament.”

“Ah, I heard. And?”

Sakura bit her lips. Did she have to say it? Wasn’t it obvious?

“And I’ll never beat him!”

Her grip tightened around the sword as she wrestled against her emotions. She didn’t want to break down in front of the woman – how embarrassing.

“Why not?”

Sakura looked up to see if Yugao was having her on, but she seemed genuinely puzzled, as if she didn’t get what Sakura was saying.

“Why not, Sakura? Why couldn’t you beat him?”

Surprise and confusion chased away her anguish as Yugao kept asking what, exactly, she was
talking about.

“He’s… He’s way better than me.”

“Well that’s why we train, right?”

“But I’m… I’m just… and he’s…”

“What? He’s what, Sakura?”

She looked away, distressed, unable to bear Yugao’s steady, patient gaze, as she waited for Sakura to voice every last of her doubt and insecurity aloud.

It was one thing to try her hardest to keep up with her teammates. She had held her own the best she could in the Forest of Death, but she had needed help in the end, and she would have gotten all three of them seriously injured or killed had she been on her own.

It was one thing to try her hardest to keep up with her teammates. It was another entirely to think about surpassing them.

Maybe it was the goal, in the most secret recesses of her mind maybe that’s what she truly aspired to achieve. But it was supposed to be way down the line. Given time and efforts and some luck, maybe she could catch up and maybe she could even… But it was not for now.

For now, she couldn’t do it.

She couldn’t face Sasuke on the ring in front of so many people. She would ridicule herself. It was as if she could taste the humiliation already, the contempt, as people would laugh at her for thinking she could compare to the best student of their year.

“He’s what?”

This was getting annoying.

“He’s… he’s better than me, that’s all!”

Yugao frowned.

“That’s what training is for.”

“He’s like, a genius, or something. He’s too good for me.”

“Again, that’s what training is for.”

“He’s an Uchiha!”

This one, she regretted letting it slip immediately.

She was supposed to be above all this, but it was easier said than done. Apart from her, all the genin going to the final task were clan kids. People would know their name, would recognize them instantly, would know what to expect of them.

And her? She was a nobody.

“So what, do you think no one’s ever beaten one of those before?” Yugao said lightly.
She didn’t get it.

“I get it, Sakura.”

The girl blushed, embarrassed. She didn’t want to have this conversation.

“I get it. You think it’s too pretentious of you to aspire rising above him. You think at the end of the day there is truth in what people say, that these clan kids are indeed something special, and that there’s nothing you can do about it. You think everyone will expect you to lose, and that they’ll think it’s well deserved when you do.”

“There’s no need to lay it all out like that,” Sakura mumbled, eyes on the ground. She wasn’t proud of those thoughts, and hearing them from someone else was at least ten times worse.

“And what if you win?”

Sakura kept her eyes trained on her old, ratty shoes. She didn’t want to think about it, it was no use, right?

“What if you won against him?”

She couldn’t help but imagine though. She couldn’t help but dream. As improbable as it was, as unlikely, it was still so appealing. Winning against Sasuke in front of the crowd, that would be…

But if she trained with that thought in mind, if she really tried… It would hurt all the more, when she lost.

“It’s not going to happen.”

“Well, not with that attitude.”

Sakura huffed and looked away.

“Okay, so you’re going to lose.”

Her head snapped back to cast a betrayed look at Yugao who just raised an eyebrow.

“What? You said so yourself.”

Be as it may, she didn’t have to confirm it!

“So, you’re going to lose. And from what I understand, you want to lose as quickly and easily as possible.”

“What?”

“What? That’s not it?”

“Wh… Of course not! Why would you say that?”

“Well you refuse to train properly, so you don’t want to get any better or stronger. And if you don’t, then you’ll lose indeed, and pretty fast.”

That was mean. Of course that’s not what she had in mind!

“I just… I… If I try my hardest and I do my best and… and I’ll still lose and so… what then?”
“You’ll train harder.”

Yugao was smiling, kind and open, although there was steel in her gaze. There often was.

“They will too,” Sakura couldn’t help but retort. Every step she took, the others took too. How then was she supposed to close the gap? Sasuke was busy training with his brother and cousin as they spoke. As for Naruto…

Ah. Who knew what Naruto was up to? She didn’t want to worry about it for now. They always worried so much, and it didn’t change a thing. He refused to let them in. He wasn’t interested in fixing things, in getting better, or he would have accepted their help. She was tired of reaching out and being left hanging.

Besides, Naruto wouldn’t be in the final trial.

“Is this how you’ll deal with real missions too, Sakura?” Yugao said. “When you’re sent into enemy territory, when you have to fight for information or a hostage life or yours, is that what you’ll say? No point in trying since I’ll lose anyway?”

She wanted to protest, because it wasn’t what she had said. Except it was, wasn’t it? She just felt so discouraged. It wasn’t just Sasuke. There were that boy Dosu and the Suna trio too, and even Shikamaru and Shino and Kiba, and Hinata’s cousins, and what was she supposed to do against all those people?

“I don’t understand Sakura. You qualified, right? You qualified for the last task, just like all the others.”

“It’s not the same.”

“Why?”

She shrugged. She couldn’t explain it. It just wasn’t.

“We’re done here then,” Yugao declared, sheathing her sword. Sakura startled, ran after the woman when she made to leave.

“What? Why? No!”

“If you don’t train to best your opponent, then what’s the point? What’s the point if you want to lose?”

“That’s not what I want!”

“What do you want then?”

There they stood, facing each other in the middle of the deserted training ground, and Yugao was asking and Sakura didn’t think she could answer that. No, she definitely couldn’t. It was too much. She couldn’t. She wasn’t so bold, she wasn’t like that, she couldn’t reasonably hope to…

“I want…”

Was it even allowed?

“I want to win.”

The dam broke only then, but she didn’t bother catching the tears. She chose to withstand Yugao’s
steady gaze instead, desperate for the woman to stay, to change her mind, to not give up on Sakura even if she was a mess right now.

“I want to win.”

“Against who?”

“Anyone. Everyone. I want to win every time. I want to…”

She had already gone that far, so...

“I want to be the best.”

Yugao’s usually mild, unreadable expression broke into a broad smile as she took up her sword again.

“Now that’s more like it. Get ready to suffer then.”

Sakura put her guard up. She didn’t have to think about the future, she decided. Since she couldn’t convince herself she could win, she just had not to think about it at all.

“Yes, sensei.”

“You made a mistake here. And here. Here too.”

With each “here”, Akira pocked a sharp claw at Naruto’s stomach, pointing at the various symbols he had painted on his skin. It was his third time redoing it, and it was no closer to being any good.

“Help me fix it then,” he spat at the young fox who had to be taking wicked pleasure in Naruto’s struggles.

It wasn't easy drawing on his own skin – he had to mirror every pattern, had to keep the lines straight and the sigils evenly spaced. It didn't help that they were so small, and that there were so many. Of course it couldn't be simple.

“All right, that’s not bad. Try it now.”

Naruto positioned himself back in the center of the sealing circle painted on the stones – these were easier at least, despite the uneven surface. He had to align the lines on his body with the ones on the ground, that then went on and stretched in a star around him, ending by the point of five kunai embedded in softer dirt.

“Five-Point Seal Release!”

Naruto slammed the seal into his stomach, hard enough to knock his breath out. He retched, nauseous, as he felt seals shift on his skin.

“So?” he asked, panting, when he could open his eyes again. Akira was studying his stomach.

“Almost.”

Naruto cursed.

Since he didn't have the resources to figure out the exact weight of the five-point seal, he had to
apply a small counter seal, over and over, until it would finally cancel the first one for good. It was like turning a key in a keyhole inch by inch until it would click into place and close the door.

“How many more?”

“Two or three, I’d say.”

He cursed again.

“Another day.”

“Tired already?”

“Shut up.”

Akira was definitely using this to get back at Naruto. He huffed, but, realizing that the boy wouldn’t do any more work that day, he disappeared in a puff, back to his mountain.

Just a few minutes later, Gaara was back at the clearing.

“Right on time.”

The first day, Naruto had been waiting anxiously, on edge and tense like he expected to be attacked. He had tensed up even more when Gaara had appeared, but after just a minute of intense eye contact, he had left again.

The next day, Naruto had elected to ignore him completely, focusing on the seals Akira had given him to practice. Gaara sat on a rock and watched, deadly silent. If Naruto looked his way, he was sure to meet his unblinking gaze. After a few hours and not a single word exchanged between then, he was gone again.

Most days for the next week, that’s how it went. Naruto was struggling now that he had given back everything Sai had acquired for him. He had only kept the scroll he had stolen himself from the Hokage’s library all those years ago. The one with the red spiral. Most seals in there were too complex for him, or required more than one caster – he still wanted to hold on to it. So he cursed and tried again and again, and through it all Gaara stared and stared, silent.

The previous day, he had snapped and attacked him.

Sometimes he looked like he was at war with himself, clutching at his head as if in pain. His murder intent would spike up and Naruto would focus back on him, wait for him to calm down or explode. He had, on the sixth day, and they had fought for a while amongst the rocks and trees, and Naruto had siphoned Gaara’s chakra to the brink of exhaustion, and Gaara had broken Naruto’s arm in three places and then left in a hurry. Naruto had heard him wreak havoc in the forest for hours after that.

He didn’t expect him to be back today, but here he was, same place same time, as if nothing had happened. Naruto’s arm was healed already. Gaara looked as fine as ever.

Naruto had no idea how the boy occupied the rest of his days, but he was here every day at the same time without fail. Naruto made sure Akira would be gone by then – it would be too troublesome to have the two to cross pass. He wouldn’t risk driving either of them away with an unwanted encounter. He wanted Gaara to keep coming.
Even if they did nothing but sit in silence, or fight.

“Do you have parents?” Naruto asked, out of the blue, because today was the day they would talk about something, anything.

He didn’t expect Gaara to answer.

“My father is the Kazekage. My mother died giving birth to me.”

“Must be sweet, being the son of the boss.”

“It isn’t.”

It figured. Maybe it made it even worse.

“He was okay with you becoming a demon?”

“That’s why I was born.”

Naruto frowned.

“What?”

“That’s why I was born. It was decided even before that.”

“Where was your demon back then?”

“Sealed. In a teapot.”

Naruto bit his tongue, hard. He cursed as the taste of blood flooded his mouth.

“You mean…”

He had figured the Kyuubi had been sealed inside of him because it had gotten lose, for a reason or another, and needed to be stopped again. But here…

Why didn’t they keep in in its receptacle then? He didn’t need to ask. He knew why.

What use was a beast if you couldn’t open its cage.

“Why do you think we’re alive?” he asked instead.

“To kill.”

That’s what he was afraid to hear.

“But… what if… if it wasn’t for other people. If it was just us.”

This time, Gaara had no answer to give. He looked mildly distressed, as if the question was out of this world, completely unfathomable.

“That’s why they kept us alive,” Naruto went on, unable to stop. “But now… If we got to choose…”

He didn’t even know where he was going with it. He remembered the woods and the soft smile on Haku’s face, to whom he had blurted the same question, because he wanted, he needed to know. He knew why others had kept them alive, but there had to be more to it.
He had often thought about leaving, but never dwelled much about what would come after. Where would he go, what would he do?

Why did people keep on living?

“I’m sure you’ll find it. The reason.”

Haku’s words had yet to come true.

“If… If I didn’t have to live… then…”

Gaara didn’t finish the sentence, but he did finish the thought, and Naruto heard it clearly.

Why, why did they have to live this way?

The sand took him away before Naruto could repair that conversation, leaving him alone, and suddenly quite cold, in the empty clearing.

.

Gaara came back though.

.

“Where did it come from?” Naruto asked, pointing at Gaara’s forehead.

“Sand.”

“You made it? Why?”

The answer was long to come.

“So that I have it. Love.”

“What?”

“I have love. Look.”

Gaara’s fingers brushed against the red kanji. Naruto looked away.

.

”What would you have done? If I had killed the boy in green.”

“I don’t know. Nothing? But everyone would have been very upset.”

“And if I had killed the other one.”

“Which one?”

“The one with the red eyes.”

“Then I would have killed you.”

Gaara mulled it over as if it was a reasonable claim worthy of analysis.

“All people are the same to me,” he declared after a while.
Naruto rolled his eyes.

“You’re even worse than me.”

.

“What about the two that travel with you. The boy and the girl.”

“Kankuro and Temari.”

“If you say so.”

“What about them?”

“What if they died?”

Naruto dodged the sand, but only narrowly. The blast cut the nearest tree in half neatly.

“See,” Naruto said. “People are not all the same.”

.

“There are others. Others like us.”

“Like us?”

“Between Ichibi and Kyuubi. There has to be at least seven others.”

“Others like us.”

“Yeah.”

“Others like us.”

“Yeah.”

.

“You can sleep.”

The voice startled him out of said sleep, and Naruto cursed himself for dozing off in such a vulnerable place. But he could cut himself some slack – after all, it was the first time in more than a week that he could, indeed, sleep undisturbed.

“I finally managed to repair my seal. So I can shut the damn fox up again.”

The demon had been poisoning his every thought, including when he was trying to rest, but he had laid the last of the correcting seal today, to Akira's mild surprise. The fox had even looked a little proud. Naruto really couldn't be blamed for succumbing to slumber immediately, both out of exhaustion and sheer relief. His thoughts were clearer than they had been in days, he felt centered again, master of his own mind. The demon was chewing his own resentment, but he could no longer easily infect Naruto with it.

Take that damn calamity.

“You can sleep,” Gaara said again, and Naruto noticed only then that there was some sort of emotion in his voice for once. “Astonished” would have been the world for anyone else – for him,
it was the barest hint of surprise, but it spoke volume already.

“Huh, yeah. Can’t you?”

It was meant as a joke, although Naruto should have learned by now there was no use wasting those on Gaara. True to form, he answered dead serious.

“No.”

Despite knowing it couldn’t possibly be a joke, it couldn’t possibly be true either, so Naruto let out a light chuckle, that quickly died out when he caught Gaara’s look.

“What?”

“I can’t sleep. It won’t let me.”

The past week had been hellish, with the voice of the demon carrying beyond its bars and invading Naruto’s mind constantly. But it was temporary. It was just damage done to the seal.

“What,” he said again, because it couldn’t be true. It couldn’t be…

Then again, why not? There was no master of sealing in Konoha, and after doing a bit of research, he was reasonably certain there wasn’t much of a master of sealing anywhere. The old hag had said Naruto’s clan was supposed to be the expert at this, but there was none of them left.

It wasn’t that implausible then, that the existing seals would be done poorly, just as the ones Naruto had encountered in the scrolls.

"Night and day, she speaks to me. She could take over if I fell asleep. So I don’t.”

Gaara had been saddled with his burden since the very first day of his life, just like Naruto. How was it possible, all this time… His eyes were always darkened with make-up, so it was hard to tell but… did it just hide the shadows of insomnia? Was it even the purpose?

The familiar haze of irrational anger descended upon Naruto’s mind, clouding his vision. Gaara responded to it in an instant, his own rage rising to meet his. It fell on Naruto to find a way back out, before they dissolved into mindless fighting again. Shisui was getting suspicious at some of the injuries he sported these days.

“Show me your seal,” he demanded.

Gaara frowned.

“It has to be it. If it’s incomplete… I could fix it for you. I could…”

He took a step forward, hand raised to grab Gaara’s collar, tug at it maybe, look for the seal.

The sand stopped him before he could as much as graze the other boy, a harsh slap that broke the skin of his forearm. Gaara’s eyes were blown wide, afraid or angry or both.

“I could fix it,” Naruto said again, confident, although he didn’t know that for sure.

Gaara was still fearful. When Naruto attempted to get closer again, the boy disappeared.

*Oh, I will*, Naruto thought. No matter what it took and even if he had to drug Gaara out or beat him unconscious and tie him to a tree.
“You’re back home early today,” Shisui commented when Naruto crossed the threshold. He had been meaning to go straight to his room and sulk a bit, but even if Shisui was careful not to show it bothered him, it was true they hadn’t seen much of each other lately. Naruto sat at the kitchen table where the Uchiha was grading history papers.

“What? You miss me?” Naruto asked, ignoring the implied questions about his whereabouts.

Naruto had waited and waited, but Gaara hadn’t shown up at the clearing today. There was no use in lingering.

“Kind of, yeah,” Shisui answered without missing a beat. Naruto bit his lips. He should know by now not to ask questions like that to the other man, who was always disarmingly honest and heartfelt.

“You spend all your time with your Hyuuga anyway,” he said so that he wouldn’t have to comment on Shisui’s words in any way.

“Spending times with friends is what people do,” Shisui sighed, with a tone, Naruto was sure, he used on his students when he was repeating a simple fact for the millionth time. “And we work together. And you’re the one gone out all day who knows where.”

It wasn’t a reproach, not really. Merely concerns. Naruto could tell. It was unnerving.

Of course, no one knew about Naruto and Gaara’s meet-up in the forest. Well, maybe the boy's companions knew, but Naruto doubted it. Without talking about it in any way, they could both infer that it wouldn’t thrill anyone to know they were becoming… Ah. Friends was a strong word.

But just them interacting had to be too much already.

“What branch is he from?” Naruto asked, adamant to deflect Shisui’s curiosity.

“Tokuma?”

“Hm.”

“Ah. The Bunke.”

“The slaves?”

Shisui’s eyes twitched and he looked about to protest, but with a defeated sigh, he nodded.

“Yeah.”

“I don’t get it.”

Hyuuga Neji had been hanging at the back of Naruto’s mind ever since the tournament. The contradiction of his resentment and resignation, his inner violence and his obedience, Naruto couldn’t make sense of it.

“It’s old traditions. It doesn’t make sense to us but…”

“That’s not what I mean.”
Naruto picked up a test to occupy his hands, but he could barely read a teacher’s neat handwriting on his best days, so the kids’ messy scrawls were unintelligible to him.

“I don’t understand why they don’t just… Go against it. Seals can be broken. Surely, there is a way.”

Shisui set his pen down, sensing that this was no more just idle chatter.

“They could, probably. But at the same time, they can’t.”

“Why?”

“There are things…” Shisui started, pausing to gather his thoughts, choose his words. "There are things you can't do, as in you don't have the capacity, or the skills. Be it physical, intellectual… But for this, it's not about the possibility in the material sense of the term, I think. There are things you could do, technically, and yet, you don't."

“Why?”

“Fear of consequences. Loyalty, self-restraint. An old promise. Lack of confidence, of hope, of faith. Resignation, bargain. Maybe you're convinced you couldn’t, or shouldn’t. Maybe it’s the right thing to do.”

“How can you be convinced that you're better off as a slave.”

Shisui smiled, fond and indulgent, another teacher thing, the smile adults got toward children sometimes when faced with their ignorance. Naruto didn’t like it much. It meant he had said something adults were sure he would change his mind about, given time.

“You have no idea what people can be brought to believe.”

But didn’t Neji’s pain stemmed from that fact that he didn't believe it? Not really? And if he didn't, then he had no reason to keep submitting to it.

“You shouldn’t… don’t meddle with this, Naruto.”

Naruto cast Shisui a betrayed, disappointed look. He would have thought that Shisui of all people would at least, if not openly reject it, then keep quiet on the matter.

“It’s not fair,” he said, stubborn. He couldn’t help being affected by it. Couldn’t help thinking about the cage circling Neji’s head, imprisoning his fate and choices.

“I know. But you can’t do anything bout it.”

“I can!”

“Naruto!”

He expected anger, but that wasn’t it.

It was more like worry.

“Don’t… You can’t afford to get involved in this.”

The message was clear then. The Hyuuga clan was powerful and influential.
And Naruto was a plague.

“Who will then?” he asked bitterly. How could nobody say anything? Why did nobody ever stand up for them?

Shisui looked away, and Naruto recognized the bitterness in his expression, and surely, Shisui couldn’t be fine with that either. Hyuuga Tokuma was his friend after all. But it’s not like there was anything they could do.

Wasn’t there though? Naruto couldn’t battle the clans, that was for sure, he couldn’t change their way, couldn’t go against anyone’s will.

But breaking seals, now that was something he could do. Naruto would break any seal he could get his hands on. He would tear apart any fate.

He would free anyone.

*What about me?*

Naruto blinked, caught off guard by the longing that he could hear in the demon’s voice, buried under the disdain and anger.

*What about you?*

*You talk about freedom, yet you deny me mine.*

Shisui cast him an inquisitive look. Even if he was used to Naruto spacing out, it still worried him. Everything did when Naruto was concerned, it was annoying.

He shut the fox down tightly, but his words lingered.

...

Of course he did sleep. A little. Or he would be dead.

He lied in bed, closed his eyes. At some point, his thoughts would wander off in all directions, free of control. He would start to relax slowly, to lose awareness of his surroundings, and then his own body. For a few minutes he would lose track of time.

And then Ichibi would shriek, or laugh, or slam her tail against the cage, startling him awake in a panic.

Rinse and repeat.

It was an issue everyone around him had given up on solving, after trying to drug him to sleep once. Once only. They had decided it was just a fact he would have to deal with on his own.

Nothing unusual here.

He laid in bed, eyes wide open, resenting the deep, even breathing of his siblings who slept with ease, although the slightest noise would wake them. He tried to stay quiet, because they were annoyed and rude if they didn’t sleep well.

He wondered, sometimes, who he would be, if he too could sleep.

“I could fix it.”
Gaara didn't sleep, so Gaara didn't dream. And he didn't hope either. There was no helping him. Things were as they were, as they were they would remain, because there was no use fixing them anyway. It didn't matter. No one cared.

“I could fix it.”

Why? Why would the boy do this for him? Why did he do anything? He seemed driven by unknown forces stirring inside of him, pulling at his core. Gaara didn’t understand him. Why Naruto talked to him, why he allowed him to stay close to him, even after they had fought and hurt each other, even after witnessing what Gaara was capable of.

Naruto had no fear. No fear of him.

What would it be like, to sleep?

Don’t trust him. Don’t trust him. Don’t let him near.

The voice was his only guidance, all in all, his only friend. Yet he didn’t want to listen this time, didn’t want to obey.

He’s not our friend. We don’t have friends.

You.

Naruto had his life. His dreams, his goals. He had other people. He didn’t listen to the voice inside of him. He slept.

What?

You don’t.

What if he could really shut it out? What if Gaara no longer had to listen?

Don’t you dare!

For the first time in his life, he thought he could hear fear in the voice.

“Can you do it?”

“Hi. Didn’t think I’d see you here again.”

“Can you do it?”

Naruto would have felt annoyed, if not for the desperation in Gaara’s voice, his whole demeanor. The truth was, Naruto had no idea if he could.

He would do it anyway.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Isn’t that what you want?”

“Even if it was.”
“I want to help you.”

“Why?”

“We are the same.”

He needed to help. He needed them to have it better, to be happier, to not suffer so much.

“We should be free.”

The demon scoffed inside of him. Gaara was gone again.

.

Sometimes the water was barely a sheen of mirrored light on the ground, sometimes it reached up to Naruto’s ankles. He had no idea why it was so, where it came from. He didn’t know why the prison was in the sewers of his own mind. Was it supposed to be a metaphor?

Whatever the reason, it sure was an unpleasant place.

Naruto sat cross-legged on the floor, studying his forced guest on the other side of the bars. He was all but sulking since Naruto had reversed the seal and cut him off again, spun in a tight ball and keeping silence. Naruto couldn’t complain. And yet…

His last words kept playing back in his mind.

“You talk about freedom, yet you deny me mine.”

*I don’t intend to keep you here forever,* he said.

In an instant, the beast had unfurled to fix its huge red eyes on Naruto. They were bright and blinding despite the darkness of the room – or maybe because of it, standing out in the washed-out colors and light.

*Is that so.*

Of course Naruto had thought about it before, although he had never formulated it to himself properly. It was just kind of obvious, as an end goal. Naruto wanted to be free of his chains, all chains, and that included the one he was holding himself. He was as chained to the fox as the fox was to him, and he wanted nothing more than to get rid of that cage.

*Free me then.*

*I can’t do that. I can’t unleash you upon this world.*

*You can’t kill me,* the fox warned, menacing.

*I know,* Naruto answered, although if the fox felt the need to threaten him, maybe it wasn’t entirely true. *I’ll just have to get stronger.*

The beast eyed him suspiciously, looking for a trick, trying to read his mind.

*What for?*

*I’ll become strong enough that I can beat you.*
There was a second of floating silence, before the fox burst into a loud, ugly laugh, that didn’t sound much different from his menacing growl.

*You? You want to beat me?*

*I don’t have to beat you. I just have to know how to seal you.*

That sobered up the fox a little.

*It killed the last one who did it, you know.*

*Then I’ll have to be stronger than them. That way you will know, that I can trap you down here again. That way I can let you go and know that you won’t go after this place.*

*You’re crazy, kid. You’ll never get there.*

*I will.*

He had patched up the seal. He could work on Gaara’s, with the foxes’ help, and he was confident he would fix that one too. He just had to learn, to know more, to train harder, and then…

If he could seal the beast, then he would no longer have to worry about losing control. About the seal breaking up, about being unable to hold the disaster back. If he could seal the beasts, any beast, then there would be no use for him, for them, to be kept on a leash, to be feared. If he could best them, if he could rise above, get stronger, then there wouldn’t be a need to fear them anymore.

Then they could all do whatever they pleased. He and the other hosts, they could live their own life. And the beasts, they would know to fear his power, fear being sealed away again.

*Do you think we fear you humans?*

*If you had feared us more, you wouldn’t have ended up here.*

The fox growled. Naruto bared his teeth too.

*I don’t believe you.*

*Well you should. The other option is to accept we’ll be stuck like this until I die.*

*It could come sooner than you think.*

Naruto frowned.

*Is that what you want?*

The question surprised the fox somehow. He dodged.

*What, isn’t that what you want? Me, dead?*

Naruto took the time to ponder over it. Ever since he had learned of the Nine-Tails existence inside of him, he had longed for it to be gone, for this curse to be lifted. He had wished he had never been burden with it in the first place. But…

*No.*

*Why not?*
This one was even harder. Though he realized that it was quite simple, actually.

*I don’t… I don’t hate you.*

Now that, that rendered the beast speechless. The huge face pressed closer to the bars, to get a better look at the boy sitting straight in the murky water. With their thoughts intertwined as they were, the fox knew he wasn’t lying.

*I killed your parents.*

A punch to the gut. Naruto sagged under the pressure.

It made sense, of course. Naruto thought back on Gaara’s words. Was it the same for him? Had it been deciding he would host the Kyuubi, even before being born? Was that even the reason his parents had given life to him? Whether it had been sealed in someone else before, or an object or a scroll, they had attempted to stick it into Naruto.

What did they think would happen then? Didn’t they have it coming? If they had just left it alone…

Long before meeting the demon, low in his guts and deep in his mind, Naruto hated his parents.

He resented them deeply, for leaving him alone, for dying without a care for what would happen to their son. There were many orphans in the village, but they were taken in by relatives or family friends, or they were cared for at the orphanage at the very least. But not him. As a child he had figured they were traitors, or enemies, and he had been mad at them for leaving him behind. Why not take him with them, if this was the life they were condemning him too?

And now that he knew where the hatred he had bear in his childhood came from, it was almost worse. Why had they agreed to this? Did they want him so little, did they have so little love for him, that they didn’t mind sacrificing him in such a way?

Maybe they had gotten what was coming for them.

Naruto got up, stretched a bit. It was so weird to feel his body, while he knew full well he was still sitting on his bed, that he wasn’t in this sewer at all, this was all in his head, it wasn’t happening.

*If they failed to stop you before, it’s their problem. But from now on, it’s mine. And you won’t hurt anyone else, ever.*

The fox smirked, amused. Its teeth were as long as Naruto’s arm. Such power, such strength. All trapped in there.

*You’re funny, brat.*

Naruto flipped him off and surfaced back, opening his eyes to his room in Shisui’s house. Somehow the first thing his gaze fell on was the team picture in its frame on the bedside table. Sakura’s wide smile and Sasuke’s more discreet one. Naruto protesting, but bracketed firmly between the two.

He hadn’t seen them in days. It was absurd to be missing them. Surely they weren’t missing him and his mood swings and his aloofness. They had their own things to do, their goals, their family and friends. They were busy training, and he was busy…

He looked away.
He had never thought about freedom. What would he do with it? He had no wish to leave and wander.

But there was something else he wanted.

Naruto wanted to help, for no reason that Gaara could fathom. He didn’t want anything in return. He was just acting out on his own feelings and desires.

Gaara brought a hand to his forehead, tracing the rise and fall of the kanji etched into the skin.

What if this, he could have?

They sat on the grass, staring at each other, for a long, long time. Waiting for a decision to be made, for a conclusion to be reached, for something to happen. The forest had disappeared around them, the rest of the world faded to an abstract concept they weren’t part of. Naruto had the briefest vision of an open field, an unknown forest, and others roaming around, brushing against each other and yet unable to talk, to even see.

He was thrown back years in the past, memories of walking Konoha’s streets, surrounded by people and yet so alone. They looked away, turned up their nose, spit on the ground. They wouldn’t approach. They wouldn’t touch. Even if he yelled and ran into them, even if he cried and begged. He wouldn’t be heard, nor seen. He wouldn’t ever be part of their world.

Naruto and Gaara could see each other though. They were here together.

They could even touch, if they wanted to.

Gaara turned his back to Naruto and the boy opened his mouth to stop him, beg him maybe not to leave. But Gaara wasn’t leaving – he stayed where he was and slowly untied the white clothes he wore around his torso, the clasps of his gourd that he set aside.

Then, he removed his shirt.

Naruto stood frozen, caught by the intensity of the moment, as were revealed to him the broad expanses of Gaara’s pale skin, spotless and unblemished. That was, until sand, sticking to him like an armor, started to pour away, revealing the jagged line of a seal rooted at the top of his spine, below the nape of his neck, sprawling to his shoulders and down to the middle of his back. It was larger than Naruto’s.

Far uglier too.

It resembled nothing Naruto had encountered thus far, the lines straight and the angles sharp where his own seals were all curves and flowing lines. But even then, he could tell.

The missing bits, the mistakes, the gaps, he could tell.

He sat down too, rose a hand.

Sand blocked him immediately.

No one could lay a hand on Gaara. Unless they were crazy fast like Lee, the sand would always get in the way. It didn’t need Gaara’s prompting or control – it blocked even if Gaara couldn’t see, like
right now, with Naruto’s hand hovering above his back.

No one could lay a hand on Gaara.

No one could touch him.

Naruto’s throat closed painfully against a rising sob, overwhelmed. Why did they have to live like this. What had they done, to deserve such a fate.

“I… I won’t hurt. You have to let me.”

You have to let me through. Let me in.

Let me touch.

Gaara was rigid and still as a statue, not even breathing. It seemed like an eternity had passed before he gave the barest nod. Naruto resumed his approach. This time, nothing stopped him.

Slowly, slowly, agonizingly so, he closed the distance between the tip of his fingers and the bare skin of Gaara’s back. He hesitated for a second a hairbreadth away from the contact, before finally going through.

The world spun on its axis.

Gaara gave a full-body shiver and sagged, tension draining like a dam had been open, as he pressed back at the same time, pushing against Naruto’s hand. The relief was painful in its intensity, there was confusion too, bewilderment.

Naruto didn’t register his own tears, as his second hand joined the first, splayed out on Gaara’s shoulder, circling the base of his neck. Gaara’s breath was labored, his chest heaving. Naruto’s hand followed the rhythm, up and down, up and down, fast and erratic.

He scooted closer, until he was all but pressed against Gaara’s back, and he slid his arms around him so that he could lock him in his embrace and not let go. Gaara’s hand gripped his wrists tight, enough to be painful, enough to leave bruises. Naruto squeezed harder, resting his forehead on the nape of Gaara’s neck. They clutched for dear life, crying, sobbing, shaking with the force of a lifetime of rejection and loneliness crashing down, resetting.

They held, they held, they held on. The world moved around them, indifferent, but right there in the space that didn’t exist between them, the world was starting anew.

Chapter End Notes

I reworked that chapter just so that I could end on that freaking scene that has been eating away at me ever since I came up with it. When I said Naru-Gaara rights I fucking meant it.
I like the touch-starved trope I’m mean like that.
Hope you enjoyed, tell me what you think, see me on tumblr, see ya!
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Lots of newcomers in Konoha these days.

Chapter Notes

I know I'm publishing often lately, but don't get used to it, I'm not idea how long I'll be able to keep that up.

You know every time I start a chapter, I'm like "huh I don't know if I'll hit the 10k word count this time, maybe this one will be shorter..." And every time I go over and I'm like "how come u don't even know ur own writing". A mystery to all. So yeah, I was a bit stuck as to what was going to happen here, and next thingI know it was too long and I had to cut things for the next one. Heh.

I'm so glad about all the feedback I got on the last chapter! I'm glad you enjoyed what went down between our resident jinchuuriki. Not as much by way of that in this chapter, but still. And I'm not done throwing feels at you on the matter haha. Enjoy!

(just so you know I made a small edit to the previous chapter, to include Naruto's talk with Haku into the one he has with Gaara about why they're alive. That's all)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So, are you gonna help or not?”

Naruto was trying to appear firmer that he was, and he wasn’t doing such a great job, if Akira’s unimpressed look was anything to go by. They stared at each other for a moment, challenging, but the tension was ruined by Akito jumping between the two of them with an excited smile.

“Of course we are! We are, right, Akira?”

The older fox sighed dramatically, glaring at his younger brother’s eagerness that always ruined his act. For the sake of not antagonizing him further, Naruto refrained from mocking him.

“You’ll owe me, Naruto,” Akira eventually agreed, and even if his resistance had been mostly for show, Naruto was relieved.

“Thank you, Akira,” he said, sincere, and Akira looked away with a pout and a shrug, as if to say “whatever”. Akito was beaming by his side.

“Alright, let’s do this then. Huh, you can… you can come closer,” Naruto said to his back.

Gaara stepped away from the tree he had been half hiding behind. He approached carefully, with slow, measured steps, as if the two foxes were going to jump him any moment now. He made straight for Naruto.
They reached out instinctively, as soon as he was close enough, to hold each other’s hand.

Gaara was as aloof as ever, quiet and withdraw, but the difference now was that he was living in Naruto’s personal space as much as he could.

Before they had met, Naruto could count on his fingers the number of times someone had laid a hand on him without intending to hurt. The only one who ever did that was Shisui, and it was earth-shattering enough already, but this was on a whole other level. He would have expected Gaara to be quite cold to the touch, to match his icy demeanor, but he actually ran as hot as sand warmed up by the desert sun. His skin was just as dry too, although Naruto could tell that he didn’t put up the armor when they were together in the forest.

They didn’t talk much. Naruto did his things, studied seals, trained, and Gaara watched, but not from a distance – he slumped against Naruto’s back or hooked their ankles together and it was so warm, so warm, and they understood each other better like this, with feelings flowing between them.

Naruto couldn’t get enough of it.

“You have to show them. They’ll help,” he said, and it was a testament to the trust that had grown between them, that Gaara didn’t question it in any way, as if asking help from talking foxes was just on par with everything else.

He uncovered his seal again – Naruto had studied it intently, but it was too unfamiliar for him to make sense of it on his own, especially seeing how incomplete and botched it was. An opinion the foxes seemed to share, judging by the disdainful snarl that escaped Akira’s mouth as he took it in.

“That’s terrible work,” he said. Without being told, he refrained from approaching, keeping a safe distance between him and Gaara. Naruto had hesitated to introduce them, although it was absurd – Akito and Akira weren’t of their world, they had no reason to disapprove like people could. But Naruto always feared being rejected, by anyone he met, human or not, and this fear extended to Gaara, who was the same as him. Somehow he had been worried his foxes’ friend wouldn’t approve.

But of course, they didn’t care at all.

“Can we fix it?” he asked, dreading the answer. If Akira said no… No, it didn’t matter. They would find a way.

Naruto had promised.

“It won’t be easy… but yeah, sure.”

Gaara’s sigh of relief was far less pronounced than Naruto’s, but it was there nonetheless. He turned around to face the foxes, face as impassible as ever.

“Thank you.”

His uncanny politeness showed up at the weirdest of time. They had stumbled upon Hinata training near the river the day before, and he had bowed to her as if she was some kind of royalty, nearly killing her with all the blood that had left her body to rush to her face.

Akira waved him off, embarrassed, leaving Gaara a bit confused.

In the end, Gaara was just… he was just a person. It should have been obvious, a given, but it
wasn’t. The both of them, when they strolled the streets of their village, when they were seen, they weren’t really someone into those people’s eyes. Demon, monster, host, jinchuuriki… but a boy? A person? No. Not them. Never.

Well. They didn’t need them anyway.

They had each other now.

“He’s not here,” Shisui said as soon as Sasuke and Sakura crossed the threshold. Sasuke faltered but kept going.

“Who says we didn’t come to see you?”

Shisui rose his eyes from the book he was reading at the kitchen table to level a very unimpressed look at this cousin.

“Okay, okay, don’t look at me like that, jeez. Where is he?”

“Who knows. Certainly not me.”

He didn’t mean to be so harsh, but he had slept badly and the kids had been insufferable today and he had had an argument with one of the other teachers over the fact that leaving an entire class to its own device for an hours because they had an errand to run was not, in fact, “whatever”. And to top it all Naruto wasn’t even there when he had come back home.

It was safe to say Shisui was in a bad mood.

“Told you he wouldn’t be. Let’s go,” Sakura said, equally done with that shitty day it seemed. Sasuke frowned.

“What time does he come back usually? Can we wait for him here?”

“Could be an hour, could be three. But sure, stay.”

Shisui regretted his bitter tone – he wouldn’t mind the company, and he hadn’t seen his cousin in a while. Fortunately, Sasuke didn’t hold it against him, and after an insistent look at Sakura, she joined them at the table, not without an exasperated eye roll. Shisui went to make them some tea.

“How is training going?” he asked once they all had a steaming cup and some cookies in hand, feeling better already. Both teens groaned heavily.

“I can’t feel my hands anymore,” Sakura said, showing off the thick callouses on her palms.

“I burnt my hair practicing Katon yesterday,” Sasuke added.

“Oh, that’s what it is? I thought you were trying a new look or something…”

“If I was, I would have left my eyebrow alone.”

“You could ask Ino to fix that for you.”

“Ino isn’t taking any sharp blade to my hair.”

Their inane chatter was interrupted by Shisui chuckling lightly. Really, this was exactly what he
needed to brighten his day a little.

“I’m sure you’ll do great at the tournament.”

They exchanged an uncomfortable glance before looking away. Ah, they were still struggling with the fact that they would have to fight each other. Understandable, and adorable really, that they were so reluctant to fight their friend.

For once in his life Naruto displayed great timing, by throwing the front door open right this moment and cutting through their discomfort.

“Hi, I’m back.”

He stopped dead in his track when he realized Shisui had company. For an awkward moment the kids stared at one another, before Sakura took the lead.

“Let’s hang out,” she said, demanded really, marching toward the door and fully expecting the two boys to follow. Naruto hesitated and Shisui almost intervened, unwilling to see him turn down his friends yet again, but he didn’t need to. Naruto crossed his arms and shrugged, playing careless well enough.

“Yeah, okay.”

Seeing their faces, Sasuke and Sakura surely expected it to be harder. They took it in stride though, and after bidding a quick farewell to Shisui, they were out the door.

He didn’t even have the time to ponder what to do next that the front door opened again. Tenzo’s head poked inside.

“We’re going out for drinks with some other jounin, you’re in?”

“Doesn’t anyone ever feel like knocking on that door before barging in here?”

Tenzo’s expression didn’t move a smidge, and yet Shisui could infer how little he thought of that suggestion. He huffed.

“I’m coming.”

They walked in silence, stilted and uncomfortable. Sakura was still pissed – she didn’t want to come at first, claiming that if Naruto wanted to spend time with them, he could come find them himself. Sasuke had argued that if they all thought this way, they would never see each other again, and she had relented, although it was true that them taking that step was far more likely than Naruto ever doing so.

“What have you been doing?” Sasuke asked when the silence became ridiculous. Nothing had happened, they weren’t even fighting. There was really no reason for them to be this awkward.


“You’ve been hanging out with that boy, haven’t you?” Sakura asked bluntly, tone set enough that it sounded more like an affirmation. Naruto still tried to play dumb.

“What boy?”
“The one from Suna.”

Sasuke feared Naruto would try to deny it and anger her even more, but he made the wise choice for once and admitted defeat.

“How d’you know?”

She shrugged.

“Isn’t that obvious?”

It kinda wasn’t, yet when she had suggested it earlier, Sasuke had found it made quite a lot of sense. He remembered how Naruto had reacted to meeting the boy the first time – it made sense he would seek him out again.

“He tried to kill Lee,” Sakura accused. Was that why she was angry? She had gone to see him at the hospital – the boy wasn’t doing so good.

“Well I tried to kill Kiba so…”

Naruto was both defensive and challenging, as if daring them to deny it. Sasuke wanted to – wanted to argue that it wasn’t the same, that he hadn’t and he wouldn’t have, not really. But what did he know?

“Why do we put so much more value on some lives than others?”

“What?”

“You wouldn’t care if the one he had crippled was some random ninja from another village.”

Sakura opened her mouth to protest, but probably realized she couldn’t, not without lying. She didn’t try to explain either. It’s not like she could argue they were friends – she was grateful for Lee’s help in the Forest of Death, but at the end of the day they barely knew each other.

It wasn’t the first time Naruto made a comment in that sense. It wasn’t the first time he expressed how little he understood of the kinship they were to feel for their fellow shinobi, for the village’s people. It wasn’t something Sasuke was comfortable thinking about, let alone formulate aloud.

The fact that loyalty to the village meant so very little to his friend.

“Let’s get some ramen,” Naruto said, shamelessly dropping the subject, and they went with it, because what else could they do? Fighting was tiresome.

They crossed the shopping district toward Ichiraku. It had been a while since Sasuke had walked through Konoha by Naruto’s side, and he had forgotten, how uncomfortable it could be. The dirty looks, the careless whispers. It raised all his hackles up, and he could only imagine how it was like for his friend. No wonder why he chose to hide in the forest, no wonder why…

No wonder why he didn't care about any of these people.

“Do you have something to say?”

Both boys cast a startled look at Sakura, standing legs parted and arms crossed in front of two clients of a fruit and vegetable shop.

“Do you have something to say?” she asked again, and the two women recoiled and shook their
head, mildly afraid at being scolded by a twelve-year-old.

"Look away then," she concluded harshly, before turning on her heels and resuming their walk, significantly faster. They scrambled after her. None of them said anything but Naruto looked a little awed, and Sakura was reddening in delayed embarrassment, and Sasuke smile. His friends were idiots.

They rounded the bathhouse and its pond to reach the Academy district. Naruto stopped though, as they crossed one of the small wooden bridges hopping over the water. They followed his gaze toward the walls of the bathhouse.

There was an old man crouching in front of the wood fence, obviously trying to peer inside.

Naruto and Sakura wore matching faces of disgust and Sasuke figured he ought to handle it before they resorted to punching a stranger that was old enough to be their grandfather.

“This is the women’s bath,” he called loudly. “You can’t be here, sir.”

The man startled and spun around to face them. Sasuke had never seen him before. He had long white hair tied in a low ponytail that reached down to his waist, and there were two red lines painted on his face, from his eyes to his neck. He wore a kind of reinforced forehead protector, but instead of the insignia of a hidden village, there was the kanji for “oil” etched into it.

“Haha, don’t worry about it kids! I am a writer. I’m conducting important research here.”

Sakura had a hand on the handle of her sword. Sasuke sighed.

“You can’t be here, sir,” he repeated. Maybe the man was a little senile – he was very old after all. “You need to leave or we will have to report you to the police.”

The man frowned, displeased.

“Come on, come on, there’s no need for that! Oh, Naruto! How are you, boy?”

That was the wrong thing to say.

“I don’t know you,” Naruto growled, threatening. He hated people addressing him by his name when they had never met – just because they all knew who he was didn’t mean they should have skipped on introducing themselves, and letting him introduce himself too.

“Ah, I supposed you wouldn’t remember. You were a baby the last time I saw you…”

So he was from the village after all? That didn’t make him any less suspicious. Naruto looked ready to jump his throat.

“Anyway, let’s not get carried away, alright? I’m sure we can find a solution,” the man said, placating.

Sasuke nodded.

“Sure.”

“I can’t believe that brat rattled me out.”
“My son only did his duty. Please don’t make me regret not arresting you on the spot, Jiraiya-sama.”

Of course Tsunade had recognized his voice instantly, but it was still jarring to hear the name. She had a hard time pretending to focus on her paperwork, as she listened to Uchiha Fugaku marching Jiraiya to her office.

An Anbu had warned her of his arrival just a few minutes ago, and she had been holding her breath ever since.

“This place used to be much less uptight…” Jiraiya mumbled.

“Well, there’s been a few changes since you were last in the village,” Fugaku said. She could hear the exasperation in his voice. Fugaku’s respect could only be earned by acts and deeds, certainly not by any sort of reputation. For a man so attached to his image and his clan’s, he surely didn’t put much weight in appearance and rumors. As such, he didn’t sound very impressed with the Sanin.

Then again, if he had found him spying on the women’s bath, as the Anbu had reported, she couldn’t blame him.

“Changes? Like what?” Jiraiya asked just as they entered the office.

“Don’t tell me you didn’t hear either, Jiraiya,” she said. One look at his dumbstruck face was all the answer she needed.

“Seriously? Aren’t you supposed to be top spy or something?”

“I haven’t had much contact with the village lately…” he mumbled, still stunned. She dismissed Fugaku with a quick nod. He looked all too eager not to get involved in that situation. Lucky him.

“I know that. I’ve been trying to get a hold of you for weeks.”

It was crazy, how they managed to be so casual, so direct, when it was the first words they had exchanged in more than two decades.

She had heard about it when he had left the village to set up his spy network, and she had always assumed he at least kept track of her, even if never tried to reach out. But if he didn’t even know she was back in Konoha…

She quickly shook off this train of thought.

“Next time they will arrest you, do you hear me? I will have no qualm about letting you rot in jail until you learn your lesson.”

“Come on. You wouldn’t do that.”

“I would. And I will. I’m the fucking Hokage now. Don’t test me.”

With all the embarrassing traits you were supposed to get rid of as you grew up, he had to keep that one? Well, she no longer had just her fists to beat it out of him, and she wasn’t above using all the power she had at her disposal.

“I can’t believe you took over the old man,” he said.

“Funny,” she answered through gritted teeth, annoyed by his incredulity. “Chichi said the same.”
He gasped, taken aback.

“You saw him?”

“In the very heart of the village. I supposed that’s the reason why you’re here.”

“His trail led up to Konoha. I thought I would check it out, but I was convinced it was a decoy… I didn’t think he would actually come back here.”

How funny was it that Jiraiya had been chasing after their third teammates all these years, and it was Tsunade who stumbled upon him without even trying.

Ah. Not very funny at all.

“Did he say what he wanted?”

“He did. Do you know about Konoha’s jinchuuriki?”

“Ah, yes, Naruto! I ran into him coming here. He looks just like his father.”

She gaped at him. Here she thought she was going to have to fill him in on everything and it turned out he knew more than her?

“You know the boy? And his parents?”

“You don’t?”

Admittedly, it was absurd that she hadn’t taken the time to get into it at all. But the jinchuuriki wasn’t a topic she could just broach with anyone, and she had been busy. Not time to sleep no time to eat busy.

“He’s Minato and Kushina’s son.”

She stared at him. Absentmindedly she cataloged all the changes – he was obviously older, deeper lines etched in his skin, but somehow he looked just like she expected him to. She focused on that, because she couldn’t process what he had just told her. She just stared, waiting maybe for an explanation, or for him to admit it was a joke, racking her memory for another Minato because surely it couldn’t be…

“Minato,” she parroted dumbly.

“Yes, one of my students. Do you remember him?”

“Namikaze Minato.”

“Yes? What do you…”

“The Yondaime Hokage. Namikaze Minato.”

“Are you alright?”

He didn’t deny it. Her hopes that this was a massive misunderstanding vanished.

But it couldn’t be. Could it?

She had assumed that since the boy’s mother was one of the very last Uzumaki, one that had been
shipped to Konoha to become a jinchuuriki probably, that his father was an outcast as well, another
Uzumaki or another foreigner. That this was the reason why no one had stepped in to take care of
the boy. It was tragically easy to lose track of orphan children in the village if they had no relatives,
and adding to the fact that people were wary of jinchuuriki, it made at least a little sense that his
fate hadn’t interested anyone. It would be just plain indifference.

But this?

Now that she thought about it, the resemblance was there indeed, hidden in plain sight. But she
hadn’t seen it because it was just too absurd. Assuming that the villagers didn’t know Naruto was
their beloved Fourth Hokage’s son… but the other shinobi? The jounin, the ones of his generation,
his advisors, his subordinates, his teammates, his friends?

“Where were you?” she asked, voice small. She saw how he hesitated, how he went for a stupid
answer, for sidestepping the issue entirely, and how he thought better of it. It was rare to catch him
in any serious mood – maybe it was an answer to her own gravity.

“After Chichi… It was pretty bad. And then he was gone. Maybe I didn’t feel like staying here,
any more than you did.”

Of course she understood this, better than anyone. But…

“But the kid? He was your student’s son!”

“I thought about taking him with me. I could have. I’m his godfather after all.”

This was the moment Tsunade decided to break out the sake. He didn’t blink at her desperate
gulping and went on.

“But I figured it would be no life for him. He was better off here.”

She let out a depressed chuckle.

"Not sure you were all that spot-on on that one, Yaya…”

She drank a healthy dose again. She had decided to cut down, after the mess with Orochimaru at
the bathhouse. Had she been less intoxicated and less eager to down even more drink, maybe he
wouldn’t have slipped out of her grasp so easily.

It was hard to let go of her best coping mechanism though.

“And you never came back? To check on him?”

He recoiled at the accusation in her voice.

“I… Hiruzen kept me posted. The boy grew up well, didn’t he?”

“You think?”

She had come to understand that their teacher had his own standards when it came to the well-
being of children, like every shinobi of his generation. He had had other issues to deal with – surely
to know that the boy was eating and sleeping under some roof was enough for him.

Now that she thought about it, the state of the orphanage and the care of their children was also an
item on her to-deal-with list.
“And you didn’t bother to see that for yourself? Not once?”

She had only vague memories of Minato, but wasn’t he well-loved, wasn’t he important to this village? Enough that someone would bother to look after his orphaned son?

“I can’t believe… I can’t believe no one… You all failed him. The whole damn village. There were only the damn kids to step up.”

“I had to go after Orochimaru,” Jiraiya said, defensive. “I couldn’t…”

“Is that your excuse? I bet they all have one. “I couldn’t possibly”, huh? “That’s not my responsibilities”? Whose was it then? Is that your excuse?”

“And what’s yours?”

“Mine? Mine is that I’m weak-willed and a coward, and I was hiding away from all my problems. At least I’m honest enough to recognize it!”

She itched to punch the pitying look off his face. She was shaking with rage, with frustration and confusion, with the weight of all the stupid decisions that had lead them to this situation. All of them, assholes and cowards. All of them, guilty.

And Naruto… Sage, Naruto.

“I’m sure Naruto understands…”

“Understand what? He didn’t know about the demon fox until two years ago. He still doesn’t know who his parents are.”

That gave her friend a pause. It didn’t make more sense to him than it did to her then.

“Should we tell him?”

“Absolutely not.”

He frowned, disagreeing.

“Why?”

“Why? Naruto has been shunned and cast aside his whole life, and before he knew why, he thought it had to do with his parents’ heritage. If he realizes that… That there was no goddamn reason… That it should never have gone that way… No. He can’t hear it.”

She had a sense that on some level, Naruto hated his parents. For who they were, for their absence, even for giving birth to him. “He would understand”? Understand what? She didn’t even get it.

“You can’t tell him,” she said firmly. “What?” she asked, seeing his sheepish expression.

“I… I sort of told him I was friends with his parents. But that's all.”

“And what did he answer to that?”

His frown deepened, and she had the impression that he was finally understanding fully the mess they were in.

"…He said it wasn't possible, because his parents didn't have any friends."
She closed her eyes against a sudden rise of emotion. She could just picture him saying this, deep scowl on his childish face.

“Of course he did. If his parents had had friends, he wouldn’t have grown up as he did, right?”

She understood why he thought this way, why he had built such an image of his parents and family in his mind. It had to be it, because if it wasn’t, it meant that he had been abandoned, pure and simple, and he had elected to reject that possibility.

“Is that what Minato wanted? When he sacrificed himself, his son, and his wife too I guess, for this fucking village, did he have any idea what we would make of it? Naruto is stored with so much resentment, and dammit, I can’t blame him…”

She relished in the guilt and regret on Jiraiya’s face, even if that made her a terrible person. But she allowed herself to be relieved not to have been the only one to fuck up so badly.

“I… I couldn’t take care of a baby, you know? I thought…”

He trailed off. What he had thought didn’t matter now. He had been wrong.

He came closer, rounded the desk so that he stood by her side. He took the bottle of sake to knock back some, but when he set it down, he made sure it was out of her reach.

“I’ll think of something. I’ll fix it, you’ll see. How hard can it be?”

“I’ll let the brat answer that. Good luck approaching him, let alone befriending him.”

“Well, haven’t you?”

She shrugged.

“Sort of. Not really. He has a hard time trusting his friends already, so, adults, it’s pretty much a lost cause.”

He set both hands on his shoulders, massaging gently her tense muscles. She was so mad at him, and disappointed and mad, she wanted to yell and throw a few punches, break a table on his head for being gone so long and being such a fool. And yet she couldn’t help but relax with a long exhale, to lean back against her chest and close her eyes. He rested his elbow on her shoulder then, slumped so that he could put his shin on the top of her head.

“It’s good to see you, Nana,” he said. She recognized every part of him – his face, his voice, his casual affection, his lack of sense. She took one of his hands in her own. She knew it well too, despite new scars and callouses, she was familiar with it, and it was a comfort.

“You too.”

Who knew. Maybe they could fix this.

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Whatever specks of good mood they had managed to put into Naruto by visiting him had been swept away by their encounter with that pervert weirdo. He called himself the Toad Hermit, apparently, but his name was Jiraiya. Sasuke’s father had seemed to recognize him.

With luck, they would never cross paths with him again.
They were still at the pond by the bathhouse, sitting on the edge to soak their foot in the warm water. It could have been nice and pleasant, but the silence hung heavily between Naruto and him, thick and cold as snow. Sakura had left to see Ino and Tenten for what they called “girl time” – braiding hair, sharpening blades and bitching about life.

Sasuke was a little envious.

“How is he then?”

“Who?”

“The… the boy. The one from Suna.”

“It’s Gaara.”

“Gaara then.”

“He’s fine, I guess.”

Was he doing that on purpose? Sasuke held back a frustrated sigh.

“Not but like… What is he like?”

Naruto took his time to think then.

“He’s like me.”

“Broody and uncommunicative?” Sasuke almost asked. Sakura’s frustration with their friend was rubbing off on him.

“How so?”

Naruto looked at him out of the corner of his eyes before turning away, hesitating.

“He has a demon. Inside. Like me.”

That… wasn’t what Sasuke expected to hear. At all.

“You mean…”

“There are others. He has a seal, like me, and he can talk to it and use it, like me. And…”

Naruto got lost in thought for a moment, absorbed in his distorted reflection on the water. Sasuke stared – absorbed in him.

“He… grew up like me too.”

Such a simple sentence. So loaded.

Sasuke couldn’t ask for more details. Couldn’t ask Naruto to put words on it. How, he still wanted to ask. Alone? Cast aside? Angry? With no family and no friends? But is it how you still see yourself? Naruto, do you believe you’re all alone?

“Doesn’t he have siblings?” he asked instead, and realized too late how biting he sounded, how judging. Naruto scrunched up his nose.

“Didn’t help.”
“Is that why you spend so much time with him then? Because you think you’re the same?”

“We are the same.” Their tone was rising. Sasuke couldn’t stop though.

“So what?”

“So what? So he knows me! And I know him. And we can… we understand each other! Don’t you get it? We know!”

“Is that what it takes to get your attention then?”

“What?”

“Do you think we can’t understand you at all? Is that it? Do you wish we were familiar with it? Should I… Should I have been an orphan too, for you to recognize that we have things to share?”

Sasuke didn’t know what he was saying, but Naruto had met that boy barely a month ago, and already he seemed closer to him than anyone. Was that what Sasuke was up against?

Then again, why did he see it as some sort of competition?

“What the hell are you talking about! I don’t… I don’t wish… I don’t want you to…”

He struggled with words but didn’t manage to articulate it. It didn’t matter – Sasuke knew what he was saying.

I don’t wish you pain.

It was sort of amazing how quickly they managed to derail the most mundane conversation. And it was absurd, this idea that he wanted so badly to get closer to his friend, that he would suggest such a thing, as if there was anything envious about Naruto’s situation.

Naruto reached up to run a hand through his hair – for a second Sasuke was afraid he would slide his mask on his face, hide away.

“I… I shouldn’t have said that,” he rushed to say. “I’m sorry.”

They were in the same position, they hadn’t moved, and yet it felt like the distance between them had increased. Naruto was frowning deeply, hurt and confused, and Sasuke had no idea how to fix it.

“It’s a good thing,” Naruto said. “That you… that you can’t understand.”

And Sasuke got that, he did. But why did it have to mean that he could never truly reach the other boy?

In spite of it all, he couldn’t help but hear some sort of accusation in there.

Did Naruto resent him for this? For not being able to relate to his pain.

For having it so much easier?

Of course the answer wouldn’t have been for Sasuke to share his fate. But for Naruto to share his.

How different a world would it be, if Naruto had had a family and a normal childhood, where they would have been friends from the start, and he would have laughed and been brighter and lighter
and they wouldn’t have had to go through this, all the time, to struggle so much, to be so miserable.

“I’m sorry,” he said again, he didn’t even know why.

“It’s not your fault,” Naruto answered lamely. It never seemed to be anyone’s.

Who could they be angry at then? Who could they blame?

How were they supposed to fix it?

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There was something different about Gaara these days.

Temari couldn’t quite put her finger on it, but it was there. It wasn’t the extended bout of disappearances – they never knew what he was up to, even at home, he was always held up somewhere on his own. How he occupied his time was a mystery.

Ah, it wasn’t entirely true. She had discovered purely by chance that he spent quite a lot of time in the glasshouse where they grew their herbal and medicinal plants. There was even a corner there solely dedicated to him, tucked away from the rest, where no one would bother him. She had gotten a glimpse of it one day while looking for old Chiyo to ask for some of her famous concoction against period pain. She hadn’t dared ask about Gaara, and the old woman hadn’t offered any explanation. It made sense though that out of everyone in the village, the misanthropic, recluse Chiyo would be the one to form some kind of kinship with Gaara, even if it didn’t go further than sharing space in silence.

It was already more than most were willing to give him.

Anyway, Gaara grew cacti in his corner and had some in his room too. It was the only pastime she knew he had, other than… the bloodier one, that regularly saw him forbidden to step outside the Kazekage Tower. The random bursts of violence were few and far between, but the threat of it was enough to put them on edge constantly, and there were only so many families the Kazekage could compensate for injury and trauma before he would end up with a rebellion on his hands.

It was better since they had started to take Gaara out on high-ranking missions. A shitty solution, but a solution nonetheless.

She had never dared broach the subject with him, let him know that she knew about his incongruous green hand. She feared he would feel the urge to abandon it – there had to be a reason why he was so secretive about it.

She had fleeting memories of a beloved teddy bear, torn to pieces, and she knew she had no right to ask for any of his trust.

So of course, he hadn’t said anything to her, to any of them. The fact remained that there was something different about him. It was in the way he carried himself maybe, in the off-angle of his frown, in the strange new light in his eyes. There was something.

And she needed to know what.

“Doesn’t Gaara seem different to you?”

Kakuro, sitting on their bedroom floor with various pieces and tools spread around him, didn’t bother to look up from the puppet he was tinkering with. She had been reading by the windowsill,
but she couldn’t concentrate on the book.

“Different how?” her brother asked, with a tone suggesting his interest in the answer was more than limited.

“I don’t know, just… different.”

He shrugged, uncaring, and she gave up on trying to get him into this – his way of dealing with Gaara was to not deal at all. As much as he could, he pretended like he didn’t exist, even more so when the boy wasn’t there.

She was bored out of her mind, restless but unwilling to go train again – she didn’t like the eyes she could feel on her when she trained on Konoha’s open training grounds. She felt antsy, and she was worried too.

She decided the best course of action was to go indulge in a bit of stalking.

She had no idea if Gaara knew that she occasionally followed him around on his aimless wandering, on the occasions where he was allowed out. She couldn’t approach him, not really, she had no idea how to talk to him. It was the next best thing, although it was pretty much nothing at all. It was the only way she had found to know what was going on in her brother’s life, at least a little. She figured, best-case scenario, it would give her some things to work with for the day she would finally cross the bridge and manage to truly engage with him.

So she took off, leaving Kankuro to his tinkering, and set off to find Gaara.

Konoha was very different from Suna, in every way. The weather was different, the building, the food, the people. The very colors. Even the sky wasn’t the same. It was nicer, she supposed, less harsh than austere Suna, but she had trouble adjusting to so many people roaming the streets and looking at her. It wasn’t just because she was a foreign nin – she was certain Konoha people were just much more nosy and less discreet about it. In Suna, people went about their business not caring about others – the streets were narrower, they didn’t linger quite as much. Except in the markets of course, but then it was the opposite – the markets were so tightly packed, so dense and noisy and colorful, it was easy to drown in there, to disappear.

She felt too exposed here, the spaces were too wide, since cutting the merciless rays of the sun wasn’t an architectural priority in Konoha’s latitude. Everything was dryer in Suna – the air, the buildings, and the people. She missed it, although she wasn’t looking forward to going back. The issue wasn’t the place, or the people. She loved her village.

But it didn’t give back very well.

She caught his trail near the training grounds, going deeper into the forest. She had trained herself from an early age to tune into the distinct flavor of his chakra, that permeated his sand and trailed behind him wherever he went. It was her job to keep an eye on him, to be able to answer for his whereabouts and actions. Truth be told, she was surprised they hadn’t heard of him causing any trouble. It had been three weeks since the Forest of Death, since his last fight. He ought to have grown antsy. Not having heard anything wasn’t necessarily a good sign.

So she followed the trail, wondering what she would find at the end. She associated it with the smell of sun-beaten sand, although she knew it wasn’t actually her sense of smell that guided her through the forest. Sand was an integrant part of life in Suna, and it was even truer of Gaara’s life.

She walked between the lush trees and wild bushes, struggling to keep her footing on the uneven
She wasn’t used to the forest, to the roots spurting out of the soil and the thorns prickling her naked legs and arms. At its thickest, the woods blocked the sky entirely, oppressive and menacing, like being trapped underwater.

She ignored the discomfort and focused on Gaara’s presence while cursing him for choosing this of all places to run and hide. Well, he liked plants, so it sort of made sense, probably. Still, she wondered what he could possibly be doing in those woods.

She got her answer a few minutes later, when she heard the telltale sounds of hits and punches, fists and feet hitting limbs. She came into view of a secluded clearing where she was greeted by the weirdest vision.

Gaara was here with a Konoha boy, the blonde one they had met the day they had arrived, the one Gaara seemed strangely taken with. It was weird in its own right, Gaara willingly spending time with someone, and someone willingly spending time with Gaara. But it wasn’t what gave her a pause.

They were sparring. Truly sparring. As in, the blonde boy was jumping around trying to land a hit and Gaara…

Gaara was blocking and hitting back. With his body. Because the sand wasn’t interfering.

It was still here, swirling around them like a puppy wanting in to the play. But it wasn’t getting between the two of them. Even when the Konoha boy’s hits landed – they weren’t full force, she could tell, or Gaara would have been sent flying. Still. She had never seen Gaara as much as hit his head on the corner of a cupboard. The sand didn’t let him get harm in any way, it didn’t let anything in.

Gaara couldn’t be touched.

Right?

He was clumsy and weak in taijutsu, as expected. The other boy worked around it though, and she realized with a start that this was a proper training session, as in the blonde boy was teaching Gaara. Teaching him hand-to-hand combat.

It was like stepping into a dream.

That quickly turned into a nightmare when she made a noise stepping forward and they spotted her at the edge of the clearing.

The sand was as a quick as thoughts through the brain, maybe even quicker – it was rushing over her before she could say anything, before he could even recognize her. Or maybe he had. Maybe it didn’t matter to him. She was frozen in place even though she knew she had to move, she knew the damage the sand would do, but she couldn’t move and…

“Gaara!”

The sand still.

The other boy had a hand on Gaara’s shoulder. Heavy, placating. Gaara looked back, they exchanged a glance. The boy’s hand moved down Gaara’s arm until it reached his wrist, his palm. They intertwined their fingers.

The sand receded.
“What are you doing here,” Gaara asked, voice wounded tight, aggressive. He wasn’t looking at her.

“I… I was worried.”

“We’re not doing anything wrong,” the blonde boy said.

*About you,* she wanted to scream *I was worried about you. Not what you might be doing or the troubles you might be causing. About you.*

After all, he being attacked wasn’t rare, and there were other Suna shinobi in Konoha, and who knew what Konoha had heard about him? At least in Suna she knew what she was up against, but here…

*I was worried about you.*

“We’re not doing anything wrong,” he echoed, still refusing to meet her gaze. “Please leave.”

She saw their hands tighten their hold. Sand was dancing around them both, light and slow but threatening nonetheless.

Around them both.

Around them *both.*

“Don’t come back too late,” was all she could say before fleeing.

Who was that boy? What had he done? How could he…

He had put a hand on Gaara’s shoulder. He had taken his hand in his. He had managed to hit him without the sand obliterating him.

He had gotten Gaara to trust him.

Had she ever touched her brother, she wondered, emotions rising, eyes welling up. Had she? It seemed absurd to even need to ask, and yet… No one in her family was demonstrative or tactile, but still she knew her father had patted her shoulder or head a few times, that she had held Kankuro’s hand to lead him through the busy streets and comforted him after a nightmare.

Gaara dealt with his nightmare alone. It wasn’t often since he didn’t sleep properly. He roamed around the village alone too.

Had she ever touched him? Had she?

She walked around for a while, aimless, mind adrift, swarming with unanswered questions. She kept wondering if he would have hurt her, and what was so special about that blonde boy, and how it was that she had never touched him. Temari had hated her younger brother, for the first few years of his life, because he had taken her mother from her, because it was his fault she had died. And by the time she had realized she was wrong, and that everyone else hated him too but for another reason, it was too late – he had put her in the same box as the rest, and there was nothing she could do to get out of it.

Or maybe she hadn’t really tried.

“What’s wrong? What happened?” Kankuro asked as soon as she returned to the inn. She doubted her face showed much – Gaara’s lack of facial expression also had some genetic backup – but
Kankuro knew her the best.

She couldn’t answer though. She couldn’t explain. Especially when she noticed Baki in a corner, watchful and calculating, and Gaara propped against the wall next to the door, equally alert. She had been out longer than she thought, if he had beaten her to the inn.

“Nothing,” she answered firmly, leaving no room for further questioning.

“You’re right on time,” Baki said without missing a beat, leaving her to her secrets. “I had something to tell you.”

“What is it?”

It was flickering, barely visible, but she caught it as she usually did, even if it was rare. The smallest hint of a softer expression on Baki’s face, something that resembled pity but that she chose to see as sympathy. She wanted to believe he was on their side, sort of. After all, he was the only adult that didn’t treat Gaara like a dangerously contagious disease. That counted for something.

“I just heard from Suna. Your father in on his way. He will arrive in Konoha in three days.”

They carefully let nothing show. Kankuro stayed focused on his screwdriver, Gaara didn’t move a muscle. She stood straight and steady. It’s not like they didn’t know he was coming.

“Very well,” she said, talking for the three of them, as always. She would need to account for everything that had happened since their arrival to their father. She had to prepare what she would say, what recap she would give of the first and second tasks. She was relieved they had all made it to the final stage – that was one bout of disappointment and scolding they would avoid.

Baki left and she made to follow, to ask him advice about how best to phrase her report. Gaara stepped in.

She flinched, when he reached out. She couldn’t help it, and she hated herself for it, but desperately wanting not to didn’t change to old reflexes, old fears. He didn’t falter but his eyes dimmed a little more. He grabbed her sleeve – not her wrist, she noticed, their skin didn’t touch.

“Don’t tell,” he whispered. Kankuro moved in her back, attention drawn by the interaction, ready to intervene. Gaara wasn’t threatening though.

If anything, he looked…

“Please.”

Scared?

He never asked anything of her. He certainly did not plead. But here they were now, his big, watered-down eyes trained on her, his hands clutching at her sleeve, but not touching, never. She didn’t need to ask what he was talking about. She realized that she hadn’t even begun to contemplate telling their father what she had seen in the forest.

But he couldn’t know that. Gaara knew nothing about her, and her feelings. As she knew nothing of his.

“I won’t,” she promised. There was no telling if he believed her, but Kankuro got closer and Gaara let go, turned away to sit in a corner and proceeded to rigorously ignore them both. Kankuro cast her a questioning look. She waved him away with a move that meant “later”, or maybe “forget it”.
“Not now,” in any case.

She looked at both her brothers and she was overcome with the urge to hold them both, close to her, to hide them away in her embrace and tell them everything would be fine, that she would protect them.

She left the room.

Gaara woke up.

It didn’t immediately strike him as odd.

His head was heavy, clouded. He couldn’t feel his mouth and he had a hard time opening his eyes. All in all, it was unpleasant.

He laid there on his futon for several minutes, greatly confused as to why exactly he felt so weird. He didn’t get sick, he hadn't been hurt, so what…

It occurred to him in a sudden flash of lucidity.

He had woken up.

The sun was just starting to rise, the room still dark, his siblings deep in slumber, but it had been just after midnight when he had laid down to attempt to get some rest. His mind had been quiet, uncannily so – he had trouble adjusting to it, the silence, the peace.

Naruto said maybe it was better this way, that he would get time to adjust, to get used to it. They couldn’t fix the seal all at once. The first attempt, when Naruto had slammed a hand on his seal after painting symbols and spells on his skin, the sand had lashed out, sent him flying.

For a second, Gaara had thought he had killed him, that the other boy’s body had broken against the tree he had been slammed into, and the thought had sent him into a panic that could have leveled the whole forest – had Naruto not stopped him.

He had been fine, if bloody and in pain. Gaara didn’t understand why stayed, still willing to go on, what was wrong with him.

He had said something then.

“We’ll just have to be more careful. It’s fine. It’s not your fault.”

It’s not your fault.

Those were Naruto’s words. “It’s not your fault.” The sand defended Gaara, always, if he didn’t make a conscious effort to stop it. It did even if he wasn’t aware, even if there was no real threat. It couldn’t judge, couldn’t think, it just acted.

It hurt and killed those who tried to hurt its master.

“It’s not your fault,” Naruto had said.

That was the reason why they sparred. So that Gaara had more say over the sand's instincts. He didn’t pretend to know how it worked – he had lived with the ability all his life. Contrary to what people thought, it didn’t come from the Ichibi. Proof enough was that his link to it hadn’t been
weakened in any way by the strengthening of the seal that muffled the tanuki’s voice more and more with each passing day. The sand was an extension of his body and mind. Naruto said that it could be trained like any other limb and technique then.

Gaara had agreed, because Naruto was still willing to help, and for the very first time in his life, Gaara nurtured the wish to avoid causing harm to another person at all cost.

The other attempts had gone better.

Their work wasn’t done. Naruto said that as long as the seal wasn’t completely fixed, he was still at risk of losing control under duress or any strong emotions. But as far as everyday life went…

The voice was still there, but it was muffled and far away, and he could easily ignore it if he wanted to. He could turn away.

Gaara had just woken up. From sleeping.

He felt light-headed and restless. He didn’t think he had ever stayed still for so long – what was it, four hours, five?

He hadn’t dreamed, or he didn’t remember it, which was probably for the best. Who knew what his dreams could be made of. It didn’t matter anyway.

*How dare you do this to me.*

He frowned. He didn’t get how she could be angry at him, how she could be surprised that he would want to lock her away, to earn some peace, take back his mind from her.

*If you want to talk to me, you have to ask,* he answered, and it was crazy, unbelievable, but it was the truth. He could mute her if he wanted to, he could be alone in his own head.

He could sleep.

He wasn’t sure he liked it, but the point was that he *could.*

Suddenly he understood this “freedom” Naruto was always raving about.

.

Some things never changed, and, unfortunately, Tsunade’s hatred for formal meetings with important people was one of them.

She had done her fair share of it as a child. All the adults in her family held some kind of high responsibility position, going from Head Archivers to freaking Hokage, and they loved to show her off for some reason. It didn’t help that at the time she had been very set on the idea that she wouldn’t follow in any of their footsteps – Senju Tsunade would be a dumb heavy lifter or a field medic, possibly both, but certainly not more, and that was this on that.

She ought to be kind of grateful now for all the lessons in proper etiquettes and diplomacy that had been drilled into her head, but it left a bitter taste in her mouth. She felt like she was betraying the girl who used to stick her tongue at her grandfather when he told her that she would change her mind someday and make a great shinobi leader.

She hated that he had been right in the end.

No matter her feelings though, she had to suffer through it. She didn’t doubt the Kazekage and the
Mizukage had made the trip more to meet with her and seize her up than to see the conclusion of the chunin exam – Kiri didn't even have a shinobi left in the competition. She deeply disliked these dynamics of power and performative relationships they all had to partake in. She was the oldest of the three, but also the least experienced.

The real trial would be to keep her cool.

Shizune stepped into her office, looking stiff and far less comfortable than she usually was, intimidated by her sudden formal role.

“Tsunade-sama. The Godaime Mizukage of Kiri, Terumi Mei.”

In stepped a tall woman with long, rich auburn hair hiding parts of her face, but not so much that Tsunade couldn’t see her pleasant smile as she walked further into the room. She was holding her Kage hat in one hand, a large, ornamented fan in the other. Tsunade’s own hat rested on her desk – she was glad they seemed to agree those things were pretty unpractical and, frankly speaking, kind of ugly. Terumi Mei wore a fitting dress of a vibrant shade of blue, her make-up was heavy enough to be spotted at first glance. She cared about how she presented herself.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mizukage.”

“Likewise, Hokage. I hope we can get along.”

She wondered what the Mizukage knew of the Godaime Hokage, just as Terumi Mei had to be wondering what the Tsunade knew about her. Not much. She had recently inherited a village left in shamble by the bloody reign of her predecessor, and she had been tirelessly working to lift it up from the ground ever since. Kiri had sent less than a dozen genin to the exam this year, it was no wonder none had made it to the last stage. Although given what was being said about Kiri’s genin selection, it was a miracle they even had that much to send.

All in all, Tsunade was probably lucky where she stood, compared to the other woman.

“I’m sure we will,” Tsunade answered, and found that she almost meant it. She offered the other woman a drink, which she accepted eagerly. Oh, yeah, they would get along alright.

The two men accompanying her stood by the door with Shizune, as the Kage sat at the table set in a corner for such an occasion. Tsunade already dreaded the trial of finding something to carry the conversation, but the other woman beat her to it. She opened her fan – painted with a misty landscape of lush forest and steep mountains Tsunade supposed to be Kiri's surroundings.

“I have to confess, there was a matter I wanted to bring up with you, if you don’t mind.”

She didn’t hide behind the fan, but it still provided a barrier, a physical wall between her and her interlocutor. It wasn’t that her politeness was faked, but there was a certain stiffness to it that indicated it didn’t come naturally, and that maybe she would have rather done without. As such, Tsunade didn’t take offense in the slight condescension. She couldn’t head-butt with the Mizukage after less than five minutes of meeting her.

“Please do.”

“I think one of your team killed two shinobi from our village a few months ago.”

The smile was still in place, the pleasant voice was the same. Tsunade drank her glass slowly, faux-casual, as she studied the woman intently.
“It’s possible.”

“It would have been in Wave Country.”

“I thought they were deserters,” Tsunade remarked, deciding not to play the ignorance card on this one. She knew what mission Terumi Mei was referring too – Kakashi’s report suspiciously lacked details, but it had been his team’s first outing, and not pleasant in the least.

"Ha, they were, regarding their actions against the Yondaime. But circumstances have changed, for us and for them.”

“Ask what you want to ask, Mizukage,” Tsunade said sternly.

“Did they truly die?”

The woman’s expression had changed, if only slightly. This was closer to her genuine feelings, Tsunade was sure. And she would have bet the Mizukage wasn’t asking purely for diplomacy’s sake.

It was almost sad to have to answer.

“Yes. Both of them were killed in combat, there is no doubt about it. I’m sorry.”

She added the apology on a whim, because the woman’s eyes flickered with disappointment and resignation, because Momochi Zabuza was just a few years younger than her, and he had fled his village after trying to overthrow the Fourth Mizukage.

Given the timing… Had news ever reached him, that Terumi Mei had taken his place?

Animosity spiked up, crackled between them. The tension affected their guards too, posture straightening in anticipation, some hands going to rest on a weapon. Tsunade noticed absentmindedly that Shizune had left the room. The idea of a fight breaking out there and then was such a hassle to think about, she failed to entertain the possibility properly.

There was no need in the end. The woman reigned herself in, the mild smile returned to her face.

“I see. I thank you for your honesty. Don’t worry, I didn’t come to seek retribution or revenge. It’s not like I could obtain it anyway.”

The words were those of the Mizukage, but the tone, the look in her eyes, they were of a woman hurting from loss and struggling not to act on it.

It endeared her greatly in Tsunade’s eyes.

“I have hope that we can build back some trustful relationships between our villages,” the Mizukage said, reverting back to a more formal demeanor.

“I would be happy to discuss it with you, if you can afford some time here after the exam is over.”

The woman’s eyes widened in surprise, as if she hadn’t expected Tsunade to be so compliant. She was quick to roll with it though.

“I can. Thank you.”

Tsunade could hear every advisor and every mentor she ever had berate her for being so open and so quick to hand out information and promises, and she kindly asked them all to fuck off. She
would never survive the job if she was as paranoid and distrustful as Kage tended to be. Didn’t it tire them out to be so suspicious all the time? So what if she chose to believe that Terumi Mei did have her people’s best interest at heart, and that as such, she was both worthy of help and interesting to have as an ally? Why not try to make some fucking friends instead of enemies for once? Kiri had cut all ties with other villages under its previous leader, and she wasn’t going to spit on their new Mizukage’s attempts at rebuilding it.

After all, they were not at war anymore, and if she would do her best for it to remain so.

Approaching footsteps in the corridor caught their attention and both women turned just in time to see Shizune enter back in the office. They both rose to their feet to welcome the newcomers Shizune had brought with her.

“Tsunade-sama, Mizukage-sama. The Yondaime Kazekage of Suna, Rasa.”

They exchanged quick bow. The man had to be ten years apart from each woman, older than one and younger than the other. He wore the off-white sash typical of the ones from Suna around his neck, and he also had his hat in hand. It was a stupid detail to be hung upon, but Tsunade needed to recognize them as real, actual people if she hoped to conduct any successful business with them.

“Rasa, so nice of you to join. This party was starting to get too lively,” the Mizukage said, voice far sweeter than earlier, unpleasantly so. Huh, so Terumi Mei didn’t make the effort for everyone. Or maybe she had before, and he had lost the privilege since? The man’s face twitched but he didn’t dignify the comment with an answer, choosing to focus on Tsunade. Behind him, the few shinobi he had brought stared ahead, impassible.

“Greetings, Hokage. We thank you for your invitation, and hospitality.”

“And I thank you for coming. Both of you,” she added. Better not to play favorite just yet, even if they were already in on that game, it seemed.

“The tournament is tomorrow. I would be glad to discuss current affairs with you until then.”

“I don’t think we have anything to say to each other,” the Kazekage said curtly. Tsunade bit back a rude retort. The Mizukage didn’t.

“Don’t you know, Hokage? Suna is so powerful and self-sustaining, they don’t need to partake in petty things like building alliances and favoring trades.”

Ah, so that was the issue between the two. Suna was prideful, even in their time of need, and wary of every other nation. It made sense, given their isolated position and lack of longstanding ties they could rely on, but it also made their life harder, from Tsunade’s point of view.

Then again, how many wars had been fought between them? How many deaths, as a result?

“The offer still stands,” Tsunade said, placating, as the two other Kage exchanged distrustful looks. This was exactly what she hated about this kind of thing. It was exactly as frustrating and headache-inducing as teenage squabbles, but in addition they weren’t even allowed to insult or punch each other.

“I have business to sort out with my people. I will leave you to it.”

They bowed again and he departed without further words. Wasn’t it a team of his own children that had made it to the final tournament? But rumor also had it that the Yondaime Kazekage had sealed his village’s jinchuuriki in his own child, so it was maybe giving him too much credit to think he
wanted to spend time with his family.

Well, it wasn’t as if Tsunade had expected anything else. Frankly, it was miracle enough that the Kazekage had even made the trip, had agreed to step into Konoha. Limiting Konoha’s missions in the Land of Wind and relaxing the border control had paid off. Besides, Orochimaru had implied that not so long ago, he had thought possible to involve Suna into attacking Konoha. In that light, the improvement was tremendous, even if they had exchanged less than a hundred words.

Damn, she hated politics.

“I’m not in a mood for foreign affairs just now,” the Mizukage said, “but I’ll take you up on the offer later on, if it’s alright with you.”

“It is.”

Since she seemed eager to leave, Tsunade felt no qualm about sounding eager to get rid of her. Terumi Mei smiled her complacent smile and walked out with her escort.

Tsunade gave quick orders for a chunin to be detached to each delegation, to show them around the village and lead them to the dignitaries quarters. When this was sorted out, she was left eyeing the bottle of sake on the table with no small amount of envy, but Shizune cut in.

“What do you want to do now, Tsunade?”

If Tsunade had no qualms about disappointing herself, she hated letting the other woman down. It was the reason why she had tasked Shizune with the monitoring of her alcohol intake, with instructions to guilt-trip her mentor as much as she wanted if it yielded results.

There had to be something else she could do to take her mind off things. She hadn’t always been such a drunk – what did she use to do to distract herself, before turning to alcohol?

Oh. Oh, right.

Maybe it was a sign then. Maybe it was time, if she was to abandoned this particular hobby, to go back to another, more productive one.

“I think I’m going to visit the hospital.”

It had the added benefit of bringing awe and pride to Shizune’s face. It was rewarding enough.


“Isn’t there something you want?”

Naruto cast Gaara a puzzled look.

“What, in general?”

“As repayment. From me. To you.”

“Oh.”

He thought about it for a while. His eyes fell on Gaara’s tattoo.

“Well. There is one thing.”
Enters Jiraiya.

As much as I've ranted after him and how little I enjoy the character, he will still have a role to play and I still can't do anything about the fact that Tsunade does like him. That's how you avoid bashing I guess - by having people like the character, even if you don't. Plus I don't like to dislike characters actually, I write them the way I need to so that I can forgive them.

Enters politics too! I can't help it, I like politics. Not to say I can write it or anything, but still, I like it ^^ As I said on tumblr I'm winging the whole Kiri/Mizukage thing cause there's so little info about it. This is an AU anyway I do what I want. sitting and talking is way better than war in my book, so that's what we'll do. Although of course, next chapter we'll have to suffer through the tournament, so there'll be plenty of waring around... arg, fight scenes again. My kryptonite.

But it looks like I'll hold my "chunin exam done by chapter 30" prophecy, or close enough. We will still have one final arc, and then this part of the story will be done. I'm mostly set on closing Flip the Coin and opening a new fic that will pick up two years later, but we'll see.

As always, I love to hear what you think. Thank you for reading!
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

The Chunin Exam Tournament (Interrupted)

Chapter Notes

Had the hardest time writing this chapter for some reason, I couldn't figure out what scenes needed to be here and what needed to happen. I don't like it because for a few chapters now I feel like I've been forgetting stuff that would have made for a nicer continuity, things that I forgot to seed and now feel like they come out of nowhere. And the opposite problem, when I simply forget entire things I put in there...

Or maybe it's just me.

I drew another silly comic. I'm glad cause it's been a while. The issue with this fic is that there's not that many funny moments to put into comics haha. Anyway, I hope you'll enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sasuke and Sakura stood straight and rigid in front of their teacher. They were trying to assume a serious, solemn expression, which was quite funny on their juvenile face. Sakura was scolding more than anything – Sasuke looked kind of sad.

Naruto was sulking a few feet away because Shisui had dragged him kicking and screaming before he had been able to elope early in the morning as he usually did. Kakashi was pleased to note though that once he had been greeted with equal part enthusiasm and disbelief by his friends, he had made no attempt to slip out.

Kakashi was suddenly filled with an inordinate amount of affection for the three of them.

Sasuke and Sakura had worked hard in the past few weeks, in preparation for the chunin exam. Since both had their own specific training to attend to – Sakura in kinjutsu, and Sasuke in the fighting style of the Uchiha clan – Kakashi had been able to split his time between the two to complete their training on more basic shinobi skills. They had often worked together, along with the other chunin candidates and their instructors. Even those who had failed the second task had joined on occasions – Ino, Hinata, Choji too… all hard-working enough, except maybe for Shikamaru, to Asuma’s endless annoyance. But Sakura had approached him regarding his peculiar chakra blade technique, so at least the man had had something to occupy himself with. All in all, a productive month.

Naruto hadn’t shown up once.

Kakashi knew his friends wondered about it, and Sakura had made it clear that she resented him for not forcing him to attend, for not going after him and dragging him here with them. Something the
boy’s friends had failed to do, and that she had hoped authority could solve, maybe.

The thing was, he had tried. Or at least, he had planned to. When Naruto had refused at first, Kakashi had thought he would change his mind, if only to spend time with his friends, but it had never happened. He had it from Shisui that Naruto was gone all day doing one thing or another, and he had elected to tail him once, hoping to catch him in the act of training on his own, and have a chance to offer him some help. He was probably still training in fuuinjutsu in secret, and there was admittedly little help Kakashi could provide on that regard, but still, there had to be something.

So he had followed his trail into the forest with Pakkun, hoping to make it look like he had stumbled upon the boy purely by chance.

And he had found him. But Naruto wasn’t alone.

They hadn’t noticed him because he was a high-class jounin and former Anbu, and also because they were asleep. Naruto, and one of the genin from Suna – Gaara, wasn’t it? – curled up against one another on the soft grass. Between them, for some unfathomable reasons, laid two balls of fur that Kakashi later identified as foxes, also asleep.

The whole scene had an eerie, surreal look to it, from Naruto’s peaceful face, lacking, in his sleep, its usual frown, to the way the boys had arranged their body around one another like a yin and a yang, to the freaking foxes.

What was Kakashi supposed to do about that?

Turn tail and pretend it had never happened, was what he did. He hadn’t tried to go after the boy again after that. It felt wrong to try and confront him on the matter – if he had somehow managed to make a friend out of that strange boy, Kakashi had no business and no reason calling him out on him. Shisui had berated him for spying on Naruto, something he himself refrained from doing despite his mother hen urges, but he had been pleased to learn that at least Naruto wasn’t wasting hours away on his own.

When it came to the boy, they had to make do with small victories.

But even if they had resigned to let him do as he pleased for now, even if there was no need for him to have followed the intensive training, seeing that he wasn’t up for the final tournament, Kakashi still wished he had been here with his two friends, and he could guess they did too. Genin teams were a special thing, it only lasted a short while but left lifelong traces on shinobi’s mind and memories.

Not always good ones though.

Kakashi couldn’t help but feel like he had failed his team, when his only win was that Naruto was there on the very last day, to see their training reach completion.

“I’m proud of you kids,” he said with a smile and without showing an ounce of what he was feeling, because Sasuke and Sakura were here still and he needed to be their teacher right now. “You’ve come a long way, and you’re ready. I trust you’ll do good tomorrow.”

“Thank you sensei,” they said in the same breath. It was nice to engage in a bit of formality from time to time.

It was not ideal, them fighting each other. Sasuke was weighed down by his family’s expectations to excel at the show of strength that was the tournament, but he didn’t want to hurt Sakura – physically, but above that, emotionally. He feared humiliating her with a swift victory, while also
feeling guilty of this assessment of her skills. Sakura on her hand, out of fear and doubt, was as likely to close off as to lash out during the face-off. Kakashi feared how this could damage their relationship, but there was nothing they could do about it.

It occurred to him then that in all likelihood, one of them at least would become a chunin, and this team would disappear.

“Alright, come on, I’ll treat you to lunch. What do you want to eat?”

“Soba.”

“Okonomiyaki.”

They glared at each other. There was a lull as they waited for a third suggestion, always the same. But it didn’t come.

They looked at Naruto, expectant. He was lost in thought – when he caught up, he opened his mouth, but he didn’t know what to say.

A complicated set of emotions flickered rapidly on the three kids’ faces, and Kakashi felt a sense of loss at the failed connection, at how they always seemed to reach out but never in the same direction, hand grazing but never touching.

“It’s quite hot today. Let’s go for cold soba,” he settled, dispelling the tension. They agreed.

They managed to have a good time, despite it all. Once they were coaxed out of their own head, they fell back into easy friendship and the casual intimacy that was so effortless to children and so difficult to adults. The edges were still there, and they nicked themselves on them sometimes, with a poorly chosen word, an ill-received comment, but they kept at it anyway, mindless of the cuts. On the one hand it was a good thing, that they could look past their grievances and enjoy themselves.

On the other hand, if it went on this way, one day the cuts would be too large to be ignored.

They had just walked out of the restaurant when they were accosted by three strangers, in a way that didn’t feel coincidental in the least.

“Hi.”

She didn’t introduce herself – he only recognized her and the two jounin with her because they all had received a debrief on the visiting Kage and their entourage. Her smile was sweet and wide and entirely fake, she wasn’t even making an effort.

“Can we help you with something, Mizukage-sama?” Kakashi asked politely, to remind everyone involved what was at stakes here. The kids’ stance shuffled just so – Sakura and Sasuke straightened, more serious. Naruto just glared harder.

“Hatake Kakashi. I was looking for you.”

Ah. So that was what this was about. He was quite used to that tone of voice, to that way of saying his name.

Plenty of people had sought revenge out of him before.

He didn’t refuse a fight, usually. Felt like he owed it to those people, if it could ease their pain,
bring them any sort of closure. But the Godaime would kill him if he got into a brawl with the Mizukage of Kiri.

Her two bodyguards looked anxiously at their leader. “Mizukage-sama,” one of them called under his breath, worry mixing with a stern warning. He was older than her, one eye neutralized by an eyepatch. Kakashi was reasonably certain he had seen his face in one Bingo Book or another, but he couldn’t place his name.

The air remained strained a few more seconds, before the woman sighed and let it go, murderous intent simmering out into something harder to spot, if still present.

“To think, just a few months ago I would have been free to challenge you and fight you to the death,” she said wistfully, true longing heavy in her voice. “But alas, that wouldn’t be appropriate now, would it?”

“Mizukage-sama,” the older man said again.

“I know, I know,” she dismissed. “Let’s go.”

Of course she had to catch sight of it then.

She zeroed on Naruto’s head. On the mask nestled in his head, that never left if now. He felt the shift, recoiled slightly.

“That’s not yours,” she said conversationally, as if she didn’t look ready to rip it out any second.

“It is. I earned it. From its previous owner.”

“And what happened to them, I wonder?”

“Dead.”

It never ceased to amaze Kakashi how Naruto managed to convert so seamlessly his anguish and pain into aggression and rage. He knew for a fact that the event of Wave Country still weighed heavily on the boy’s mind and heart, and yet he managed to throw it around so casually, as if it didn’t affect him in the least.

Kakashi was forced to consider how he would stop the Mizukage of Kiri from throwing hands with a twelve-year-old that would be more than happy to oblige.

“Did you know them? Haku, and that one, Zabuza,” Naruto asked, uncaring of any property or tact.

“We did.”

“Were you friends?”

She twitched at the question, so naïve and blunt, because they had been missing-nin and she was the Mizukage – surely it had to be more complicated than that. But she just shrugged.

“Not very good ones, it seems.”

Lightning fast, she suddenly extended a hand, attempting to snatch the mask right from Naruto’s head. Instinct had him crouch down and snarl like a wild beast – he bared pointy teeth at the laughing woman.

“Haha, alright, alright! Keep it then,” she said, mocking. The older man behind her shook his head.
The younger one, a hand racking through blue hair and the other fiddling with his glasses, looked like he wished for nothing more than to be far away from this.

The Mizukage flicked the mask on the forehead, where Kiri’s symbol had been morphed into the monster kanji by Naruto’s stubborn blade.

“It suits you, doesn’t it?”

They left it at that.

Kakashi’s team watched the Kiri nin walk away in silence, a bit stunned by the whole encounter. What were the chances really, that they would run into them? Most likely it was no chance at all. Kakashi’s name and face were well-known.

“I didn’t think they had…”

Sakura trailed off when she realized she had started to voice that thought aloud. She coughed, embarrassed, but she finished anyway.

“…friends.”

“It’s easier not to,” Kakashi answered.

He didn’t elaborate. It wasn’t a lesson he was eager to teach them – all their enemies were the same. They would all have friends and families, they would all just be people, just like them.

They had to know, so that they realized killing wasn’t something to take lightly. And at the same time how easier it would be not to know at all, how lighter the burden on their shoulders, the nightmares plaguing their nights.

“She wanted revenge,” Sasuke said, pensive. Kakashi hummed.

“Why not take it?”

Naruto this time, of course.

“She has her village to look after,” Kakashi answered.

He could see on the boy’s face that he didn’t understand.

Naruto split after that, claiming he had “things to do”. His friends sulked but didn’t try to stop him, whispering between them. Or, well, “whispering”. Kakashi had no idea how they could believe their poor understanding of what discretion was and the mere three feet between them meant he couldn’t hear them. Kids.

“He’ll come tomorrow,” Sakura whispered-scream into Sasuke’s ear, “right?”

“Of course he will,” Sasuke mumbled in answer.

“Yeah. Of course.”

Neither sounded convinced.

"He will," Sakura repeated more firmly, hints of anger in his voice. "His new friend will fight too after all."
Kakashi had to join in at that.

“What friend?” he asked, feigning innocence. The kids’ faces soured – jealous? It was kind of cute.

“One of the genin from Suna. He’s going to see him right now I’m sure, they spend all their time together, though I can’t imagine why,” the girl said, bitter.

“It’s because they’re alike.”

Sasuke couldn’t help but defend Naruto, even when he was crossed with him. It was both endearing and a little worrying – at least Sakura knew to express her frustration at the boy.

“Alike? In what way?” Kakashi asked casually.

Sasuke debated with himself, no doubt pondering whether getting it out was a good idea or not. Things had improved between them, and they had come to trust him, but they often reverted into their standard teenage stance of “adults shouldn’t be trusted”, especially when it came to Naruto. But Sasuke was desperate enough for insights that he finally spilled.

“The boy. He has… Like Naruto. He has a demon.”

Kakashi’s thoughts stuttered to a halt.

“What.”

After all these years though, keeping his emotional reactions in check was second nature, and the kids didn’t notice a thing, even though he was having a minor freak out.

“Naruto told me.”

Right, no big deal, Kakashi thought. It only meant that Suna had send their freaking jinchuuriki to Konoha without bothering to warn anyone about it. No big deal.

Apart from the small matter that this could be seen as a declaration of war, or be a motive for one.

What was the Kazegake thinking? He had just arrived in Konoha, according to the chunin on gate duty, but Kakashi was certain that if it were known that he had his jinchuuriki here with him, the whole shinobi force would have been notified of it.

What the hell.

And to top it all, Naruto had to go and make friends with him, of course. If he knew about it, as Sasuke had said, it was probably the very reason why they had approached each other in the first place. Kakashi had not thought much of the display during the preliminary tournament – Naruto was in high spirit and high on mindless violence, which wasn’t new. He didn’t think…

Sometimes how unobservant he could be was beyond him.

“Are they in trouble?” Sasuke asked warily, catching on his teacher’s hesitation. He looked like he regretted saying anything at all. Kakashi waved his concern away with a smile.

“No, not at all. Off you go you too, try to get some rest. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Though suspicious, they complied and scurried away, and Kakashi wanted nothing more than to follow his own advice and go crash on his couch for a five-hour nap – or Gai’s couch maybe, or Asuma’s? Asuma was more likely to match his sullen mood.
But he couldn’t do that.

Instead he took the way of the Hokage Tower.

“We’re almost done,” Akira declared, after a careful inspection of Gaara’s exposed back.

“Really?” Naruto peeped hopefully, peering at his handiwork. The seal sure looked a lot less messy now.

“I think one more time, to bind your work together, and it will be stable enough.”

Both boys let out a heavy sigh of relief.

“Finally,” Naruto said as he collapsed in the grass. Complex sealing was exhausting, not so much for all the chakra it took – even if it was a lot – but for the focus and patience it required. Naruto had never been very good at sitting still and concentrating on one task, so drawing hundred of tiny seals and infusing them with steady chakra for hours on hand didn’t rank high on his list of favorite activities.

And on top of that…

“The tournament is tomorrow,” he said to the open sky above him. Gaara hummed in assent by his side. Naruto didn’t want to say it, but inevitably, after that…

“You’ll leave.”

The other boy hummed again, before silence claimed them once more.

In a sense it was good that the dread filling him at the idea was so huge, so impossible to seize and apprehend. As such he couldn’t act or react to it – he simply couldn’t manage to fathom it. So he was calm enough, for now. But Gaara would leave soon, return to his own country, and who knew…

Who knew when they would meet again?

His mind was running wild with all sorts of crazy ideas, of taking Gaara’s hand and making a run for it, dashing through the forest, never to return. Of hiding him in his room at Shisui’s place – and it was the first time in months he regretted not leaving alone, for it would have made it easier. Of hiding in Gaara’s gourd and follow him to Suna.

He said as much to the boy.

“I wonder if I could fit in there.” He tapped the sand gourd. Gaara narrowed his eyes quizzically.

“I don’t think…”

Naruto snorted.

“It’s a joke, Gaara, a joke!”

“Ah.”

He had yet to make Gaara laugh. But he would manage, he would.
He wanted them to elope, to leave, but how could they? Where would they go, what would they do? Had they been ordinary orphans abandoned by the word, they could have just done that, but their village would never let them go, would they?

And if they each stayed stuck behind their walls, chained to their village’s will, then…

No. No. They would meet again. They had to. They couldn’t leave because they weren’t strong enough, because they couldn’t go against the rest of the world.

Yet.

“I think it’s not mine,” Gaara declared as Naruto was drifting off to sleep. Had he missed a part of the conversation?

“What?”

Gaara was looking at his hands, a thoughtful look on his face. He didn’t elaborate, and there was no making him say anything he didn’t want to. Naruto shrugged it off.

“I want to sleep.”

Gaara never said no to that.

The sound of excited shrieks greeted Tsunade even before she was pushing the gate of the Hokage’s residence. The former one, not the tall house next to the Hokage Tower where she supposedly lived but barely set foot in. She slept on the couch in her office. Shizune said the house was lovely though.

She entered a well-tended garden, full of bright-colored, odorant flowers and plants. There was a small boy with mud-stained clothes and scraped knees running around kunai in hand, playing ninja no doubt. He almost crashed into her in his chase for imaginary enemies.

“Hey! What’re you doing here?”

“Konohamaru. Be more respectful to the Hokage.”

She stopped trying to outdo the kid in the grimace competition to look at her old teacher walking toward her leisurely, tranquil smile on his face.

The boy wrinkled his nose. It disturbed the half-peeled band-aid stuck across the bridge.

“She’s not the Hokage. You are.”

“Konohamaru.”

The warning was plain as day despite the man’s warm tone, and the boy pouted but obeyed – he gave a hasty bow and a quick “good morning, Hokage-sama” before dashing back into the bushes.

“Hello, sensei.”

“Hello Tsunade. How are you.”

“Well enough. And you?”
“Older by the day.”

She chuckled awkwardly. It was true he had aged, in just a short few months, as if his body had been waiting for him to finally be at rest to catch up on the years, to allow the weaknesses of age to take their rightful toll. He wasn’t unhealthy. Just…

Old.

“Please excuse Konohamaru. I fear he has been too spoiled – he is terribly bad-mannered.”

“It’s fine.”

She had seen him before, running around the village with his friends from the Academy, and she had heard of him too. The teachers complained about the boy, who was rowdy and rude and never listened to anyone. He reminded her of herself at that age, and she could even guess they had the same reasons for acting out like this.

After all, she was a Hokage’s grandchild too.

“It’s the last phase of the chunin exam this afternoon,” she said conversationally. “The tournament. Rasa of Suna came to watch, the new Mizukage too.”

“I heard. It’s going to be quite the entertainment, I’m sure.”

She thought about asking if he was coming, but she found that she didn’t want him to, and she didn’t want to sound like she did, to give him any idea.

“You’ll have to tell me about it,” he said, as if reading her mind.

There were people keeping informed. She didn’t know who – proper informants or just old friends and students dropping by to gossip. Either way, even if he seldom left this place, he knew all that happened in the village still.

Or maybe not all.

“Orochimaru is in Konoha.”

She hadn’t come to exchange pleasantries after all.

It was a stale satisfaction to see him lose a bit of his carefree attitude, to see worry settle in its place. She didn’t want to feel guilty about sharing that burden with him, even if it didn’t really concern him in the end.

She followed him to a stone bench half-buried between the bushes. He reached back to ruffle between the leaves and draw out an eavesdropping Konohamaru.

“Go help your mother in the kitchen,” Hiruzen ordered calmly. The boy stuck his tongue at them, but he complied without more fuss, and the old man turned back to her.

“You saw him?”

“Yes. I still don’t know all that he came for. But there’s one thing at least.”

“What is it?”

“Naruto.”
Curiously, the expression on the old man’s face told her it wasn’t the answer he had been expecting. What did he think she would say? She dismissed it.

“And what would he want from him?”

“Who knows. Just to deprive the village of him, or to study him? No matter the reason. He won’t have him. I just wanted to let you know.”

“How is Naruto anyway?”

She was surprised by the fondness in his tone, the genuine concern. She didn’t think he cared.

“He’s… fine.”

A blatant lie, but what was she supposed to answer to that? He didn’t press.

“Was that all you wanted to say to me then?”

It wasn’t. It never was. There were a million things she wanted to tell him, to ask him, stories she needed to hear from his mouth, grievances she needed to get off her chest, advice she was desperate to be granted. She wondered what he knew of Danzo’s death, of the two young jounin they had buried, of the poison of Roots still seeping into every crack. Of all the reproaches people had for him. She wanted so badly to just ask.

But every time was the same – she ended up tongue-tied, unable to speak her mind, to step up into the Hokage’s coat that she wore with less and less effort outside these walls. In front of him she was a teenager again, unruly and unwise, and he was her teacher, the one she looked up too, who had all the answers and could do no wrong, and to whom she absolutely could not confide in.

And so, every time, it ended the same.

“No. That’s all.”

He had to know it wasn’t true, but he didn’t ask, either because he didn’t want to push her, or because he too was unwilling to dive into unpleasant topics.

They stayed like this for a while, sitting in silence among the flowers and the buzzing bees. She appreciated the calm but she couldn’t fully enjoy it – not with the list of all remaining duties heavy on her mind, not with the weight of all that was unspoken between them, a dense mass in their silence, that set them apart even if they sat right next to each other.

It had been the same with her parents, with her grandparents too. Maybe children and their elders were bound to resent each other, and to never be able to put it into words or acknowledge it at all.

“Well, I won’t linger. I have a lot to do.”

Next time, she promised herself. Next time, they would talk properly. They would lay it bare.

She got up and walked to the gate. He usually watched her go without a word, but this time, he followed and he stopped her as she reached for the knob.

“Tsunade.”

Something in his voice made her turn to face him fully. He had a softness in his eyes, sadness too, regrets.
“I’m sorry.”

She frowned, puzzled, but he didn’t let her question it.

“You will make a great Kage.”

She blinked at him, caught off guard. He had said it before, with different words, but there was a strange kind of finality in his tone, almost fatalistic.

Almost like an order.

“I’ll do my best,” she answered lamely.

When she closed the gate on his old, pained face, she couldn’t help but feel like she had missed something obvious.

Sasuke was shocked to realize he had almost forgotten how it was like. To be fair, he had other worries on his mind, other issues to deal with. He didn’t spend much time at home these days, what with training and seeing his friends and training some more, and his family was busy too, doing whatever it was they did. There was an ongoing investigation taking up all of his father’s time, and Itachi was helping at the Archives again, putting to use his love for organizing things. His mother was preparing her genin team for their graduation.

It was hard to say if his father had said so little for the first tasks of the exam because he was occupied elsewhere, or because he didn’t see the need, didn’t even consider Sasuke failing so early in the process. But now that they were nearing the final stage, it was as if he had just remembered that he did have strong expectations for his sons’ performances.

And Sasuke had forgotten how it was like. And as such, he was ill-prepared for it.

"I hope I’ll be able to come for your first fight," his father was saying, bowl in hand yet soup still untouched, "but I may only be there for the second round."

And all Sasuke could do was grip his chopsticks harder.

He didn’t know which feeling to give into, which retort to voice. He tried to see it as a mark of confidence, to be proud of the fact that his father was so certain he would win his first fight. But all he could hear was that he had no choice in the matter. That he’d better win indeed, that there was no other option.

Maybe it wouldn’t have mattered so much if his opponent was someone else. But Sasuke knew what opinion of Sakura his father had. He would have phrased it differently if his first fight were against Neji or Shikamaru. Not even that – he would have made sure to be there for that.

“Once you’ve made chunin, you can join the regular training sessions with the rest of the clan, although you’ll be sent on missions often enough at the beginning.”

Because of course, him not making rank wasn’t an option either. Because every self-respecting Uchiha got promoted on their first try, and all of them before they were fifteen, and Sasuke was twelve already and Itachi had been only ten so there was really no other option.

With their father, there never was.
“And what if I don’t?”

Both his mother and Itachi covered their face with their bowl.

“What if I don’t make chunin?” Sasuke asked again, just to be clear, eyes firmly trained on his father’s confused face.

“You will,” he said, as if it was already settled, as if it was obvious.

“What if I didn’t?”

He wanted to know. He wanted his father to say it. To think about it at the very least. To be honest and tell him, what would he do, if his son failed the exam like a loser.

“What then? What would you do?”

He knew he had to stop pressing, had to calm down because he was working himself up over nothing, but why did his father have to say it like that? There were people failing all the time. Most of them did, actually. And Sasuke was good and he was strong but he was not special. He was not above it all.

“You won’t,” his father repeated stubbornly, and this time there was the hint of a threat in his voice. As if he could scare Sasuke into winning his fights.

At that very moment, Sasuke wanted nothing more than to fail the exam miserably. At that very moment, his own ambitions, his own drive and self-esteem and competitiveness were less important than to embarrass and shame and anger his father.

It quickly passed – he could never lose on purpose, and Sakura would murder him if he tried anyway – but the realization lingered, bitter in his mouth. That he wished so badly to disturb his father’s plans. To disappoint him.

He was about to retort when Itachi caught his gaze and shook his head, just barely. Let it go, he urged.

He was right, of course, there was no use arguing with their father on that, but Itachi was far better than Sasuke at reigning in his frustrations.

Itachi was better than Sasuke at everything anyway.

“Yes, father,” he finally said, and went back to his bowl, eyes trained down and determined to leave them there. He heard a sharp intake of breath, braced himself for a comment on his insolent tone and rude attitude, but he supposed his mother did some mediation of her own, because his father stayed silent.

They resumed eating without another word.

Sasuke had offered to fetch her at her house so that they could go to the arena together. Sakura had declined, and she had a feeling he was expecting it.

She had barely slept, turning and tossing restlessly in her bed all night, the promise of sweet oblivion only getting further and further away the more she wished for it. She didn’t feel especially tired though – one sleepless night wasn’t hard to deal with, although she would surely feel like
death when the day was over.

She couldn’t project herself that far, no matter how hard she tried. It was inevitable that the day would end indeed, that the hours would pass and that she would find herself back exactly where she was come evening, at the doorstep of her parents’ house, sliding the key in the lock. But oh, all the things that would have happened in between.

How would she be then? Triumphant or humiliated? Hurt, proud, disgusted?

Impossible to tell.

She made her way to the arena avoiding the main streets and keeping her head down, even though people wouldn’t recognize her as the first contestant of the day’s tournament until she would step into the pit. Sasuke, they knew. Her? Not a chance.

Absorbed as she was into her feet, she startled when another pair entered her field of vision. When she raised her head, the other person was close enough that they almost bumped their forehead against one another.

“You should look where you’re going,” the girl scolded, a severe scowl on her face, the same she had had in the forest, although it was then twisted in pain and covered in sweat.

“You…”

“I came to wish you good luck,” the girl said. Karin, Karin, her name was. She pushed up her glasses and waited for an answer.

“How is your leg?” Sakura asked instead, because she didn’t know what was happening exactly.

“It’s fine,” the girl scoffed, caught off guard. “Worry about yourself.”

Sakura couldn’t bring herself to take offense at the disdainful tone. She was used to this kind of cold exterior. The girl had sought her out – it was too late to pretend she didn’t care.

Why couldn’t people just. Be honest.

“Thank you.”

Caught off guard again. The girl blushed lightly, and it did a funny thing with her bright red hair. It was pretty.

“I have to go or I’ll be late.”

“I’ll be watching you.”

Sakura pondered that such red hair would be easy to spot in the crowd, and the thought was comforting in a way. That was one person that would be cheering only for her at least, except for her parents, whom she had failed to convinced not to come, of course. As if they were going to miss it.

Couldn’t they have chosen another time to stop being disapproving of her career choices?

“The chunin exam is a big deal, Sakura. No matter what happens, we’re proud of you.”

They didn’t think for one second that she would win her first match.
The fighters were shuffled into a viewing platform away from the main rows. Sasuke didn’t look at her, sulking in a corner as he gazed at the arena down below.

He didn’t want to be here either.

The Uchiha were an unmistakable dark splotch in the sea of spectators – all gathered, all wearing their clan’s dark outfits. At least for her it was only her parents, her aunt, a few cousins, if they had even bothered to come.

But Sasuke didn’t worry about disappointing them all.

Or did he? Was it bad of her that she wished he did? That she hoped he was worried, just a little, about the outcome of their fight?

She didn’t pay attention to the others – she didn’t even know if she would stay to watch their fights. She wanted it to be over. She wanted to know the outcome without actually having to go through the whole ordeal.

“Uchiha Sasuke, Haruno Sakura,” one of the chunin in charge said in their back. “Come down. It’s time.”

They marched down the stairs in tense silence, thick and heavy although it wasn’t silent at all, what with the rumors of the crowd above them. There were a lot of people.

Sasuke stopped her just before they stepped through the door and into the sun, into view, with a hand on her arm, a bit more forceful than necessary.

He opened his mouth several times, but he had trouble saying what he wanted to say. In the end he settled for, “we’re friends.”

It could have been a declaration or a question, it was unclear. He looked frustrated with himself, as usual when he had failed to get his point across, which was all the time, because he had no way with words nor with feelings. Either he said too much too bluntly, either he didn’t say enough and it was incomprehensible – she empathized with his struggles, really, she did, although it was kind of hilarious too. It wasn’t the same as Naruto. Naruto didn’t want to talk. Sasuke did, but he didn’t know how to.

Hopeless, both of them.

But she was too, at that moment, so she could only grab his wrist and squeeze lightly, and parrot, "we're friends," and trust it meant something.

They found themselves facing each other in the arena.

Shiranui Genma raised a hand.

“Begin.”

The crowd cheered.

“Stand guard. Kill anyone steering trouble, but don’t attract attention. If the alert sounds, raise the kekkai.”

“Yes, Master.”
Sasuke’s eyes flashed red as soon as the fight began, and Sakura instinctively looked down, in order not to cross his gaze. Her eyes fell on his lips, and a fleeting memory crossed her mind, of how love-struck she had been as a kid, how she had daydreamed about him being her first kiss. It seemed impossible to even entertain the possibility now – that would be so weird. She could only imagine the confused and disgusted face he would make, and it made her relax somehow.

Sure it was Uchiha Sasuke, best student of their year, good even among his clan, trained by their very best. But also…

It was only Sasuke.

She drew her sword. It was a bit shorter than what he was used to seeing her with. Or so he would think.

The wait was setting her on edge and she knew from experience that he was unlikely to attack first – his style was surprisingly still, the consequence of his clan relying so heavily on genjutsu, probably. It meant that his stamina wasn’t off the chart, but it was still better than hers. She wouldn’t win this on the long haul.

She charged.

He blocked the blade, kunai in hand, tried to knee her in the side, but she spun around to avoid it and stroke again, aiming for his neck. He ducked – she stepped back, chased by a kick. A favorite of his, hands flat on the ground to kick up at his opponent’s abdomen. She had suffered it more than once.

A kunai could change hand, he only needed one to hold it, so he had a limb on her who had to keep her two hands on the handle of her sword. That didn’t mean she couldn’t hit him though, and when he got too close next, slipping through her guard, too close for the blade to be turned back against him, she slammed the handle into his temple. He avoided the fall with a flip, but there was blood trailing down the side of his face, and it was absurd and a little mean how pleased she was with this. Of course, she hadn’t hit hard enough to knock him out or even throw his balance – there was a reason why she favored kinjutsu, and that reason was she packed a weak punch. It was frustrating.

Especially seeing that when he managed to land a hit on her next, catching her jaw with a fist, her vision went dark for a second and she almost bit the dust. What she bit instead was the inside of her cheek and she spat blood with an angry snarl. She hated the taste.

At least he didn’t show any hint of concern or regret, as he watched her closely for the next move. She wouldn't be able to handle it if he tried to be nice to her right now.

Again, she thought back on what she would have given, back at the Academy, for him to show kindness to her. The kid she had been would be appealed if she saw her now.

The brief lull had her uncomfortably aware of the noises around them, of all the eyes watching their every move. Assessing, judging. What did they think of her, she wondered. How did they think this would end.

Sasuke broke her out of her building panic by moving on to the next move. His hands flew into familiar mudras, and she had never told him, but she truly hated his clan's signature jutsu.

She was forced to retreat and ran around on the walls as he rained hellfire onto the arena, scorching
a few trees on the way and no doubt making the whole audience sweat buckets. He had improved
the range and scale of his Katon in the years they had known each other.

But at least the destructive jutsu meant little visibility for him, and she could do with a few burns
and a few holes in her clothes if it meant she would get closer. He would run out of breath eventually.

She was on him as soon as he did. They exchanged a few more blows, until finally…

She swung her sword at his chest but he stepped back in time, avoiding the blade by a few inches.
Or so it seemed, until his shirt ripped and blood gushed out of the cut, not too deep but not just a
graze either. He looked down in confusion, then back at her, back down again, at her sword, before
understanding dawned on him.

His face twisted in a mixture of disbelief and delight.

“Sakura!” he scolded.

She stuck her tongue at him.

It had been Ino’s idea, because Sakura was complaining that her sword still wasn’t long enough.
“You can just make it so,” she had said. She had talked about her sensei’s technique.

If Sakura had one thing going for her, it was her chakra control, and it was the basic requirement of
the chakra blade technique. She could only give a few more inches to her blade, but it was enough.

Sasuke shook his head and laid his palm on his chest. It glowed green briefly – the bleeding
stopped.

Damn, he could do that too.

No time for anything too refined though, so the wound was still there. She still had that.

They fell back into it. He was wary of the tip of her sword, but knowing it could reach further than
he could see and actually working around it were too different things, especially seeing that she
didn’t keep it up at all time, and she managed to slice open some more skin, draw some more
blood. She was glad the Sharingan couldn’t discern chakra like the Byakugan could. Since she
couldn’t win over him neither in strength nor in speed nor in genjutsu, she would have to make do
with brains. And the pointy end of her sword.

She had to be damn fast to stop him from doing his Katon – the speed with which his signed his
jutsu was unreal. It consumed a lot of chakra though, so he wouldn’t abuse it. She was anxious to
finish fast because she was running out of breath and her muscles were aching. Her whole face
throbbed with the hits she had taken, her side too, and she had pulled something in her right leg, if
the pain was anything to go by. She kept a laser-sharp focus on his movements, where he would go
next, what he would do. Sasuke’s main weakness was his predictability – he wasn’t very good at
improvising, and he often fell back on the same patterns. She knew him well. If only she could…

Sasuke missed a punch and had the reflex to twist back toward her. She crossed his gaze, annoyed
and frustrated, as she swung her blade toward his exposed back, stopping a hairbreadth away from
the nape of his neck with a triumphant cry at the tip of her tongue. He couldn’t move without her
cutting off his head.

And then it hit her. She had crossed his gaze.
He vanished, only to reappear in her back, kunai pressed to the base of her skull.

He seldom used genjutsu during training and sparring, wasn’t all that comfortable with it. But his Sharingan had evolved again during the Forest of Death, it stood to reason he would have improved on that too. She knew not to look at him in the eyes, she knew it, but he did that so rarely, and she had been so caught up in the moment…

“Naruto is right,” she said through gritted teeth as she lowered her sword. “Your eyes suck, Sasuke.”

He had the good taste to look apologetic, as Genma proclaimed him the winner of the first round.

That was it then. She had lost.

Of course because that was the kind of idiot he was, he put out a hand for her to shake. She rolled her eyes, but she complied – she knew it was important to him.

She couldn’t help using her grip to bring them closer and head-butt him.

“What was that for?” he asked, rubbing at his forehead. She had the harder head, at least. Perks of her big forehead, Ino would say.

“For beating me.”

He looked at her warily, likely trying to gauge if she was angry for real. She waved off his concern.

“I’m fine. I am. It was… It was a good fight, right?”

There was a lot of noise around them, people cheering, talking excitedly. Sasuke was out of breath and a little battered, but he looked content. He nodded firmly.

She had held her own. Longer than anyone would have guessed, probably. She was in pain but she was still standing. She could be proud.

They went back to the stairs to regroup with the others, but Ino called her out at the bottom of the stairs. Sakura gestured for Sasuke to go on without her and joined her friend in a corner of the deserted corridor.

Ino stared her down, arms crossed and eyebrow raised, and Sakura just stood there, blank-faced, because it was fine, really, it had gone better than she expected, she was fine.

“Damn, you’re such an idiot,” Ino said dramatically before engulfing Sakura into a sturdy hug.

Sakura gripped at her friend’s back and burst into tears.

She hoped the next contestants wouldn’t be down just yet, and at the same time she really didn’t care.

“I wanted to win,” she raged into Ino’s neck, pouring tears and snot all over her shirt, shaking hard with frustration and disappointment. Ino was stroking her hair, making a soothing noise from the back of her throat.

“I know, I know,” she kept saying, because she did. She was familiar with that helpless rage.

Damn it. Sakura had known, she had known there was no other outcome, that she wouldn’t come
She had done good, really, she had, better, than others would have against Sasuke, she had done good, it was the best that could have happened. But still, still…

“I wanted to win,” she whined again pitifully, now angry at her own greediness on top of everything. Ino didn’t berate her for it though.

“I know, I know.”

Ino could understand.

Shino’s fight against Kankuro of Suna ended on a draw. Shino’s bugs ate at the chakra string of the boy and invaded his puppets so that it couldn’t move, and the puppet’s blades that had nicked him were coated in poison. It was declared that they were both dead by the end of the match. Neither showed much emotion over the fact. The Suna boy looked sour when he was made to give the antidote to Shino.

Dosu didn’t show up for his fight, leaving Kiba pissed off and the winner by default. Come to think of it, there was no shinobi sporting the music note to be seen in the arena. Maybe they had gone back to their village already. After all, even if the event was a joint thing, the promotions were handled by each hierarchy according to their own criteria.

Shikamaru’s fight against Temari put Sasuke and Sakura’s fight to shame, in Sasuke’s opinion. They hadn’t ponded each other into unconsciousness like base street brawlers, but they hadn’t displayed much strategy either. Everyone in their year knew that Shikamaru was in a league of his own when it came to the brain, and this was blatant proof.

Even if he gave up in the end, because he couldn’t be bothered to put up any more effort.

The Suna girl didn’t look pleased, and Sasuke could understand why – it couldn’t feel much like a victory to her, despite her being the one to advance to the next stage.

Out of all of them, Shikamaru would be the one to survive in the field, to lead a team.

Sasuke wished they could have met in the next stage. He had no interest in Temari, although he felt strangely compelled to beat her too. It wouldn’t do to be outed from the tournament by a ninja from Suna.

And speaking of Suna nin…

Gaara appeared in the middle of the arena in a whirl of sand. Neji looked thoroughly unimpressed and sort of angry to be here.

Sasuke would have thought the boy eager to take revenge for his friend, whose future was still uncertain, even if he had spotted Lee and Gai’s twin bob cuts in the crowd earlier. Did Hyuuga Neji have any friends though? He hadn’t seemed to care all that much when Gaara had nearly killed his teammate.

It came back to him then, a piece of trivia he had learned when studying the various clans and their traditions.

“Member of the Hyuuga clan can only be promoted at the will of their clan head.”

It was sort of customary for clan members to ask permission to attempt an exam, because their
performance was a display of the whole clan’s strength, but it seemed silly that they could be
denied a higher rank in the shinobi force.

Unless, of course, they were of a subordinate branch, and couldn’t be allowed too much
responsibilities or power.

Would Neji be allowed to make chunin? Surely, if he was there today.

Maybe that’s why he didn’t want to.

As for Gaara. Well. As usual.

Gaara was looking at Naruto, his blonde hair easy to spot in the crowd.

Naruto was looking back. Who knew, maybe they could even communicate like that.

What could they be saying?

Sasuke hoped Neji would win.

“You don’t seem surprised to see me, sensei.”

“I knew you would come.”

Neji huffed, annoyed at being ignored, especially for that obnoxious blonde that had sprouted all
this nonsense during the preliminary tournament. His opponent, Gaara, focused back on the ring
and the fight supposed to happen here. His eyes were cold, unfeeling, as he studied Neji carefully.

“You’re the boy with the seal,” he said, looking up at his forehead. Neji felt the urge to cover it,
even if he was wearing his forehead protector, and the seal wasn’t in sight. It was an open secret,
yet he preferred to pretend like people around him didn’t know. He preferred not to wonder what
they thought of it.

“And?”

He parted his feet, put up his hands in the traditional Hyuuga stance. It would be good to fight
unrestrained and try his hardest to hurt his opponent. For once no one would reproach him.

The boy stayed motionless, arms crossed and back straight. Neji had seen firsthand he didn’t need
to move to inflict damage.

“You should ask him to remove it. He will, if you ask.”

He didn’t need to precise who “him” was.

Neji had done his best to forget about the boy’s words, about his nonchalant attitude and confident
comments.

“There is no such thing as an unbreakable seal.”

He had tried, but the words were haunting him.
It had never even crossed his mind. Once the seal was there, there it would stay. Any attempt at removing it would trigger it, and who would even know how to begin? There was only one thing that had ever erased a Hyuuga Binding Seal from the forehead it was etched on, and it was death.

“How?”

“I don’t know. But he would.”

He got a similar feeling from those two boys. When his eyes settled on them, on their core, he could see something stirring below the surface. There was a black hole at the center of their chakra system where the Byakugan couldn’t see a thing, and it felt like an entire world was folded into that spot.

It felt like it could stare back.

They also spoke with the same deadpanned confidence.

“Why would he do that then?”

“I don’t know. But he would.”

There was no doubt in his words, and it made Neji wondered…

He shouldn’t have. It was absurd. For all he knew, this was all they were – words, meaningless, empty. What could that boy know anyway. But it wasn’t just those.

“If you hate it so bad, why don’t you just fight it?”

The boy was a pariah at the Academy, for no discernible reason. He wasn’t even supposed to ever graduate. Everyone at the Hyuuga clan had been warned at some point against befriending or even approaching him.

That rage within him, the way he talked, looked at others, adults especially… Neji had learned a long time ago to conceal it all, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t recognize it.

Fight it, fight it. In the end, wasn’t that all he ever wished for?

The proctor cut through their thoughts.

“Begin.”

Neji had seen it before – it was no surprise. Sand surged. He took positions.

“Eight Trigrams! Revolving Heaven!”

The stronger the attack, the harder the Hyuuga’s shielding technique would repel it. Sand exploded away, taking the other ninja by surprise, although not enough to make him move. Neji dodged the next attack. Look like he wasn’t going to wait passively to be attacked this time.

“Byakugan.”

Neji could see it easily. As long as there was chakra involved, then he could dispose of it.

This time, when he slammed palm against the tendril of sand coming his way and it liquefied abruptly, lifeless, there was a true look of surprise on the Suna nin’s face. Surprise, and displeasure.
“Don’t do that,” he gritted. Neji didn’t bother answering.

Sand came again. Neji neutralized it, again. In the end, it was the boy’s chakra controlling it, and disturbing chakra patterns was as easy to do inside a body as outside, for Neji. The first tournament had proven the sand wasn’t faster than Lee.

And Lee, no matter what he deluded himself into thinking, wasn’t faster than Neji.

“Don’t do that!” the boy repeated, agitated. He didn’t seem to appreciate being robbed of his only mean of fighting. There was no angle of attack the Byakugan wouldn’t catch, and slowly, Neji was getting closer.

There was the matter of his sand armor, but even that would fall away if hit enough. Neji was patient.

“The sand is mine, it’s mine. Don’t take it away!”

He sounded genuinely distressed. Neji scoffed.

“How do you supposed I would win then?”

Neji finally got within punching distance, but that was the moment his opponent decided that his feet weren’t glued to the ground after all. He jumped away, raising a barrier of sand in his place – Neji had to retreat.

“You want to win?”

What kind of question was that? Neji didn’t answer, just prepared for the next move. Nothing happened though.

“Why?”

For a moment he wondered if the Suna nin was just attempting to mock or provoke him, but he looked genuine in his puzzlement.

The worse thing was Neji didn’t even have a good answer to that question.

He almost didn’t come. For a second in front of the arena’s doors he had thought of turning away. But Neji didn’t disobey, never. No matter how much he wished he could, how much he wanted to, it was never going to happen. His uncle had ordered him to make chunin, since he had the capacity and genin were useless to the clan, and he had complied. If he ever made jounin, it would be because the clan willed it so. But he wouldn’t ever rise higher than that.

What he told himself to justify yielding like a good servant yet again was that he was to fight this Gaara, and that the perspective of beating him where Lee had so thoroughly failed wasn’t an opportunity to miss.

He wasn’t going to tell that to that stranger though. In fact, he wasn’t going to tell him anything at all.

“Why not? Don’t you?”

“No. I want to kill you.”

It was said with a disconcerting lack of passion.
“Why?”

The boys had the gale to look surprised by the question.

“That’s… that’s what I’m meant to do.”

And really, of all the answers…

Sand surged from the ground, almost catching Neji’s ankles as he jumped up. He used the momentum to launch himself toward his opponent, determined to put an end to this stupid fight. It was easier said than done though.

“That’s what I’m meant to do. But…”

The more agitated the boy was, the more the sand was too, and it picked up speed as it kept Neji at bay, alternating between whipping tendrils slicing the air and high-speed projectiles flying wildly. The boy didn’t even seem to be in their fight anymore, mumbling to himself as sand danced around him. It was beyond frustrating.

If he could find a window, if he had enough time…

He launched into the Eight Trigrams right into the other boy’s space.

Sand protected him, of course, but he was still thrown away by the force of the spiraling chakra, rolling away in the dirt. Sand was up again even before he was – there was no counting on the boy getting out of chakra to end this fight. It was impressive how little he had to focus on what was happening around him, how autonomous his sand technique was, as if it had a mind of its own. Gaara was looking at his hands, mumbling something again.

“It’s not mine,” Neji thought he heard. Ah, what did he care about that boy’s emotional crisis. He ought to do the Trigram again closer to the outer walls next time, so that it would catch the boy in his fall, so that he could be on him fast enough to get through the sand.

There was a crack on the boy’s face – it was as unsettling the second time around, to see sand peel off of his skin. This time there was no murderous expression underneath though, no wave of violent intent sweeping through the air. Instead, he almost looked…

Sad?

“How can we just leave this place,” the boy wondered aloud, even if he wasn’t addressing anyone in particular.

It gave Neji the slightest pause, that strange longing in the boy’s voice, as if he was truly questioning what they were doing here.

Truly, what were they doing here?

Neji couldn’t even finish the thought. As if scripted, the boy’s wish was answered, albeit in a roundabout way, that very moment – a thunderous crash ripped through the air, shaking the very ground beneath their feet.
I used to do posts on my tumblr with my thoughts on the chapters for my bnha fic because I like to ramble and I didn't want the end notes to be too long, maybe I'm gonna bring that back...

So the chunin exam is done sort of, but we immediately launch into the next crisis lol. I think we have... you know what I just remembered right this instant that I forgot a huge bit of plot in my calculation of how long we still had to go before the end of this part... SO I think we have ten more chapters to go.

Don't come at me with how Lee deserves better, it's not my fault Neji can't stand him and thinks he's the best. I like him but he IS insufferable mdr. I have to say I liked putting Neji and Gaara in front of each other, I think they would have things to share. In case it wasn't clear in this what they'll share is their love for Naruto lol. I like feral Gaara but I like even more melancholic Gaara so yeah.

I'm glad I could clear up that Kakashi has actually been doing shit this past few weeks x) i kinda forgot about u bro sorry. I hope you enjoyed, don't forget to let me know, your comments are the light of my life and I love you all. See you!
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Succession.

Chapter Notes

I'm sick and super tired and generally feel bad all around, and what better to lift the spirits than some sweet feedback? So here's chapter 31. Kind of anticlimactic maybe as in not much fighting (good to me). I want to go to bed so I won't say anymore. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The panic receded even before it could arise when people realized that the arena wasn't coming down of their head – the explosion was from further away. Despite half of its population being civilians, Konoha was a hidden shinobi village, and the mass couldn't be so easily scared off.

The Anbu Tsunade had posted to watch over the tournament were already in position. Too many focused on her for her taste, but she would chew them out for it later. It didn't take long for the first report to come to her.

"Hokage-sama," Bird said, kneeling in front of her. "There is an ongoing fight at the Hokage’s residence."

"My house?" she asked, disbelieving. The man faltered.

"…The Sandaime’s residence."

And the light went on in Tsunade’s brain.

God fucking dammit, how stupid could she be?

Of course Orochimaru wouldn’t come here. What did he care about the exam, about the kids? From his own admission, he had approached Naruto already in the way he wanted to. Tsunade hadn’t been able to figure out what more he had to do in the village if he was sincere about not attacking it directly. She assumed he just wanted to establish some spies and wreak some havoc but of course, of course…

Didn’t she know him at all?

"You two, with me!" she yelled at Lynx and Bird. "The others, take the Kage back to the Hokage Tower. If something happens to either of them, I’ll have all your heads on a stick."

They had their own guards of course, but Tsunade couldn’t dismiss the possibility that Orochimaru would jump on the opportunity if he could. The two Kage went willingly enough. They had no care for this situation after all, as long as they and their own people were safe.
This wasn’t their village.

She dashed toward her sensei’s house, which she had left less than half a day ago with the certitude she would come back in no time to finish the conversation they had started. Stupid, so stupid. And the look on her mentor’s face, when she had told him about Orochimaru, as if he knew…

He had to know. He had to know what his student wanted. Surely, he had to know.

It appeared soon enough that there wasn’t any fight happening anymore. The house was gone, blown to pieces. She stepped into the garden, oddly spared compared to the wreck of the building right next to it, the flowers still swaying gently, still disclosing their sweet smell now fighting against the stench of burnt wood and spilled blood. Jiraiya was already there. A few jounin too, but they stayed at a respectful distance, and that could only mean…

She crouched down next to her teammate, a hand on his shoulder as if to comfort him, when it was she who needed the support so that she wouldn’t collapse to the ground.

“Was he already…”

“He was gone when I arrived.”

The old man didn’t look so bad, save from the gaping hole in his chest. At peace, almost. He could have been sleeping.

“Fuck. *Fuck.*”

She pressed two fingers into her eyes mercilessly, as if that had ever worked to keep the tears at bay. She fell back on her bottom and Jiraiya did too, put a hand around her shoulder, drew her to him.

“That fucking asshole, what…”

She didn’t know which one she wanted to curse more. Orochimaru going after Hiruzen was no surprise, and yet she was completely blindsided. Or, more likely…

She just didn’t believe he could succeed.

What did it bring him, she wondered. Was he satisfied, was he happy?

Could he ever be?

“Hokage-sama.”

It was Lynx, kneeling by her side, eyes to the ground. She was lucky to have that mask, she didn’t have to school her expression, hide her feelings. Tsunade wiped her tears, got back to her feet. It was official now.

It was only her.

“What can you tell me of the intruders?” she asked the jounin in charge, a senior from the Inuzuka clan.

“We didn’t get a clear look at the assassin” – no need, she knew who it was already – “but the ones accompanying him were the ninja from Oto.”

“Oto?”
It was one of those obscure, poorly known hidden villages that sprung up on occasions. Independent clans or missing nin seeking to establish themselves somewhere, and even succeeding sometimes. Other times they were promptly eradicated by the nearest force who didn’t appreciate their presence. They knew next to nothing of Oto, not even its location – they suspected it wasn’t an actual village, more like the headquarters of one organization or another. It was only the second time the mysterious village had sent participants to the chunin exam, and it was the whole extent of Oto’s ties with the rest of the shinobi world.

Looked like they had just found out who it belonged to then.

“The village is on lockdown,” she told Lynx. “No one in or out. Everyone on high alert, start your search from here and make your way to the walls, target the ninja from Oto and anyone looking suspicious. I want all forces involved, have the genin run messages. We have to be on the lookout for further attacks. Go.”

The woman disappeared.

“Where is Nara Shikaku?” she asked the jounin.

“On his way, Hokage-sama.”

“Tell him to meet me at the Hokage Tower. There’s…”

She took a sharp breath, swallowed around the ball of lead jammed in her throat.

“There’s nothing more to do here. You,” she called another jounin, “stay here until the medical staff arrive, and have them tend to him. Bring him to the hospital.”

“The hospital?” he hesitated.

Ah, yeah. There would be no need for that.

“Bring him to the funeral house. Don’t let people see.”

“Yes, Hokage-sama.”

Jiraya stayed silent but he was close by, at her back – if she took just a step, she could lean against him, he would receive her weight. It was enough to know it – she didn’t reach out.

She was about to step out of the garden when she heard a whimper, the smallest noise of distress coming from an unscathed corner. She knew what she would find, even before she parted the lush plants to reveal what was hidden underneath.

“Konohamaru,” she called gently.

The boy was furled into a tight ball against the garden wall, shaking all over. He raised a reddened face covered in snot and tears to her, eyes wide with distress and fear. He didn’t seem hurt at least.

“It’s over, Konohamaru. Come out.”

She reached out a hand to help him up, but he dismissed it in favor of launching himself into her chest and burrowing there, wailing like a toddler. Her arms closed naturally around his trembling body, and she pressed him against her as he cried in earnest, after having had to stay quiet and still for so long. Hiruzen must not have even known he was here – it was a miracle he had come out unharmed. Well, physically at least.
She indulged him until he calmed down, until he felt safe enough to come out of her embrace. She couldn’t seek comfort herself right now, there was too much to do and she had to be the strongest, the steadiest. But provide comfort, that she could, and if she drew strength from it too, if she needed it not to drown, no one had to know.

A commotion outside the residence drew their attention, a woman screaming at the confused jounin.

“Let me go, let me go! KONOHAMARU!”

“Mom?”

Tsunade gestured for the woman to be let in, and, displaying impressive speed for a civilian, Sarutobi Keiko dashed into the garden to her son. Tsunade had the good sense to back out as she hugged the boy tightly, crying in earnest.

“Are you alright? Are you alright?” she kept repeating, checking her son on all angles for injuries. He batted her hands away weakly but didn’t try to get away.

“I’m fine mom, I’m fine.”

The woman exhaled a long sigh of relief, eyes closed to try and rein in her emotions. Only then did she notice Tsunade, kneeling awkwardly next to them.

“Hokage-sama, I’m… forgive me, I didn’t…”

“Forgot it,” Tsunade dismissed. Pointless formality was the last thing on her mind at the moment. Now that her focus wasn’t narrowed down to her son only, Keiko took stock of her surroundings, the destroyed house, the grief-stricken faces.

“Where is… Where is my father?”

She didn’t need to hear an answer to understand. Konohamaru closed his fists around her dress, white-knuckled grip under his effort not to start crying again.

“The medics will be here shortly,” Tsunade said, wincing at the coldness of her tone but unable to find a balance between this and the raw emotions trying to take her down. “If you could…”

"I'll take care of it," Keiko promised. "Your dad is coming to collect you. No argument," she said to the boy, cutting short his protests.

“I will… need you to bring him to me later. I have to hear what he saw.”

Keiko threw her an accusing glare, displeased, but she agreed with a sigh. Tsunade got up, turned back to Jiraiya still waiting for her at the gate of the garden, looking at mother and son with an unreadable expression.

He fell into step with Tsunade without being prompted, and knowing that he had her back gave her hope that she would get through that day without crumbling down like the house still fuming behind them.

They were all put to work and for the next few hours Naruto and the other genin ran around the village passing messages and orders to the teams of chunin and jounin chasing after intruders, the
shinobi with the music note. Not that they found any, and the ones they found scattered in the wind quickly.

No one knew what had happened exactly, what had been damaged and who had been hurt. No one among the youth anyway – judging by the grim looks on some jounin’s faces, they knew about it, and it was pretty bad.

The ninjas from the other villages had retreated to wherever it was they stayed, waiting to be authorized to leave and eager to do so now that Konoha was seemingly under attack, even if after that first explosion that had interrupted Gaara and Neji’s fight, nothing more happened. It was kind of disappointing. Naruto had lost sight of Gaara and was anxious to see him again, worried that in the chaos, he would miss the Suna delegation’s departure, even though Gaara wouldn’t leave without saying goodbye.

He was considering just going to hide in a corner until things had calmed down, or hunt down Gaara through the village, when he stumbled upon one of the chunin exam’s participants.

Precisely, the one from that very first day, with the grey hair and the glasses, that had tried to win the genin over with information on the exam.

The one Naruto had warned them against.

Naruto gathered quickly that he hadn’t stumble at all – the teenager was waiting for him in that deserted side street, casually propped against a wall. He greeted Naruto as soon as he saw him.

“What do you want?” Naruto demanded, ignoring the faux politeness.

The man had an unpleasant smile and a general unpleasant feeling about him. Naruto could tell when people wished him no good, and this boy, he felt, wished no good to anyone. But Naruto also had a feeling that he wouldn’t do anything about it.

“I have a gift for you.”

“You can keep it.”

“Listen to me. I promise you’ll want to think about it.”

“And what makes you say that?”

“Aren’t you interested in a way to leave this place?”

Naruto recoiled, suspicion jumping up as he studied the man warily, and realized too late he had all but given away how sensitive the topic was to him. The man’s smile widened – what was his name again? Naruto couldn’t recall, and he couldn’t ask, so he was at a disadvantage he didn’t like in the least.

“I want to extend an invitation. From my master.”

“Who’s that?”

“You’ve met him before. In the Forest of Death.”

Naruto had a flash of a pale, grinning face, slanted eyes, a darting tongue. The grating susurration of a singing voice.

He wouldn’t have guessed, but it made sense, looking at this guy and his terrible smile. Was it
something this Orochimaru taught to all their people?

“Is this your fault then?” Naruto asked, gesturing vaguely around. They could still hear distant fighting and shouting, the unrest that had been stirring in the past couple of hours.

“I didn’t do anything,” the boy said innocently.

Ah. Kabuto. That was the name. Naruto had a feeling he never did anything, and yet wasn’t innocent at all.

“I have no interest in joining you.”

“That’s not what this is about. My master is interested in your… peculiarities. And you’ll soon be proven that he has no trouble hiding from the rest of the world, no matter his crimes.”

What had they done, Naruto wondered, what was brewing in the village right now? Something serious for sure, something that concerned all of them.

“I don’t ally with criminals.”

“Oh, you’re not a shinobi?”

Naruto blinked, caught off guard. It was the first time those thoughts were thrown back at him, and so casually, as if it was no big deal, just a fact of life. Kabuto had a Konoha forehead protector tied around his head, yet Naruto was sure he respected it even less than Naruto did his own. He couldn’t help thumbing at the band around his neck. It always felt constricting no matter how loose he wore it, and it was even less comfortable now with the raw skin underneath, where sand had…

“The offer stands. If you ever need to escape prying eyes and hands, come knock out our door.”

“You’ll be there too?”

“Hm. My time here is done.”

Finally, Naruto heard in his tone. It was a traitor he had in front of him. Someone who worked against the village, who had no doubt helped with whatever trouble was happening, and done who knew what else.

“ Aren’t you worried I’ll just report you? Sell you out?”

“Oh, I’m sure you won’t. But of course I can’t take that risk. Here.”

Kabuto produced a paper from his weapon pouch.

“A summoning seal. When the time comes, if you wish to take us up on the offer, activate it. You know how to, right? It’ll guide you to us, if it deems you trustworthy enough.”

Naruto made no move to take it.

“You have no interest in refusing. Who knows, maybe you could use it to bring about our downfall. Otherwise, it’s always nice to have options, isn’t it?”

Naruto felt trapped, and he hated it. How could this man know his so well? How could he be aware of his deepest desires, of how alluring this piece of paper was to him? He didn’t want to take it. He wanted nothing to do with these people.
And yet…

He grabbed it without a word, snarling at the satisfied look on the other’s face. Naruto thought about punching it off his face, but another Oto shinobi appeared in the street, disrupting this train of thought.

A red-haired girl, from the exam too. She pushed her glasses up and cast a long, scrutinizing look at Naruto. He thought she would call him out, but it was Kabuto she addressed.

“We need to go, now,” she said curtly.

“Don’t you have anything to say to him first?” the man said, pointing at Naruto with an amused look. Naruto had never seen her before, and thus couldn’t imagine what she could want from him. She glared at the other boy, murderous, before disappearing into thin air without acknowledging Naruto at all. Kabuto promptly followed.

Naruto found himself alone in the street, the summoning seal the only proof of what had just transpired.

“Where have you been?” Sakura asked when he regrouped with the rest of the genin at the Academy, waiting for further instructions.

He knew he had to say it. He had to tell someone, it could be crucial information, Kabuto had to be known as a traitor.

But would the seal work, if he did?

The man had played him so completely, he knew Naruto so well and it was so unsettling. To know Kabuto had revealed himself like this because he had the absolute conviction Naruto wouldn’t sell him out.

And he had been right not to doubt.

“Same as you, what do you think?”

Did that make Naruto a traitor too?

Izumo, who was in charge of the liaison between the genin and the Hokage Tower with Kotetsu, called for their attention then.

“Thank you all for your hard work. The crisis is resolved for now. You’re all dismissed.”

“Wait! Tell us what’s going on. We know something happened,” Ino intervened, never one to be kept in the dark. Izumo cast her a look that said “find out yourself”.

“I’m not cleared to give you any information for now. You’ll…”

Kotetsu ran into the courtyard at that moment to speak a few rushed words into his partner’s ear. Not ones he liked very much, with how far he rolled his eyes. They argued quietly for a moment longer before Izumo lost whatever it was they had been fighting about.

“Looks like I’m cleared now so…”

They waited with batted breath as he hesitated, clearly hating having to break whatever news it was to them. What could be so bad that he was so reluctant? Eventually, he looked up to face them head-on, but he wasn't focused on anyone in particular when he spoke.
“The Sandaime has been attacked and killed at his residence.

“Were you ever going to warn us that the most wanted S ranking criminal from your village was wandering your streets unaccounted for?” Rasa of Suna exclaimed way too loudly for a room as small at Tsunade’s office. She had been sitting behind the desk at the beginning of the conversation, but now she was leaning against it, facing her fellow Kage. She didn’t like to have the piece of furniture between them, and above that, she hated having to raise her head to talk to either of them.

“No,” she snapped. Maybe it was wrong of her, but she had no other answer for the man. She didn’t owe him anything, it had nothing to do with them.

“Were you trying to get us killed, Hokage?”

“He didn’t come for you.”

“And how do you know that?”

“Who’s the one who died here?” she roared. Rasa didn’t back down but he kept his mouth mercifully shut for a while.

“And you are in no position to talk about hidden truths, Kazekage, not when you brought you jinchuuriki in my village without my knowledge!”

The man had the decency not to try to defend what was, ultimately, the worst offense.

“Your own jinchuuriki entered the competition too, Hokage. That blonde kid, right?” Terumi Mei peeped from her corner of the room, looking thoroughly entertained by the whole thing. Tsunade willed herself not to react, even though she couldn’t think of what would have betrayed Naruto’s identity to Kiri.

Kids’ gossip, like for this Gaara boy? She had thought Kakashi was having her on when he had reported this to her. At least Rasa didn’t seem to be aware of the company his son kept in Konoha.

“We can do as we please in the confines of our walls. Or were you expecting us to just advertise him?” Tsunade retorted. How she hated to talk about the boys in this regard, but it wasn’t Naruto nor Gaara they were talking about it.

It was their respective military power.

“Just as we didn’t,” Rasa said. The nerves.

“You planted your Tailed Beast in the heart of Konoha in secret. Do you expect me to get let that slide?”

“Seeing that Orochimaru also entered the exam, I’d say it’s a good thing we had him indeed!”

That discussion was going nowhere and served no purpose whatsoever. Tsunade could feel the wood of her desk yield under the death grip she had on its edge. Deep down, she didn’t even care. She didn’t care about Suna and their jinchuuriki and their intentions, she didn’t care about who knew what and how. She just wanted this day to be over.

She wanted to grieve in peace.
“Anything to add, Mizukage? Did you also bring a criminal or a jinchuuriki in tow?” she asked sarcastically. It was childish to want to drag the woman into this, but she shouldn’t have been looking so damn smug about it all.

She quickly lost her contented smile at Rasa’s next words.

“Kiri has plenty of criminals to spare, Hokage. But as far as jinchuuriki go…”

The threat hung in the air, unspoken yet obvious. The information wasn’t confirmed, but the previous Mizukage was dead, and if Kiri had been able to seal its tailed beast into another host, they would have made no secret of the news. Jinchuuriki were deterrents, first and foremost, so if a level of secrecy was needed to protect them and their identity, they still had to be advertised in some way.

Kiri was deprived of its own for now. Mei didn’t let that deter her though, despite the sensitivity of the subject, despite how vulnerable it made her village.

”Ah, yes, it’s my fault, my timing isn’t right, I’m yet to be married and have no children to sacrifice as a host,” she spat, venomous despite her mild tone. Rasa choked up on a retort that promised to be anything but polite and Tsunade deemed it an opportune time to deescalate a situation that was only getting more and more problematic.

“Orochimaru is gone,” she said, “and we have nothing more to say to each other I believe. The gates will be open to you as long as you agree for your people to undergo some backup check. You’re free to go.”

“Then we will take our leave immediately.” Rasa declared. He gestured for one of the men accompanying him – the jounin instructor of his children’s team – to get the word out.

“We will follow Suna’s wise decision,” the Mizukage added. A true talent she had, to sound insulting in everything she said, no matter how sweet the words.

“A pleasure to have received you all here in Konoha,” Tsunade concluded, even though none of them would use such words to qualify the encounter in private. They exchanged curt bows. Just before exiting the office, Mei addressed Tsunade one last time.

“Congratulations on your new position, Hokage.” It sounded callous, but she added in a quieter voice, almost as an apology, “I’m sorry for your loss.”

Tsunade could almost believe she was sincere.

“Right now?”

“Yes, right now. Pack your bags. As soon as your father is done sorting things out here, we’re leaving.”

“But…”

“What?”

Baki leveled her with an expectant glare and Temari fell silent. Satisfied, he left their room to go warn the rest of their fellow ninja.
Temari cast an anxious look at Gaara. She thought she would find him reeling, well on his way to a crisis. But he only looked lost, terribly young at that moment as he stared at her, pleading. Despite everything, Gaara could never go against their father.

There was no time to seek out his friend now – who knew where he even was? Konoha was a large city. And how would they explain the delay to Baki? To the Kazekage?

They wouldn’t even believe it.

She hated that Konoha boy, she really did, yet she couldn’t just stay back and do nothing, not when it was the very first friend Gaara had ever made.

“Kankuro…” she began, wondering how she would convince her most stubborn brother to help out. But she found him already drawing quick instruction on the back of one his smaller puppets, that he used as a spy and a messenger. He threw the puppet out of the window and watched it hobble on the rooftop and leap away.

“It will find him and lead him to us,” Kankuro said gruffly.

Gaara was looking at them both, incomprehension clear on his face. Kankuro wasn’t looking at any of them, busying himself with his various tools to be carefully packed away.

She hadn’t even known he knew, that he had noticed anything. She wanted to say something, try to explain, because Gaara clearly didn’t get it and Kankuro was ignoring him as he always did, but he had noticed, and he wanted to help and…

If she asked though, or said anything, he would back down. She could guess what explanation he would give – that he just wanted to pacify Gaara and avoid one of his tantrums, that he only did it to make life easier for himself. And Gaara would believe him because Gaara didn’t understand people at all, least of all his brother.

“Your friend will come to say goodbye,” was all she said in the end, and still it took so long for it to sink in, for Gaara to take the measure of her words, for understanding to clear the confusion on his face. Not of what she was promising would happen.

But of how they were both willing to help him with it.

One day, she promised herself, one day that would stop surprising him. No matter how long it took, one day it would be the norm between them. She would see to it.

Without concertation, they all decided to go hang out at the playground. It felt impossible to just go home with what they had just heard, to deal with the news on their own.

Naruto thought and thought about it, but he couldn’t begin to analyze how the death of the old man made him feel.

He couldn’t recall the last time he had seen him, what they had said to each other, what had happened then. There was only one event dominating all memories he had of the Sandaime – his face cut into pieces by the bars of the cage, as he explained that no, he couldn’t let Naruto out.

Hadn’t the man been nice once? Hadn’t Naruto been happy to see him? Was he obligated to remember that, was it bad of him not to be sad, not to care? His friends were quiet around him, weighed down by the disappearance of someone they had known all their life, that they had
thought would always be there, that they liked and who liked them in turn.

Naruto didn’t feel a thing, if just sadness on their behalf, for he hated to see them looking so down and dejected. Even Kiba who was never so quiet, even Choji who was so good at finding the bright side in any given situation, even Shino who didn’t seem to care about much save from his bugs, and Shikamaru who had no care about anything at all. Even Hinata who he thought always looked sad but apparently could turn even sadder, even Ino who appeared to only have anger and vindication in her set of emotions.

Even Sasuke and Sakura, who shouldn’t have cared so much, because he had hurt Naruto and they were supposed to be on his side.

Except they didn’t know. He had never told them. They had never learned about Mizuki’s fate, about his mad dash through the forest, about the cage buried deep under the Intelligence Department. They didn’t know why he couldn’t bear small spaces. They didn’t know why he wasn’t sad.

He was in the wrong for wanting them to be aware of it anyway. It was his fault they knew nothing. And still they were the ones he was angry at.

Naruto was just a very bad friend.

“Hey, what’s that?”

Kiba pointed at a small wooden puppet hopping off toward them. It had two legs but no arm, and one big lifeless eye in the middle of its face.

It went straight to Naruto.

He was tempted to step on it until he recognized the craft and realized who it had to come from. There weren’t that many people around there who used this kind of puppet. He lifted it from the ground despite the others’ protests – there was a message on the back, carved hastily on the wood.

Naruto couldn’t read it.

A sharp spike of distress made him see double for a second, because this was a message for him and there was no doubt who had sent it, and it had to be important but he couldn’t read it, he just couldn't, he couldn’t decipher kanji that badly drawn when neatly printed characters were already a struggle. He had never regretted his lack of reading skills so badly before, it was just yet another thing he had he would have to live with, but now, if he couldn’t read it, if he couldn’t…

“Leaving now. Hurry.”

Naruto spun around to face Shikamaru, who had crept up in his back and read the message above his shoulder. There was nothing to be deciphered on his face, no expression nor judgment, no way to know why he had done that, if he knew how he had helped. Shikamaru wasn’t to be understood by the rest of them – what he knew and didn’t, why he did what he did, no one could ever know.

It was too strange to say thank you. Naruto just bolted.

“Leaving now. Hurry.”

Please, please, don’t disappear.
"Go warn Kakashi," Sasuke told Sakura before dashing after their friend. She ran in the opposite direction, as fast as she could.

They were walking slowly, slowly, any slower and they would have been going backward. They were less than twenty shinobi going back to Suna, it was easy to slow the group down, but there were limits to the delay they could buy.

Temari feared Gaara would snap, that he would just stop walking and refuse to go any further, especially with the gates coming closer and closer. He was as impassible as ever but Temari was highly trained in his tells. Where was that damn Naruto?

“Gaara!”

The group came to an abrupt halt.

Gaara was the only one not to be surprised, not to react in any way when the kid came barreling into him, almost knocking him off balance. Temari watched anxiously for her father’s reaction, and Baki’s and the others’, but they were just too shocked to say or do anything. Surely they expected to be drenched in blood any time soon – no one had ever gotten this close to Gaara and lived to tell the tale.

Well. Until that boy.

The other ninjas were ready to intervene – bloodthirsty monster or not, Gaara was a ninja of Suna and the Kazekage’s son, they couldn’t just let a Konoha nin assault him without doing anything. They didn’t have the time to react though.

“Are you ready?” Naruto asked in Gaara’s face because they were hugging, for all heavens they were hugging each other and Gaara nodded, calm and sure, completely trusting. Naruto took a step to the side and slammed his hand on Gaara’s back as hard as he could.

The boy gasped and spluttered violently enough that she thought he was going to throw up. All around them the various Suna and Konoha nin had seized their weapons – there were the ones guarding the gates, drawn by the commotion, and another genin from Konoha, the one who had beaten the pink-haired girl. Said girl was running toward them, jounin in tow. This could very well blow up to their faces at any moment.

Gaara and Naruto had no care for it. Despite the violence of the hit, Naruto was now supporting Gaara as if he wasn’t the one who had tried to detach his lungs from his chest. “Did it work?” he kept asking. “Did it work?”

Gaara got up slowly, Naruto’s hands still firm on his chest and back. He looked up to meet his gaze.

Temari gasped.

His face, his face! He was looking at Naruto in complete awe, open and young like he had never been in his life. He wasn’t smiling, but it was a close thing. The change was so jarring he looked like a different person.

"It's not mine," he murmured, disbelieving. “It wasn’t mine.”

“What?”
Temari wasn’t sure they were even aware there were other people around them.

“All of it. The bloodthirst, this… this desire, to harm and destroy, and to cause pain, and to kill. It wasn’t mine.”

He wasn’t crying either. But that, too, was a close, close thing.

“None of it was mine.”

She felt like crying too.

“What is happening here?”

It was a physical thing, Gaara’s hackles going up at the mere voice of their father. The Kazekage made his way toward the two boys. They let go, though they didn’t step away, staying in each other’s space. The man got no answer.

“Gaara. Explain yourself.”

Temari would bet her fan Gaara wouldn’t say another word from then on.

“Naruto,” one of the Konoha jounin intervened, with the demanding tone of a scolding teacher. Silver hair, one eye visible only – wasn’t that the famous copy nin? The other ones, she didn’t recognize.

It was obvious both boys would stay silent as the grave. Though when the Kazekage took another step forward Gaara faltered, just barely.

It was wild that Gaara, for all his raw power and the destruction he could yield, still could be afraid of their father.

The copy nin took a step too, not menacing but purposeful enough that it caught the Kazekage’s attention. They assessed each other quietly, considering.

Rasa of Suna wasn’t known for his patience though.

“We’re leaving,” he declared, leaving no room for argument and expecting everyone to fall in line, as was the norm. Expect Gaara gripped Naruto’s hand and didn’t move.

He wasn’t even aware of it, probably didn’t know what he wanted to do, what was happening exactly. All he knew was that he didn’t want to let go, and even their father’s scorching glare didn’t manage to make him move, to the man’s growing anger and confusion. Gaara was distressed. She had to do something.

Naruto beat her to it. He leaned in to talk into Gaara’s ear, and Rasa couldn’t hear them, but she could.

“I’ll come find you,” he said. “When I’m strong enough, I’ll come. You wait for me. I’ll come for sure.”

And Gaara to nod gravely like it was a reasonable thing to say, like he had no doubt the boy would do just that, like it wasn’t an insane thing to believe. Gaara brought a hand up to brush at something at the base of the other boy’s throat, beneath the forehead protector he wore around his neck. Gaara nodded and relaxed and he let go of the other boy’s hands, placated by his promise.

And on Naruto’s face shone a determination that proved those weren’t empty words. He believed
them, as absolutely as Gaara did. Heedless of the consequences, of the logistics, of how unlikely they were to ever meet again, they believed it, and Temari wanted to shake them up, to dislodge the idea because it was insane, it was crazy, but most importantly, it felt like they could do it indeed.

It felt like one word from that boy would take Gaara away from them.

From her.

Gaara turned away, resumed walking, ignoring all the eyes on him, the gaping shinobi who looked like they were seeing him for the very first time. He ignored their father who ignored him in turn, even though his thunderous expression promised consequences later on. Naruto stayed rooted to the spot, fixated on Gaara’s back. He opened his mouth just as Temari made to follow.

“Gaara,” he called. His voice was low but the other heard him still. Their eyes caught again. They forgot about their audience, again.

Naruto gave a gentle, absent smile. A little pained, but hopeful too, drawing a similar softness from her brother. The boy’s voice hitched on the first sound, but he didn’t hesitate.

“I love you.”

A hush. Over the whole scene, the whole world it seemed. Temari wanted to scream, to rage and jump around and throw a tantrum because how, why, why this boy, how, in such a short time, with so little effort…

How had he managed to do that so easily?

Gaara stared, eyes wide. He looked shell shocked, completely blindsided. And yet the answer came easily. He touched his fingertips to the tattoo on his forehead.

“And I, I love you.”

Temari was overcome by a sharp sensation of loss.

It was her brother. He felt lost to her then.

“We’re leaving,” their father said again through gritted teeth. Kankuro made to take Gaara’s arm and stir him away.

The sand stopped him. Not violently, not with any force, but it still raised a barrier to prevent contact, and Gaara barely noticed while Kankuro’s eyes filled with surprise and hurt. This time they weren’t stopped as they walked away, crossed the gates and picked up the pace. Gaara didn’t look back and didn’t add another word. Neither did the rest of the party.

There was nothing left to say.

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Sasuke couldn’t detach his gaze from Naruto’s back.

His fingers were itching to reach out, close around the worn-down fabric of his friend's sweatshirt, because Naruto wasn’t moving but it still felt like he was walking away. Still felt like he was following Gaara, leaving with him, never to return. Sasuke wanted to hold on to him as hard as he could, to never let go.

Sasuke wanted to hear these words again. He wanted to say them too. He wondered, why was it
that they had never done it? Because it was the truth. Right? They did have love between them. Naruto had to know that, he had to.

Why didn’t they just say it then?

He felt bad to have witnessed what they had just witnessed. Both because it felt terribly inappropriate to be spectators to such intimacy, such raw feelings and open display. And also because he would have rather not known. He would have rather ignored the bond that linked the two boys, the depth of the affection they had for one another. He would have rather not known Naruto could say those words and mean them, that Naruto had such feelings stored inside him, and that he had chosen that person to share them with, and that person wasn't Sasuke.

He would have rather not been here at all.

As soon as Naruto made the slightest move, Sakura was on him, pulling at his forehead protector. It came free at the first tug since he tied it loosely, and left his throat and the top of his chest exposed.

Naruto stared straight ahead as they all zeroed on the exposed skin, where Gaara had brushed his fingers, where he had seemed to see something of import, something that had reassured him in their fate, in the certitude that they would meet again.

There, just at the base of Naruto’s throat, stuck between his collar bone, two kanji had been etched in the skin in blood red, the same way the love kanji branded Gaara’s forehead. Those were far simpler, just a few lines.

It spelled “freedom”.

Naruto met Sakura’s gaze when she handed him back his forehead protector. It was hard to say who her anger was directed at.

“Is that what you want?” she asked, aggressive but pleading too. For an answer? Which one? Sasuke surely knew which he didn’t want to hear.

“And one day I’ll get it.”

“And from what? What do you wish to leave behind, what is so binding here huh? What will set you free?”

Sasuke didn’t want to hear it, he didn’t. He already knew. He knew what Naruto, deep down, wished for. Knew that he didn’t think that freedom to be found anywhere around here.

“Sakura. Leave it.”

It was useless for Kakashi to say it, because Naruto wouldn’t answer anyway. At the very least he had learned to keep those thoughts for himself. Which was a danger in itself, for it led them to believe he had given up on them when it was the opposite. Naruto always had his eyes beyond the walls. He just took care to look when nobody else was.

Sasuke didn’t reach out, didn't take a hold on him. He had a terrible feeling it wouldn't change a thing.

“What is it, Naruto?” Shisui asked patiently after spying out of the corner of his eyes the kid
hovering at his bedroom door for the past few minutes.

“I don’t own any dark clothe.”

Shisui let out a surprised chuckle at the mundanity of the request. Naruto had been quiet and withdrawn ever since the Suna nin had left the village, a short week ago. Shisui had barely heard the sound of his voice since.

“Why didn’t you ask Sasuke for a spare?” he asked, although he knew the answer. Naruto was avoiding his friends again. That pattern was getting old. The boy shrugged, elusive.

“Let me dig up something for you,” Shisui compromised. It was welcome enough that Naruto was even willing to attend the funeral – Shisui wasn’t about to alienate him to it over a set of clothes.

Naruto was short for his age, and Shisui was quite tall – even his oldest shirt was large on the boy. He didn’t mind – he tied a belt around his waist to have it fit his narrow build and slid into a pair of black shorts which waistband could be tightened. Only then did it occur to either of them…

“Don’t you have a jacket or something, that could cover it?”

Naruto didn’t wear more than his sweatshirt in the height of winter and would certainly never ask for a jacket in the humid spring weather if not for the large Uchiha fan he currently sported on his back. Shisui debated the logistics of unstitching the pattern form the shirt for all of two seconds before promptly throwing that reasoning out of the window.

“It’s fine like this,” he declared.

No one would start any shit on that day, and if he could picture Fugaku’s disapproving expression already, he couldn’t bring himself to care.

“Is it?” the boy pondered, sarcastic, but there was a form of vulnerability in his tone.

Sasuke had come to find Shisui a few days ago, so upset he had barely managed to explain why. The why was simple – Naruto was unhappy, and Sasuke feared he would try to go look for a better alternative far from here, from them.

That Naruto would never be allowed to didn’t change the fact that they had to do something about it. Shisui had long ago vowed to himself that he would make it so that Naruto would finally understand he did have a place here, that he was cared for, that they loved him. It was still ongoing. It would likely never stop, and every step counted. So he nodded firmly, taking care to look confident in his decision.

Dumbstruck, Naruto could only agree.

The whole village was there to say farewell to the Sandaime. Shisui had always been fond of the old man, who was an honorary grandfather to all the kids in Konoha. The last few years had put quite the strain on that though, what with the Danzo affair and then Naruto… Shisui looked around him, and he was irrationally angry that most people around him had no knowledge of any of this. He had no interest in slandering the name of the beloved Hokage, but still, it didn’t seem fair, that he was known only for his benevolence and kindness, as if he had ever only been an aging grandpa and not the chief of their military forces, responsible for all the major decisions taken by the village in the last decade, good and bad.

Naruto was frowning to new depth when came his turn to lay a white rose on the man’s grave. Shisui remembered the cage, and he was sure that right now it was all Naruto was thinking about.
Konohamaru, Shisui’s most promising and also most troublesome student, was sobbing loudly next to his parents, and once again Shisui wondered at the duplicity people could engage in. The boy was inconsolable because he had lost a very important member of his family and life, and what would he care about his grandfather’s mistakes if he knew of them? Would he understand even?

He was about the same age as Naruto when he had been put in chains. Did the Sandaime ever think of that?

Shisui and Naruto stayed among the gathered Uchiha clan. As predicted, they were too busy chewing on their own bitterness to remark on the colors Naruto was sporting. Sasuke noticed, of course, since nothing about Naruto escaped him, but he didn’t react to it. No doubt was he pleased about it anyway.

Itachi stayed closed too. Izumi was by his side and Shisui caught her taking hold of their friend’s hand discreetly in silent support. His mother was watching him closely, probably looking out for signs of distress and anguish. Itachi and Naruto caught each other’s gaze at some point during the ceremony, and some sort of understanding passed between them. They had the strangest similarities, the two of them, even if they had to be only vaguely aware of it, or not at all.

They both believed themselves to be monsters in the making. And neither could be deterred from that idea.

“Am I wrong not to be sad?” Naruto whispered as they followed the group to the Hokage monument where the Godaime would unveil the fourth stele coming to join the others. Naruto tried to look unaffected, and it didn’t work. He wasn’t asking if he was in the wrong. He wondered if there was something wrong with him. Itachi was right by his side, listening without subtlety. Shisui didn’t even have to think about the answer.

“No.”

No matter if others would disagree. Naruto was entitled to his mixed feelings about the old man. Itachi too. There were enough people mourning him that he could forgive these two.

The Godaime’s speech was pretty short. She looked grief-stricken and very tired, and likely wasn’t so fond of big speeches in the first place – after a few lines about her predecessor’s mighty deeds and inheritance, she called for a minute of silence to pay their respects to their fallen leader.

It was only disturbed by Konohamaru’s sobs.

They all dispersed after that, most clan and family leaving to put together their own wake among themselves. The mourning period would last three days, where all the shops would be closed and all missions suspended.

Then it would be time to properly instigate the Hokage’s succession.

Shisui liked Tsunade, for the few interactions he had had with her. She cared about the kids and the school, enough for her to score points in his book, and she was willing to listen to anyone on all subjects, big or small.

But only time would tell how much she took after her mentor.

Maybe it wasn’t such a bad thing, that they could no longer trust their leaders so blindly. Maybe they should have done that sooner, voice their opinion, question their orders.

Refuse them, even.
Ah, what an idea.

“Do you have any questions about the proceedings of the ceremony?” the old Koharu asked forcefully, jolting Tsunade up from where she had been dozing off at her desk.

“No, I’m good,” she assured, though she hadn’t heard half of the woman’s long-winded speech. How hard could it be? She had witnessed it thrice already – she was confident she could get through swearing her loyalty to her village and receive a hat on her head. Koharu glared at her disapprovingly but she made no further comment. Small blessings.

She waited for the two council members to exit the office to recline in her chair with a sigh. She used an old technique to take herself out of the present’s troubles and burdens – she imagined herself a month, two months, six months later, where the current crisis would have passed, when it was already nothing more than an unpleasant memory. It was her go-to coping technique during the war, when it was so hard to think about anything other than the cold, the hunger, the pain, the drying blood stiffening their clothes and filling the air with a foul metallic smell. One day, all this would have passed. In those moments knowing that time couldn’t stop was a blessing.

“Never thought I would watch you take on the hat,” Jiraiya commented in her back as he climbed into the office through the window.

“Didn’t think I would make it?” she asked without managing to sound offended. Of course he didn’t. She shouldn’t have been here at all.

“To be honest I thought the old man would outlive us all. I never thought…”

For all that they mixed with death every day, it was absurd how it could still take them by surprise. Hiruzen, they had thought him immortal. He had always been there, and, against all logic, they believed he would always be.

“I didn’t think he was so diminished,” Jiraiya pondered aloud.

“What do you mean?”

“Even if was old… Orochimaru is good, but he’s not that good. That fight should have lasted longer.”

He must have noticed her disbelief on her face. He frowned.

“What?”

“There was no fight,” she said dryly, angered that he hadn’t caught on that already.

“What? How is that? Did the kid tell you that?”

Konohamaru had heard and seen very little. A fortunate thing – since Tsunade already knew what had happened anyway, she was relieved to know he wouldn't keep too many terrible images of that day.

“Yeah, but he didn’t have to. Isn’t it obvious?”

Obviously not. She sighed, angry at him for not knowing that, for forcing her to explain it aloud.

“He didn’t fight, Yaya. He surrendered.”
Her friend began to protest, before his brain finally caught up to speed with the whole situation. He
closed his mouth, taken aback. She almost felt bad for bursting his bubble like this.

Almost. There was no reason why she should have to bear this on her own.

“I imagine Chichi gave him a choice. He said he wasn’t going after Konoha, but that doesn’t mean
he didn’t want to, and he would have, I’m sure, had he not gotten what he came here for.”

“You think… that couldn’t be his sole objective. That’s so…”

Jiraiya didn’t find an appropriate word to qualify it. Petty, foolish? Meaningless, mean? Yet there
was no doubt in her mind. The fight had been too short, Hiruzen’s wounds too straightforward. It
was even possible Orochimaru had blown up the house after the fact on a whim, to cause a little
panic, to advertise his deeds.

He had offered to spare Konoha in exchange for the old man’s life, and his wish had been granted.

She could picture his disbelief and frustration, could imagine the conflict in him, between wanting
the man to die as quickly and easily as possible, and wanting him to refuse, to put his life before his
village for the first time in his life, to finally betray his principles and give Orochimaru a good
fight. The results were the same anyway.

Except now the Sandaime had sacrificed himself for the village, and she had no doubt the clan
heads and the jounin, the ones old enough anyway, were well aware of it.

And it wasn’t fair.

She hated that anger, she hated that she couldn't let this go. But this wasn't how it was supposed to
end. She still had things to ask him, and he still had things to answer for. It felt like cheating, it felt
too easy. Where were their resentment and reproaches supposed to go now? How were they to get
closure?

On one hand, she was pathetically grateful that they had avoided a full-scale attack, that
Orochimaru hadn’t had the chance to level an entire district and to kill many more of them. In that
regard, Hiruzen was a hero.

On the other hand, wasn’t he a coward too?

What had gone through his mind then? He could have beaten Orochimaru, she was sure of it. He
could have, maybe, had he tried. It would have caused more damage and more death maybe, but
they would have caught the man at last and wouldn't that have been a better way to make amend, to
fix past mistakes? Though he wasn’t guaranteed to succeed. It would have been even worse for the
fight to happen only for Orochimaru to come out on top in the end.

The decision was sensible, noble too. But damn it, it was still beyond frustrating. The easy way
out.

How pointless, to be angry at the dead. Yet to know it didn’t make the anger go away. Not for her,
and not for the other senior shinobi either. She didn't want to think what would become of those
feelings, if they would be able to let them go or if they would let them fester, to come to bite them
in the ass at the worst moment.

Couldn’t have Orochimaru stayed in his stupid village.

Kakashi told her that they ought to keep an eye on Naruto, and she dreaded to think what
Orochimaru could have told him, could have promised him. He was good at offering what people desired the most, when they didn’t even know they did. As to know if he actually provided in the end...

She didn't hold her breath on that one. But Naruto didn’t know him like she did.

“I’ll go after him,” Jiraiya declared, fire renewed now that he knew their former teammate to be so close, and still up to no good.

She fucking knew he was going to say that.

“No want you want,” she sighed, no fight left in her.

“You don’t approve?”

“I don’t care. I didn’t plan to count on you.”

Chichi came first in Jiraiya’s heart, always had, always would. She had known it forever, from the start really, had accepted it because what else was there to do? She was angrier at the fact that he wasn’t even aware of it, that stupid shithead. He couldn’t think of anything better to do, couldn’t fathom that she needed him here, that he could have put her first, for once, let go of the other man for once since it was pointless to chase after him anyway. Chichi wouldn’t get caught. But he was Jiraiya’s responsibility, his drive. He wasn’t able to care about anything else.

Case in point, he didn’t catch the meaning of her words, shrugging like he did when he gave up on understanding her, without even trying.

It was fine. She would manage without him. It wasn’t anything new.

The mood remained heavy, but lighter still a few days later, when Tsunade stood above the crowd at the top of the Archive building, to be officially introduced at the Godaime Hokage of Konoha. She had been doing this for months, and yet she would only be legitimate today, recognized by all as Sarutobi Hiruzen’s successor. She wondered what they thought of it, the civilians, the shinobi, all those people. Some disapproved, some didn’t care, some were glad. She wondered if it mattered at all. They just had to accept it, they had no say in the matter.

Maybe they should have. But it’s not like there was anyone else to take on the job. If there was, she wouldn’t have been here.

Soon they would start the process of carving her face in the mountain with the others. The idea of having to face that every day from then on was far from appealing, but she would bend to the tradition, as she had to.

Nara Shikaku was the one to lower the hat on her head. He was as stoic and perfunctory as ever, and she understood why he had held onto the position of jounin commander for so long. Maybe she could have forced him to become Hokage in her place, but she didn’t trust him not to botch it out of spite. Really, there was no escaping it.

“Here stands Senju Tsunade, the Godaime of Konoha,” he said solemnly, presenting her to the gathered crowd.

“Here I stand,” she echoed, taking in the sea of faces turned toward her, which would keep at it from then on – looking up at her, waiting to be guided.
Here she stood indeed.

Chapter End Notes

So here we are, the third is dead, here is Naruto's tattoo, and here is what I've been building up to between the boys. I said this to someone in the comments I think but I'm very into intense platonic relationships, and I think people should say "I love you" more often in non-romantic ways (she says when she's unable to speak the words in her own language to anyone at all lol). Just to say that Naruto and Gaara's relationship won't turn romantic.

As for Sasuke, he's in deep already, but it will take time to understand it.

Kinda feel like Gaara's departure could have been more dramatic but at the same time they are pretty resigned to the force pressuring them for now. Throwing a tantrum now would do them no good. Also Rasa is sorta chill there because he doesn't actually know Naruto is Konoha's jinchuuriki, or he would be blowing up right now.

Didn't I say I would keep the rambling short?

I hope you enjoyed. Tumblr is this way. I drew a bunch of stuff for Naruto Sci-fi week, go check it out if you'd like! See you.
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Naruto has doubts.

Chapter Notes

Was a bit stuck for this chapter but I'm better now. Wanted to address the fact that Naruto's life did improve as of late and that it could make him want to stay and see.

There was a LOT of feedback on the previous chapter, you all spoil me. A lot of newcomers too, so I welcome you all here and hope you'll keep enjoying this. I also discovered that reddit channels about fanfic were a thing and that this had been recommended in some places. It's always nice to see my work mentioned somewhere, so thanks for that!

Almost forgot but I drew our boy Nart as he is now. I swear he'll smile at some point.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This early in the morning, the hospital wasn’t so busy yet. It was the slow kind of activity it could see on the day-to-day – patients waiting on uncomfortable chairs for a check-up, standing in lines as the pharmacist prepared their medicine, nurses doing a bit of cleaning up and paperwork while they had the time. Once again Tsunade was grateful that at the very least, they had avoided open confrontations in the streets of Konoha during Orochimaru’s latest stunt. The hospital and its staff were in no condition to handle such an emergency.

She was taking stock of all this once more – the peeling paint, the outdated or worn down tools and equipment, but above all, the tragic lack of training of the medics.

It was the nurses who were running the house and keeping it from collapsing, and they did it without any ninjutsu. The few medic-nin who could perform acceptable healing techniques only handled the bigger trauma, namely the retuning shinobi injured during their missions. And what they could do then was tragically limited.

The size of the task at hand was enough to give Tsunade a headache and a strong urge to drink. Fortunately, for this – as for all things – she wasn’t alone.

“Is that all of them?” she asked Shizune when the young woman came back from various spots in the hospital, young medic trainee in tow.

“Yes.”

Nine women and three men. Less than half of what they would need to let Tsunade sleep
peacefully at night, knowing that the next crisis could be handled by her medical staff. But it was better than nothing.

Shizune had been spending a few hours every day teaching them for several weeks. The senior staff had been kind of offended, of course, by Tsunade’s implications that they weren’t good enough to treat anyone, let alone teach someone to do it. Granted, she could have been more gentle about it. But at the end of the day, she didn’t care about some ego – the fact was Shizune was more competent than all of them combined, and Tsunade had no qualm reminding everyone of it.

“Ah, there’s just Marco missing. He must be at the library.”

“Or the morgue,” one of the students peeped in her back, earning a few snickers from her colleague, quickly snuffed out by Shizune’s scorching glare. Tsunade couldn’t be more proud.

Just then a scrawny young man came tumbling down the hall and came to a halt at Shizune’s side, out of breath and panting heavily. His face was half-hidden by a heavy mop of curly dark hair and there were freckles all over his brown skin, including his hands and neck.

“Sorry I’m late, I was helping out at the morgue.”

More snickering. Tsunade rolled her eyes – they were young, but they weren’t *that* young. Did they have to act like unruly teenagers?

“I’ll take that one,” she said purely out of spite, and because that would spare her the trouble to be introduced to each and every one of them. She would come to know them soon enough anyway, if Shizune deemed them worthy of her lessons.

They looked displeased, but they had the good sense not to say anything about it, as Shizune led them away to an exam room for some practice. The boy stayed rooted to the spot, having understood at least that he was supposed to stay while the other went, but not much more, judging by his confused, kind of scared look.

“Come,” Tsunade ordered. He scrambled after her without grace.

“What’s your name?” she asked. It was only polite, even if she already knew.

“I’m-I’m Marco. What’s yours?”

She faltered, taken aback. He looked away so as not to meet her gaze.

“I’m Tsunade,” she said, because what was she supposed to answer? “Don’t you know?” That would have been rude.

Tsunade hadn’t chosen the boy entirely by chance. Shizune had told her about him – no future as a medic-nin or any kind of field practitioner, but he was a walking encyclopedia, found more than once camping in the library. A brilliant mind, if a little weird. That’s what she needed right now – brilliant, not weird. Although that was kind of refreshing.

“And how old are you?”

“Nineteen.”

She almost believed he would throw that question back too, but he didn’t dare, or he simply forgot, as his attention was caught by a nurse cleaning the bloody knee of a young kid in the corridor. Marco averted his gaze, only to fall back on Tsunade’s.
“I’m not a fan of blood,” he said as an apology, shoulders hunched in shame.

Tsunade understood then why Shizune had been so adamant about her meeting him.

She hadn’t put herself to the test yet. She could handle the sight of that kid because she was able to be rational about it, to focus on the superficiality of the wound and know there was no cause for panic. She knew it wasn’t exactly blood she was afraid of – it was life, life slipping away, trickling one drop at a time or in a torrent, impossible to contain. It was her own powerlessness in the face of death.

She had no idea if she would be able to face it, and no one knew about that of course, except for Shizune. No one could know – she was a legendary medic-nin. She couldn’t be scared of blood.

“Yeah, me neither.”

It was her turn to hold her head high so that she wouldn’t meet his eyes, but she felt his puzzled look on her face. Luckily, they were nearing the door they had been looking for.

It was already open, and Tsunade quickly understood why.

“Did you have to carry him back to his bed again?” she asked Sayuki, a tall nurse dry as a twig and strong as a horse, that was, as such, assigned to wrestling recalcitrant patients to their bed, and especially one patient.

"I swear if he doesn't stop with this training non-sense I will tie him up to his bed!" she exclaimed. She had voiced the threat before.

Back under his cover, Rock Lee looked sheepish, but not at all like he had learned his lesson.

“We’ve talked about this, Lee. You have to rest.”

“Yes, Hokage-sama.”

She had never heard a least convincing agreement.

“Lee, I brought Marco here today so that he could run some tests with me. Are you okay with that?”

The boy shrugged – he was always okay with everything. He did as he was told, took his medicine, went to physical therapy. But he couldn’t keep to his bed.

Marco was a good doctor by the books only, but that was enough for his purpose today – she guided him through the physical examination, though she noticed he was reluctant to initiate contact. Another damming fact in his file. Still, they went through it, and he mercifully kept his conclusions to himself. In fact, he stayed silent the whole time they were in there.

“No change then?” Lee asked once they were done, because he was used to this by now. She shook her head, apologetic.

“No yet. But I’ll help you, Lee. I promise.”

He had told her several times that she didn’t need to, that she was the Hokage and that she had to have better things to do than take care of one insignificant ninja – his self-esteem wasn’t at its best these days.

She retorted she did what she wanted and had ordered him to stop arguing about it. Sometimes it
helped to be the boss of them all.

“I don’t understand,” Marco said as soon as they stepped out of the room, closing the door on poor Lee getting chewed out by Nurse Sayuki again.

“What?”

“There is no helping him. He’s lucky he even has his leg still. He’ll be luckier if he gets to walk without a cane one day.”

She sighed. She knew that all too well. The repairs she had done to his bones were patch-ups at best. They weren’t a solution he could heal around.

“That’s where you come in.”

He seemed pretty scared by that.

“Shizune tells me you know all the ins and out of the medical library. I need you to do some research for me, research I can’t conduct myself. I need you to find me something to work with. I told Lee I would fix him, and I will. And you will help me.”

To her surprise, the apprehension disappeared completely. He must have thought she would ask him something scary like an actual operation – as if she would ever let him take a scalpel to a living being.

“I-I can do that,” he said, and despite the hesitation, he seemed to believe that. He met her gaze for the first time that day.

“I can do that,” he said again, a little steadier.

She smiled at him. “Then get to work.”

“A mission?” Naruto asked, incredulous.

“Yes. We still have a job to do.”

At least he wasn’t the only one to find that preposterous. Kakashi could assume disaffection all he wanted, it didn’t change the fact that it was anything but as obvious as he said. The three genin of Team 7 exchanged dubious looks.

Their last mission had been a total fiasco, and the next trial, the exam, hadn’t been much better.

"As long as the Chunin promotions aren’t announced, we are still a team," Kakashi said, as if that explained anything.

It sort of did, but then it had nothing to do with them doing their duty.

It was highly likely that Sasuke would make Chunin. Sakura’s promotion was even on the table too, though she didn’t seem to nurture much hope about it. The announcement had been delayed because of the mess the exam had ended on, but it was only a matter of time.

Very soon, this team would no longer exist.

It didn’t mean they would never have missions together again. A lot of genin trio stayed close
teammates despite the different advancement of the members, with one commanding the others.

But it wouldn’t be like that for them. Chunin didn’t get the missions genin did – they traveled further, for longer periods of time.

Something Naruto wouldn’t be allowed to do.

“One last ride then?” he asked, because he couldn’t help but twist the knife, because it was better to get ahead of it, get it out. There was no point in tiptoeing.

Sakura grimaced, Sasuke frowned. Even Kakashi couldn’t quite keep up the nonchalant façade. Naruto buried deeper in his hoodie, pissed at their palpable disappointment. This was just how things were. They had to get over it.

Shizune inviting them to enter the Missions Assignment Desk saved them all from having to go on with that conversation.

“C-ranked,” Namiashi Raudo said – he was the one handing assignments today. “Some thefts and altercations at the food storage warehouse. No one got seriously hurt so it’s probably low-level thugs from nearby settlements.”

“Do we have to catch them?” Kakashi asked, accepting the mission scroll.

“Or dissuade them from trying again.”

Were shinobi allowed to just kill whoever they wanted, Naruto wondered.

Near the North gate were the warehouses, where the food and various products coming from around the country were stored before being distributed to the various shops and restaurants in town. Konoha produced little of its food – they only had a couple of glasshouses to grow some vegetables, and some livestock outside the walls tended by local farmers. Everything else, especially rice and wheat, came from the farming lands of Fire country, as did other raw materials like fabric and paper.

Sakura explained all of that on their way to the gate. Naruto stopped listening when she went on with the finer art of long-term storage planning in case of shortage or war.

It was decided they would split – Kakashi and Sakura would go investigate the woods and fields nearby to see if they could find the thieves’ hideout, while Sasuke and Naruto would have to watch the warehouse.

Naruto didn’t know which was the worst offense – that he didn’t even get to take three steps beyond the walls, or that Kakashi hadn’t found anything better to force Sasuke and him to get stuck together for a prolonged amount of time.

They hadn’t talked in what felt like forever. The last time hadn’t gone so well. Sasuke was mad at him for something, and Naruto sort of got why. He was mad too, for the same reason, and it was absurd but they couldn’t do anything about it. They weren’t even angry at each other, not really.

It was nobody’s fault if they couldn’t understand each other. But it was maddening all the same.

“Give me the binoculars,” Sasuke demanded, tone impatient, for the third time in as many minutes.

“I told you, there’s nothing to see.”
“Give them anyway.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m bored, that’s why!”

Naruto huffed but passed the binoculars over. He was bored too, and looking at the warehouse through the lenses was barely an improvement over counting the leaves of the tree they were perched in. They weren’t that far, since they had to be able to intervene quickly if needed, so the binoculars were a bit redundant, but it gave them the illusion that they had something to do.

“So. How are you?”

Naruto’s eyebrows shot up high enough to disappear under his hair and he cast the most incredulous look at the other boy, but Sasuke stayed stubbornly focused on the binoculars and didn’t meet his gaze. There was nothing natural in his rigid posture, in the tight grip he had over the thing – at least he knew this was awkward as hell.

“I’m fine, I guess.”

It’s not like Sasuke didn’t know. They saw each other every day.

“You?” Naruto asked back anyway. It seemed like the right thing to do.

“Fine.”

The silence was somewhat more tensed than it had been a minute ago. Naruto was scrambling for something to say just to break it, because it wasn’t like that between them, it had never been, and he didn’t want it to. Sasuke beat him to it, though he seemed determined to make things even worse.

“You know, we’ll surely go to Suna someday.”

It was probably the most out of context thing Sasuke could have possibly said.

“What?”

“There are missions that could take us there. Or diplomatic visits, or just messages to deliver.”

“What are you talking about?” Naruto asked, as if he didn’t know. Sasuke finally put the binoculars down, but he still didn’t look at Naruto. Naruto couldn’t look away.

“I mean… We’ll meet with them again. Those people from Suna.”

And by those people, he only meant a specific one.

“Why do you care?” Naruto asked, more confused than aggressive.

“I know you want to.”

“So?”

It didn’t make sense. Naruto knew neither Sasuke nor Sakura appreciated the fact that he had gotten so close to Gaara, that he had preferred his company to theirs for the whole time he was here. It made no sense then that Sasuke would want to make it happen again.
The dismissal in his voice finally annoyed Sasuke enough that he turned back to him.

“Is it so hard to understand that I would want what you want?”

There was accusation in his voice, and it was easier to react to it than to his words, the feelings showing in his eyes and on his face.

Easier to get into a fight.

“You…”

“Stop! Come back here you thief!”

A second later, a man with his face and hair hidden under a scarf zoomed past their tree toward the small woods behind the warehouse, chased by a corpulent quartermaster rapidly losing ground. They had assumed the thieves came from beyond the walls, but it wasn’t the direction this one was taking.

The quartermaster had already given up on the chase, panting heavily next to the tree. Naruto and Sasuke jumped down.

“We’ll take care of it,” Sasuke said politely, with a bow and everything. Naruto was already running.

The intel was correct – that man was no challenge to a shinobi. He was weighed down by the heavy bag of rice he had stolen, and his footing was unsure on the uneven ground of the woods. They caught up to him soon enough. Naruto jumped his back, slamming him to the ground, and stayed seated there.

“Let me go, let me go!”

The man kicked and screamed, to no avail.

“What do we do?” Naruto asked. “Bring him back to the Tower?”

“Wait. There’s…”

Sasuke was staring, eyes bright red, seeing things Naruto couldn’t hope to.

“Don’t you have those seals to break ninjutsu?” he asked, and Naruto followed his lead without questions, pulled out a thick marker pen from his short pocket and drew two small seals on his thumb and middle finger – he couldn’t call up the seals without drawing them for now.

He pinched the man’s nape – his body disappeared in a puff of smoke, and Naruto found himself sitting on a much smaller and thinner one, that managed to wriggle out of his grip and got back to its feet, ready for a fight.

It was a girl, messy bob cut hiding a dirty, angry face. She was younger than them by a few years. She drew a knife from her back.

“Let me go,” she hissed, showing no hint of fear at the two trained shinobi in front of her, even though she had to know what they could do to her. She wasn’t from the Academy, that was for sure.

Naruto recognized her, but not from there.
“You’re from the orphanage.”

It wasn’t a question, and she didn’t feel the need to answer. She didn’t have to.

“Why are you doing this?” Sasuke asked, gesturing at the bag rice that had miraculously survive their tumble unscathed. The girl rolled her eyes hard, disdainful.

“Take a guess.”

“Don’t you get food there?”

Naruto and the girl let out a perfectly matched snort. Sasuke frowned, vexed. Naruto felt a little guilty – it wasn’t his fault he had no idea how that place worked, how the life there was like. But it was just laughable, the idea that the orphans ate their fill.

“You can’t possibly need that much for yourself,” Sasuke tried again, stubborn as always in his quest for answers, for a better understanding.

“Of course not.” It was Naruto she addressed then, because she might have recognized him too, or she just recognized their similarities, that strange culture they shared. "I sell it back to the other kids."

“The ones who did it before you were better. They never got caught,” Naruto jabbed, ignoring Sasuke’s scandalized look. The outings of the orphanage kids were strictly regulated, but it wasn’t hard to slip past the aging nurses and climb the wall opposite to the entrance gate, facing the forest. The older kids – ten, twelve years old – went into town to steal food and supply that they brought back to share or sell. Of course, they had no money – they dealt in favors, knowledge, things they had stolen themselves, the few possessions they still had from another life, a family that had existed at some point but was of no use anymore. It was as much a necessity as a distraction, a thrill, that whole market happening in the darkest corners of the corridors and empty bathrooms at night.

The kids that went to the Academy taught basic ninjutsu to those who were able to do it. Naruto had learned the Henge at the orphanage, though he was too young to practice it when he had left, and that girl surely had too.

“Who said I got caught?” she challenged, raising her knife.

She was really up to fight them both.

Naruto could understand why. He too would have chosen the terrible odds of escaping two genin than the certainty of being brought in front of the Hokage and facing the Head Nurse’s wrath. The old ma’am would be lenient, probably. She was nice to kids – she was even nice to Naruto, of all people, so she wouldn’t care about a nameless orphan. But the Head Hag? That girl wouldn’t see daylight for a week, at the very least.

So he did the obvious thing to do. He spun around and very deliberately faced away from her, getting absorbed in the contemplation of the trees surrounding them.

She didn’t need more than a second to get it. At the orphanage solidarity and kindness were never expressed as such – they wouldn’t have been understood anyway. It was things like this – distracting the nurses, lying during room inspections, looking away.

She spun around and dashed through the trees.
“What the… what are you doing Naruto?”

“What? We’re not going to arrest her!”

“She’s a thief!”

“She’s just a kid like us!”

“Yeah, and we don’t steal things!”

“You don’t!”

Sasuke clicked his tongue. Naruto huffed, nose wrinkling. Were all those things easier to ignore when they were younger? Why was it such a big deal now, the differences between them, all the things that set them apart? Why did it seem to get into every conversation, every little cracks, taking up all the space?

“It’s not doing her any favor,” Sasuke muttered, changing tactics. “She’s bound to get caught again, by someone not as nice as you are.”

Naruto wanted to protest that it wasn’t out of niceness, but he had already started rebutting Sasuke’s first point.

“Avoiding punishment is a great favor actually. And it’s not like they have a choice! They do what they have to!”

“We could help.”

“How? Are you going to feed her?”

“Why not!”

Naruto stared, puzzled, and Sasuke looked embarrassed but he didn’t back down.

“If it’s food or money they lack…”

“What? You’ll pay yourself?”

“I could!”

“For how long? How much? What about when you’re no longer there, huh? When you get bored or you can’t do it anymore or any other reason, what about when you die? What then?”

It was Sasuke’s turned to be taken aback, and Naruto’s to be ashamed. What was he even saying? Sasuke’s gaze was too heavy on him, to piercing.

"We could report it then," Sasuke said, diplomatic as always. He didn’t tend to press his advantage, but that didn't mean he didn't store those ammunitions for later. “If it’s true that they don’t get what they need at the orphanage, we have to talk to the Hokage. She’ll do something about it.”

“Why would she care?”

Sasuke rolled his eyes and threw his arms up, infuriated.

“Why do you always say that? Why do you always assume no one will care?”
“Because no one ever did!”

Sasuke recoiled. He displayed too many things at the same time, it was impossible to tell his emotions apart. Was he angry? Hurt? At who, for what?

“Don’t we count at all?”

Ah. Hurt then.

Naruto knew that was the real issue. That was what Sasuke didn’t get, what frustrated Sakura. Because they were right – there were people who cared, and he even knew that, as a fact if not as a conviction he could trust.

They didn’t get how he couldn’t hold on to that. How it couldn’t matter as much as they thought it should.

The norm, for him, was people not caring. It had always been, and it still was. Not the people he was closest too, those he saw most often, but the people at large. The norm was indifference – at best. At worst, hostility.

How could he explain and not hurt Sasuke further, how could he tell him that he tried, he tried, but as hard as he did, as much as he wanted to, he couldn’t get rid of that view? Couldn’t trust that things could be different, that he didn’t have to be alone, that they did care? It’s not that he didn’t believe them, it’s not that he thought they were lying. It just… It didn’t take root. Didn’t register.

Those feelings, he couldn’t receive them. They didn’t stick.

It was so unfair. Everyone else seemed to do it naturally, it was easy, for them, and he couldn’t do it. He spent time together with his friends and everything was fine, they enjoyed themselves and he was content, soaking up their attention and company, and he thought things would be okay. But then he doubted again, as soon as he was alone, because who knew how long it would last? Who knew how meaningful it truly was? How could he possibly know?

Gaara was a different story. Gaara was like him in every way that mattered, he understood those feelings. There was no doubt between them.

“You’re not the norm,” was all he could say in the end. He had no idea if Sasuke got it or not – they remained silent until Kakashi and Sakura came back to regroup.

“We heard the thief made another apparition. Did you see him?”

“He got away,” Naruto said promptly. Of course Sasuke didn’t let that fly.

“We caught him, but it was a girl, from the orphanage. She said she was stealing food because they don’t get enough – I think it would be a good thing to check on that.”

“And where is she now?”

“We let her go.”

Sasuke sustained Kakashi’s scrutinizing gaze, and Naruto was at a loss once more, because Sasuke had disagreed with him on this, so why was he sharing the blame now? He who was such a stickler for the rules, who never lied?

Kakashi sighed, overly dramatic in how long and drawn out it was.
“We’d better report all that to the Hokage then.”

The Hokage listened to their report with a serious face that grew increasingly stormy. She promised something would be done about this without delay. Naruto could see no lie in her expression and voice, no deception. Why then couldn’t he believe her? What was wrong with him?

“Naruto,” she called once they were dismissed to go get their reward at the Assignment Desk, “please stay.”

He heard Kakashi shuffle Sasuke and Sasuke away when they tried to stay lurking beyond the door. Tsunade got up from her chair to circle her desk and lean against it, arms crossed on her chest. Naruto couldn’t help but tense up, wondering what he had done this time to warrant a talk down by the Hokage in person.

“What is it?” he asked, sounding too defensive for his own taste. She looked surprised at his hostility – she uncrossed her arm, assumed a more relaxed position.

“Nothing special. I just wanted to know how you were doing. It’s been a while since we hang out.”

Struck dumb, Naruto had nothing to answer to that. The woman was smiling, soft and a bit sad too, looking straight at Naruto. With the sun starting to set and the day coming to a close, the Tower was quieting down around them, and Tsunade wasn’t often wearing her Hokage hat or robes so it was just her now, asking how Naruto had been, and looking like she really wanted to know.

“I’m… I’m okay,” he stuttered. He was off-balance but she was the only thing he could have held onto to steady himself, and he couldn’t do that, could he?

“I know the exam has been a mess. I heard you made a friend.”

Ha. Back in more familiar territory – recrimination.

“And what of it?” he asked. He couldn’t be sure she knew about Gaara, who he was to his village and to Naruto, but if she had brought it up, she had to know, right?

She only shrugged.

“You’re not… mad?” he couldn’t help but ask, when she didn’t add anything. She ought to be. Gaara’s father had seemed enraged, and Naruto wasn’t even sure he knew who his son’s friend truly was.

“To be frank, I don’t really care. I’m just glad you could get along with someone new.”

Naruto looked for the lie and didn’t find it, and it was worse in a way because it meant he didn’t know what to think, what to do. It wasn’t how it was supposed to go – he was at a loss.

Someone else strode in then, and Naruto was almost grateful for them putting an end to this moment, bringing the world back to them. He also sort of wanted to set them on fire. Especially since it was…

“Nana! Let’s go get dinner. Hello Naruto!”

He still had no idea who the pervert old man was, but there was one thing he knew for sure.

“You can join us if you want!”

“No.”
He wanted nothing to do with him.

He was about to bolt when Tsunade stopped him.

“Naruto.”

She had grown serious again. He squirmed under her gaze.

“I know… I know what Orochimaru promised you must be tempting. But you can’t trust him. If he didn’t ask for anything in return, it will come. And it won’t be something you’ll want to give.”

He gaped at her, at the unspeakable sadness and anger weighing her down, at the closed-off expression of the other man, and he could feel the space their story took, their past and feelings, years and years, as he realized they had to know each other, and well enough.

She knew. She knew all about it, and she was pained by it greatly. He felt small in the face of this. He couldn’t understand what was at play here.

Then again, they couldn’t either.

He bolted without another word.

“Yo, Sasuke. You were called in too?”

The small hope Sasuke had nurtured that this convocation to the Hokage’s office was unrelated to any chunin promotion business was washed away by Shikamaru’s lazy salute and pointed look. There was no other reason why both of them would have been summoned at the same time. Among all of the genin, Shikamaru was the only one whose promotion made little doubt.

“Hm.”

“Try not to look too happy about it.”

Sasuke grimaced but didn’t answer, though he could have commented about how little Shikamaru seemed to like it himself, and they waited in silence to be called in.

He was grateful to see that at least, it was only the two of them and the Hokage, along with her right-hand woman who was always in the office with her. He had feared his father would be there too, that he would have to tailor his reaction and words to his scrutiny. Shikamaru’s father wasn’t here either.

“Good morning, Shikamaru, Sasuke.”

“Hokage-sama.”

They bowed. She was leaning against her desk. She rarely sat on the chair.

“You must have an inkling as to why I asked you here.”

“We do,” Sasuke said through gritted teeth. She looked amused.

She reached back to grab two scrolls from her desk, sealed with her personal seal and more ornamented than ordinary mission orders or reports. Their name had been inked in in careful calligraphy, one for each.
“Congratulations,” she said, handing them the promotion decree. “You both made chunin.”

It was hard to say, out of Shikamaru and himself, which one was the least thrilled.

“You’ll be briefed later today on your new status and prerogatives. Your genin teams are dissolved, though you’ll be allowed to request them for the missions you’ll be leading, as long as they qualify. Do you have any questions?”

On all accounts, it was a bad idea to ask the question he indeed had. Princess Tsunade was fair and approachable, but she was still the Hokage, and he basically meant to both question her decision and her motivations. It was a bad idea.

“I would like to know why we were selected,” he blurted out before he could talk himself out of it.

“Why? Do you think you don’t deserve it?”

He bit his tongue, hesitant. He had the skill level and knowledge to be a chunin, that couldn’t be debated. And yet…

“That’s not it.”

“Do you take issue with your friend’s promotion?”

“No!”

She smirked, knowing. She knew exactly where he was going with it, he was sure.

“Did my father ask?” he said at last, because this was the only thing he wanted to know. The man was adamant to see Sasuke get promoted, and Sasuke wouldn’t put it past him to use his influence at the Tower to that goal.

“If he had,” the woman said, voice sharper than before, “it wouldn’t have worked in your favor.”

Sasuke had heard in passing some shinobi complain about her intransigence, and some older ones about her “lack of respect for secular traditions.” Word was she had little consideration for the clan’s status and power.

Sasuke had gained a new appreciation for her.

“Thank you for your answer,” he said politely with a small bow. She looked startled, before she burst into a booming laugh that made Sasuke redden, embarrassed.

“I like you kid. So. Do you accept?”

For a wild second, Sasuke thought of saying no. Being a chunin would only set him apart from Naruto and Sakura, as if Naruto wasn’t distant enough already, and just imagining the look of his father’s face… But it was gone as soon as it came. Sasuke wanted to climb the ranks. He had things to do, things that couldn’t be achieved by a mere genin.

“Yes. I thank you for your trust, Hokage-sama.”

He couldn’t say if she was pleased or amused by the formality. It’s not like he could let go of it anyway – his parents had drilled proper apparatus into him deeply enough that it was stuck there now.

“What about me?” Shikamaru asked. “Can I refuse?”
She grinned.

“No.”

“Figured,” he sighed dramatically.

“We’re proud of you, Sasuke.”

His father was pleased. His mother too, but it wasn’t the same – she would have been fine even if he hadn’t made it. His father though… Maybe Sasuke had managed to seed some doubts in his mind, because he seemed relieved, which meant he hadn’t been as convinced as he had claimed that Sasuke would be made Chunin. At least it was confirmation that he had had no hand in the matter.

Sasuke was pleased too. Twelve was more than honorable an age to become a Chunin, and even if he was two years behind Itachi, it didn’t manage to bring his mood down as it once could have. He had decided that what mattered was the end of the line – when he sat in the Hokage office, it wouldn’t matter how old he was when he had passed the Chunin exam.

Chunin meant more responsibilities, more missions that would be more interesting. It meant more information too, being closer to the action, to the Hokage Tower and to his end goal. The requirements to make jounin were on a whole other level – he had to get started right now. There was no time to waste.

Naruto wouldn’t wait forever.

His mother made his favorite – omusubi with okaka and tomato salad – and his parents indulged in a drink to celebrate, though they stayed very reasonable about it. The windows were open, summer breeze sweeping the living room, and for once, there was no tension, no argument to be had, Sasuke could bask in his parents’ attention, and it was nice.

And then, his father had to ruin it.

“So, what about you, Itachi? When are you going back to active duty? You could go on missions together now.”

Itachi looked at Sasuke. They didn’t need to make any kind of gesture, not even a nod, not even a blink. They looked at each other, Itachi asking, Sasuke assuring him it was okay. It wasn’t his fault if their father couldn’t let this go.

Itachi turned back to their parents.

“I’m not.”

Their father’s smile froze on his face.

“Excuse me?”

“I’m not going back to active duty. That’s definitive.”

And just like that, the good mood was forgotten, Sasuke’s promotion too. If Itachi always had the spotlight for his accomplishments, he also did for his mistakes. Sasuke would have had to set a building on fire to compete with Itachi getting slightly less than a perfect grade at school, and some
things never changed.

“Where is this coming from?”

“I’ve been thinking about it for a long time. I made my decision. Please respect it, father.”

The man was speechless. It was the first time Itachi was so decisive, and that he went against him so frontally. He was sitting straight, face closed and determined.

Choice made, and no intention to go back on it.

“This is… how can you say that? Mikoto!”

She waved a hand to signify she wouldn’t get involved. She looked taken aback too – most likely though, her surprise was only due to Itachi saying anything at all, more than what he had to say. She always seemed to know that sort of thing.

"Do you realize what a waste it is? For the village and the clan, and even for your fellow shinobi. What will you even do?”

“I don’t know yet.”

Itachi wasn’t getting angry, not even a little worked up. Sasuke was envious. He was boiling over, and this wasn’t even about him. It worked on their father though, who’s anger couldn’t express itself properly if it didn’t receive any answer.

“Why?” he managed to grit out through his choked indignation, and there was so much disbelief in his voice, like he couldn’t possibly think of a single reason. Itachi stayed silent.

Sasuke didn’t.

“That’s what he wants,” he snapped, “isn’t that enough? Why is it never about that with you?”

Both his parents looked at him then, both puzzled by the accusation. They weren’t even aware of it.

“It’s always about what you want. Or what’s best for the clan, or what’s tradition, or the most strategic choice, or what everyone is doing, has ever done. Why can’t we just choose?”

Sasuke had a flash of the red ink on Naruto’s chest.

Why aren’t we free?

“What, are you going to tell me you don’t want to be a shinobi either?”

“I want to be Hokage. And I will be. And Itachi doesn’t want to fight. So he won’t.”

And he knew he had no authority to be saying any of this, but also, what could his father do? He couldn’t force Itachi to go back.

He couldn’t.

Sasuke thought about Naruto again, who had asked more than once. Why become a shinobi? It had always been the obvious choice for Sasuke and Itachi and all the kids around them. Sasuke had never questioned if he could do anything else. He wondered when Itachi had started to, but he thought he had an idea.
Had Itachi ever enjoyed a single aspect of their shinobi life? Be it the Academy, his genin team, the missions, the training, when had he ever enjoyed himself a little?

When had he ever been happy?

Sasuke wasn’t so fond of fighting for his life, but he wanted to help, and protect, and he liked to learn new techniques and get stronger, he liked to train and to study, he liked the idea, the ideals. That’s what he wanted to do with his life, what he wanted to be.

Though he wondered if his choices would have been different, had he been born in a different family.

Itachi, he was certain, had disliked all of this from the start. Yet he had done as he was told. He was exceptionally good at what he did, and that had sealed his fate. Since he could do it, and do it well, then he had to.

He had once told Sasuke that being gifted wasn’t a blessing at all.

“We will talk about it later,” their father eventually said. It was frustrating, but probably for the best – Sasuke had inherited his tendency to let his words run free in the heat of the moment, and he didn’t want to say something he would regret. They finished their dinner in heavy silence and awkward attempts at casual conversations.

Later, when he was getting ready for bed, Itachi came to find him in his room.

“I’m sorry,” he said from the door, hesitating to enter.

“For what?”

“It was supposed to be about you.”

“I’m used to it,” Sasuke said with a shrug. He regretted it immediately. He had sounded bitterer than he wanted to – the corners of Itachi’s mouth turned down, his frown deepened. The lines under his eyes were more pronounced when he was upset.

“I mean it’s… it doesn’t matter.”

“I’m sorry.”

Sasuke looked at his brother closely. He was used to this deciphering – Sasuke wasn’t of many words, but he was a chatting box compared to Itachi.

“For what?” he asked again.

“I let you fight in my place.”

It was true in more than one way. Arguing with their father, going out on missions. Itachi just didn’t have much fight in him. And Sasuke had plenty. He could even admit that he didn’t just head-butt with the old man for Itachi’s sake. He was just wrong, and Sasuke felt the constant urge to prove it to him.

Itachi didn’t want to fight anyone. And Sasuke wanted to fight everyone.

So it worked out in the end.

“You’ll tell me?” Sasuke asked. “When you figure it out?”
I’m in this with you. Don’t hide away.

Itachi smiled softly. “Promise.”

At the very least, they would always have each other.

Naruto decided to stand guard near the orphanage. The first few days, nothing happened, but after a week, he saw Shizune march in with a couple of chunin and some administrators from the Tower. They came out after a long while, Shizune looking pissed, and after a few more days, most of the staff at the orphanage had been replaced. The thefts stopped at the warehouse.

When he saw Sasuke next, it was the first thing the boy said to him, even before they could talk about his promotion.

“Did you hear? About the orphanage?”

“How do you even know?”

Sasuke looked away, embarrassed.

“I… I’ve been checking. Just in case.”

Naruto realized they had had the exact same idea, that they had probably been standing guard a few dozen meters apart this whole time. He was reminded then that Sasuke was upright and trustful, and maybe even naïve at times, but he wasn’t an idiot. And he had checked. To make sure. Like it mattered to him.

He didn’t understand at all.

“I was looking for you,” Shikamaru said, plopping down next to Naruto where he was sprawled in the grass, basking in the sun. It was a beautiful day, sunny and warm, probably one of the last ones they would get, as summer was coming to an end. Naruto was supposed to report to the Mission Assignment Desk that morning, but now that Sasuke was a chunin, Sakura and Naruto had been sent back to the worse of genin duties, catching cats and tending to gardens, and he couldn’t do that a day longer. So he was skipping – he could always start lifting wallets again if he needed money. This wasn’t worth it.

Sakura would have his head, probably, but later. For now, Shikamaru had been considering enough not to sit between Naruto and the sun – out of experience probably, as he was quite known for enjoying that particular way of wasting his time away – and Naruto was content.

“What do you want?” he asked without opening his eyes.

“To give you something.”

That made him curious – he thought Shikamaru just wanted someone to cover for him or something. They were evenly matched on the skipping-and-hiding department. Shikamaru didn’t like to work too much.

When Naruto opened his eyes, he had to squint to distinguish what Shikamaru was holding up between his fingers. As soon as he did, he bolted upright, snatching the small object. Shikamaru
huffed. Naruto ignored him.

“Is that…”

“Yes.”

It was a small sculpture, a little fox curled around its two tails, asleep.

It was made of sand.

Naruto looked up with round eyes at Shikamaru, who sighed as if giving an explanation for this was that much of an unexpected inconvenience.

“I’m working at Communication for now, specifically foreign liaison. Specifically, Suna.”

He waved a letter around, covered in scratches Naruto had no hope of deciphering.

“You remember the girl. Temari.”

“And she sent that in an official letter from her government?”

“No.”

Naruto wouldn’t get anything more specific, he presumed. He turned back to the sculpture. Chakra lingered in the sand, making its creator unmistakable.

Gaara had given it to his sister, trusting her to send it. She had, trusting Shikamaru would pass it on. And he had. So that Naruto could have it now.

It felt like a minor miracle.

“Do you have… news?”

“The Kazekage wasn’t too happy. But they’re fine.”

“Okay. Okay.”

The fox was warm in his hand. Gaara was okay somewhere, thinking about Naruto as Naruto was thinking about him. They could reach each other.

It was the longest he had spent with Shikamaru in recent memories. They used to hang out a little as kids, but Naruto often felt uncomfortable surrounded by his peers, and it hadn’t last.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.”

They enjoyed the sun in silence after that.

The Academy was on break, so Shisui was at the house a lot these days. He still woke up ridiculously early – shinobi on leaves tended to keep the exact same rhythm they did on missions like idiots – but instead of running out of the house just as Naruto would stir, he stayed around, cooking, tending to the garden or cleaning the house. Naruto couldn’t say he understood his conception of leisure time, but what did he know. Shisui didn’t go out much, but he had a lot of
people over for lunch or dinner or tea, or anything really – they always ended up eating something.

Breakfast was Naruto’s favorite. It was the only meal that didn’t risk being invaded, and they were both a little slower in the morning, quiet and soft, and there was a peace to those moments that Naruto didn’t think he could get anywhere else.

Moments that made him realized that, through trials and thorns, he was home here.

Oh, what a wild thought.

“What are you doing today?” Shisui asked once the gyoza were gone and he was half slumped over the table, full and content to stay right where he was.

“I’m training with Sasuke.”

“Oh, really?”

“…he asked.”

Shisui looked far too pleased – he worried, because he thought Naruto spent too much time alone. He also worried when Naruto slept too late, when he didn’t eat enough, and when he had blood on his clothes.

He worried all the time. And Naruto grumbled and waved him off, but he would have been lying if he said it wasn’t a little nice.

There was something, he thought, there was a word for this, for Shisui and Naruto in the little house, for the shared breakfast and Shisui’s fretting, but Naruto wasn’t sure, and if he had been, he wouldn’t have dared utter it anyway.

Sasuke came to fetch him and they went to the Uchiha’s ground for once, the open field behind their district where they could train as they wished, especially their special brand of devastating fire techniques that weren’t the best idea in the middle of the woods.

He feared it would be awkward, that they would have a hard time falling back into it, but they didn’t. Fighting was the easiest thing between them. They knew each other well by now, knew their bodies, their minds, how they moved together. This was something else that Naruto enjoyed greatly, he remembered. His thoughts quieting down as they fell into their rhythm, how there was no miscommunication possible, feelings flowing freely. How they could understand each other a little more.

Sasuke wanted to talk. He could feel it in his impatience, in the very way he breathed around unformed words. He had been right to suggest they trained first, for Naruto felt grounded now, and he was ready for it. He would listen.

“Do you trust me?”

Sasuke didn’t believe in softening the blow.

Since it was a real question, Naruto took the time to think about a true answer. The quick one would have been no, because he didn’t even know what that was supposed to mean. But he could try, couldn’t it? It wasn’t about the people, the village, the life waiting for them. It was just Sasuke.

“Yeah.”
He found that it was less a feeling, and more a decision to be made. He could decide that he did. That Sasuke did care and that he wouldn’t give up on him, he had to decide he believed it, since he was incapable of knowing for sure.

Maybe that’s how people did it.

Sasuke looked startled, as if he hadn’t expected that answer, or any answer at all. He frowned, as he did when he was determined to get his point across no matter what. There was no stopping him.

“I know you’re not… very happy. Here. I know it’s hard for you, still.”

Naruto opened his mouth to protest, because they weren’t supposed to talk about it, not like that, not so bluntly, it wasn’t to be acknowledged. What could he stay though?

It was only the truth.

“It won’t always be like this.”

“Sasuke…”

“Things can change.”

“And why would they?”

“Because I’ll make it so.”

They were alone in the field, and it was wide enough that they felt a bit alone in the whole world, hair and clothes ruffled by the wind, time standing still.

Sasuke had never looked so sure of himself as he did now. Naruto wanted to grasp at it, hold it close. He wished he could share his conviction.

“I’ll be Hokage one day. And even before that… Things will change. I just need some time.”

Time was all they had to bargain with. Time, and how long they could endure.

“You have to give me time.”

_When I enter the Academy, things will get better_, Naruto used to think. Then it had been, _when I make genin_. And then, _when I get stronger_. Stronger, stronger.

And then, _when I’m strong enough to leave._

But there was something else. Because life _was_ better, better than it had been, at any rate. And so there was something else.

_When enough time has passed, and I can trust this is real, then, then…_

The question ever since had been, would that be enough. And it was what Sasuke wondered too, what they all wondered. Would they be enough.

And sometimes Naruto was sure they wouldn’t. And sometimes, he desperately wanted them to. So that he could settle. So that he could let it go.

So that he could belong, at last, and be secured in his place in this world.
“I will change it all. I will set you free. So please, just…”

Sasuke took a step forward. His fists were tightly closed at his sides. Naruto wondered if he too itched to reach out.

“Don’t leave.”

He didn’t think he had been that transparent.

His first instinct was dismissal, wave the whole thing off, ignore it. But Sasuke’s eyes were holding his and there was no looking away, and without looking away, he couldn’t lie to him. Couldn’t pretend disaffection, couldn’t play it down. His thoughts had to be clear on his face, on display for his friend to witness. Lying had never been hard for him, yet lying to Sasuke was the hardest thing.

“I don’t know,” he said weakly, though Sasuke hadn’t asked anything, though it didn't make much sense. Sasuke nodded anyway. He wasn’t waiting for an answer – he just wanted to say his piece.

“Keep it in mind. That’s all,” he said firmly, regaining some balance after looking so raw, so on edge. Naruto couldn’t say the same. He was tilting more and more off-balance, yet never falling. He didn’t know if he would finally tumble, or if he would just found out he had completed a whole turn and ended upright again.

“Okay.”

They kept staring a while longer, having to commit the moment to memory, so that they could go back to it. What would have become of this point in time in one, two, ten years? It was so frustrating sometimes, to have no idea what the future held.

“Let’s go again,” Sasuke said, putting his guard back up, and Naruto was grateful for it, because sparring with his friend was about the only thing he could handle right now.

For a few more hours, just not thinking about anything.

.

Are you seriously thinking about it?

Could it be fear, under the disdain? Could demons even feel fear?

I don’t know.

He had found that he could make the water go away, if he wanted to. He could also make the prison a little brighter, less gloomy. He didn’t know why he went down there, but he found himself often enough sitting in front of the cage, meditating under the beast’s scrutinizing glare.

Why would you do that?

He couldn’t explain this to a disembodied monster, not when he wasn’t even able to explain it to himself. But he was thinking about it still.

About staying.

You said you would set me free.

So the fox had been listening after all.
I will.

They will never let you.

And he was right of course. No one in Konoha would be foolish enough to consider it. Or caring enough. No one who had the power to stop him anyway.

No one yet.

Sasuke will.

The demon’s confusion was palpable, thick in the air. Naruto found himself strangely attuned to its emotions, especially here, so close to its territory. Or maybe it was just his own feelings, mirrored. It was hard to make the distinction sometimes.

You have that much faith in him?

He will.

Naruto could not imagine Sasuke not achieving anything he set his mind to. And Sasuke didn’t lie, he didn’t stray.

And Naruto had faith.

What is so special about him?

From the demon’s perspective, nothing surely. Sasuke wasn’t the only talented shinobi their age, he wasn’t the only stubborn one, the only one dreaming about making a difference and rising to the highest high of their world.

Sasuke was special though.

If only to Naruto.

He was the very first. The first to have crossed the gap, the first to have reached out. When Naruto had sought him out, all those years ago, to get a decent training partner and get the chance to kick his ass too, he fully expected to keep the boy at arm’s length, and for him to do the same, so that they would never attempt to get any closer. What had prompted Sasuke to ditch that, to walk the distance, he couldn’t fathom it. There was some rebellion in it, his reason for approaching Naruto the very same that had kept all the other kids away. But the dedication Sasuke had kept at it, despite Naruto’s desperate reluctance, it went beyond that.

By all accounts, Sasuke should have given up on him by now. Every time Naruto was harsher than needed, every time he pushed him away, he was seized by the same panic, that this would be the final straw, the one that would finally tip the balance over, send Sasuke away for good. And at the same time, he almost wished for it. To put an end to that strange anticipation, since it was bound to happen and Naruto was sick of waiting in fear. And maybe also to prove himself right after all. Prove that he had been right to doubt, and to keep his distance, because there Sasuke went.

It was unfair to him. If he decided to turn his back on Naruto, it certainly wouldn’t be from any lack of trying on his part. It would be on Naruto and Naruto only.

And yet, it didn’t happen.

Sasuke was still there.
He and Sakura, they just wouldn’t give up, and it made no sense.

But Naruto was slowly starting to believe that it was just how things were. And how they would remain.

*Will you be able to bear it though? How much longer?*

There was no answering that question.

*I don’t know. Maybe I’ll try anyway.*

He rubbed his finger at the base of his throat, where he could feel the strokes engraved by the sand on his skin.

Gaara had found it. Love. He had it now, Naruto wouldn’t ever take it away, and he would maybe even found some in his family too. Naruto also had some love, he knew that. But it wasn’t what he most longed for.

If he waited… if he waited, he would stay stuck here, and it would suck. But he would also not make them unhappy, not bring them pain and disappointment – because no matter how much he loathed it, that’s what would happen when he left. For some reason, they would be sad. He hated it when they were sad.

And if he left, he would be alone.

It didn’t use to bother him that much.

He would be alone. No Sasuke, no Sakura, no Shisui, no Tsunade. They would stay behind. Live their life, a life he wouldn’t be in. They wouldn’t be in his either.

*That’s the price to pay.*

Freedom. Love.

Was it that he had to choose between the two?

“I will change it all. I will set you free.”

Maybe not. Maybe he didn’t need to.

Maybe there was hope.

The light sound of a bell hanging from a rice hat, chiming in the wind. An announcement.

A warning.

“The seals are still lacking.” Voice slightly muffled by a mask. Bright orange, but hard to see beyond the hat and the high collar.

“Good for us.” A grin, shark-like. Hand tightening on the handle of a massive sword. “Let’s hunt down some Tails.”

Beyond the mask and its swirling spiral, the red glint of a Sharingan.
See, this is what I love about fanfictions. Cause in a original I can't do cliffhangers like that. Not after writing 400k of build up anyway. But here I don't have to introduce the characters or explain anything to hype things up. Someone else already did that work for me lol. Y'all know what's coming.

So yeah, shit's going down again. Next chapter won't be very happy. Like, even compared to the latest ones x) Leave a word, I always love to hear about what you think, see you!
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

Someone is after Naruto. Shisui disapproves.

Chapter Notes

Here is my gift to you to start that new year, though, fair warning, it's not a very nice happy one x)

WARNING for Violence, Major Character Injury, Lots of Blood, Angsty Shit. I would like to remind everyone reading this tho that there is no Major Character Death tag on this fic.

And on this cheery note, have a good read!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was a good day.

The air was warm, the sky cloudless. They had nothing better to do than lay down in the grass by the river and enjoy the sun. Izumi was on leave, Shisui still had a few days before the Academy resumed, and they had even managed to drag Itachi out for once.

His face was already pink with how unused it was to soak up sunlight. Shisui knew the uncertainty of his future and his place in the village weighed heavily on his cousin’s mind, and it was nice to see him unburdened for once, smiling softly at the open sky. Izumi was ranting about the jerk she had been paired up with on her latest mission while Shisui made a valiant but only mildly successful attempt at braiding flowers into her hair.

It was a good day.

And then it wasn’t.

Itachi jolted upward, startling his two friends. His gaze wandered in the distance, as if looking for something beyond the tree line and the flowing water, even though they were the only ones around.

“What is it, Itachi?” Izumi asked, resting a gentle hand on his arm as if he would spook. He looked back at them, eyes widen, lips parted, with an emotion Shisui had rarely seen on his stoic face.

Fear. It was fear.

“We… We need to find my father.”

It was a good day.
Fugaku finally closed the report and reclined in his chair with a heavy sigh. He didn’t know who was to blame for shinobi’s abysmal writing skills, but he sure felt like blaming someone. Sorting through reports wasn’t supposed to be that hard a trial, and yet it was, given how Fugaku had the sensation he was grading ten-years-old papers.

Alright, so maybe he was being a little harsher than needed. He used to find respite in his work, from the other aspects of his life, but nowadays his worries followed him everywhere.

He couldn’t get his last conversation with his sons out of his mind.

Sasuke was right – it had never crossed Fugaku’s mind that they could want other things for themselves. Just as he had never wondered about his own path. It wasn’t a choice they made. It was just how things were.

And among all of them, Itachi was the very best, destined to the highest achievements, and Fugaku couldn’t reconcile this fact with the quiet resolution on his eldest face, when he had announced his unambiguous decision to quit the shinobi force for good.

What would he even do then?

There was a soft knock on his open door, as Inuzuka Hana peered inside carefully. He gestured for her to come in.

“The latest reports from the warehouse,” the girl said, handing him yet another dreaded read. “The thefts seem to have stopped for good.”

He was still a little bitter that the patrols had not been able to do anything about this, and that the issue had had to be turned over to the Mission desk. But the police force was stretched thin by the fallout of Orochimaru’s infiltration that needed to be weeded out, and in the end, Sasuke and his team had solved the situation quickly. Fugaku had no idea how, but he was unwilling to read a report about it. He could let it slide.

”Thank you, Hana. Is Inabi around?”

“I think he’s still at the shopping district, about last week’s fire.”

“Send him to me when he’s back.”

“Yes, Uchiha-san.”

Hana was mild and mellow and never seemed to be bothered by anything. She worked efficiently and could handle all the members of the police force she came across, no matter how rude or dismissive – including him. Sometimes he had a feeling she approached humans the same she did the beasts she took care of, what with the non-threatening smile and firm voice. Despite her easy smile and compliance, she was impossible to intimidate, as stubborn and unmovable as her mother.

“Hana? Can I ask you something?”

They spent a lot of time together at the police headquarter, but it’s not like they got to talk or anything. Fugaku was awkward around younger people, especially those who were his sons’ age.

Mikoto would say he was awkward with the rest too.

“Of course.”
"It's not work-related. It's a bit personal I suppose."

"You can ask," she said with a smile. She would decide to answer or not.

"I was wondering why you choose to work here. You had excellent reviews on your fieldwork. Why did you decide not to go on missions anymore?"

To his surprise, it took her no time at all to answer.

"I wanted to be in the village as much as possible, and this was the place that most appealed to me, compared to Intelligence or Communication. I like to help."

"Was it such a problem, to be sent out?"

"I have the animals to look after and still have much to learn on the matter. And I don’t like being away from my family."

It was such a straightforward, heartfelt admission. She wasn’t embarrassed by it in the least. She had obviously thought this through carefully, and she was content with her choice.

"What about you, Uchiha-san?"

"Hm?"

"Why did you chose this?"

She made a vague gesture at the office he had been occupying for more than fifteen years – ever since his uncle had passed the title of Head of the Police Force to him, and the big, cluttered desk that went with it.

He found himself lacking an answer.

It didn’t feel like a choice. It was just where he was supposed to be. What else would he have done? He supposed he could have stayed in the active roster, but truth be told, most older shinobi had left their place on the frontline at one point or another for a more settled position, and the privileges and prestige that went with it. But not before long years of field missions and fights – it was war anyway, it’s not like they had a choice.

It was different now, for the kids of today.

Hana’s smile tightened – he had stayed silent too long, she had to worry she had said the wrong thing. He could think of nothing to say to reassure her of further the discussion. She disappeared without another word.

Only to be back moments later, a very different kind of worry on her face.

"Sir, there is…"

"Dad."

Fugaku had the most terrible feeling of déjà vu, when Itachi burst into his office, face ashen and eyes wide, but he was older now and there was determination on his face, even if he looked scared too. Shisui was close behind, with Izumi. Hana stepped to the side, and Fugaku went to meet his son in the middle of the room.

"What is it? What happened?"
“He’s here. The man, the one with the Sharingan. He’s here. He’s in the village.”

“Are you sure?”

Itachi nodded, decisive, though he looked like he feared he wouldn’t be believed.

As if they had time for that.

“Alone?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where?”

“I’m not sure, I…”

If he didn’t know more, there was no time to waste guessing.

“Hana. I need you to go to the Hokage Tower right away. Report these exact words to the Godaime, she will know what it means. If you cross path with any member of the Uchiha clan above genin level, tell them too, and have them come here. Be discreet though, I don’t want a panic.”

“Yes, Uchiha-san.”

She was gone in an instant – he trusted the message would get around. She was efficient and reliable, and he had to count on her for now.

“Itachi, I want you to find Sasuke, and I want you to go home.”

“But…”

“That’s an order. Izumi, will you see to it?”

The girl nodded firmly, implacable. It was a testimony to his state of mind that Itachi didn’t protest any further. That man, that stranger who bore their mark, he was one of the very few who knew about Itachi, about what he had been tasked to do back then, and they had to keep it that way. Itachi was in no state to face him.

And Itachi didn’t even want to be a shinobi anymore. They would do without him.

Various members of the police force were starting to crowd outside his office, rounded by Hana and her words spreading around. Izumi stirred a stunned Itachi away.

“Shisui, you…”

“I… I need to do something.”

Before Fugaku could protest, the boy was gone too. He didn’t have time to deal with it – he struck the boy from his mind, and went on to organize the man-hunt.

.

He had to find Naruto.

He didn’t know where the urge came from, but he knew he had to. A rogue Sharingan user set
loose in the village, of whom they knew nothing except that he had ominous intentions toward the Uchiha clan at least and probably the village too.

Shisui had to find Naruto. Stick him somewhere safe. And then maybe he would be able to think clearly again.

Naruto felt the emotions before anything else.

He was napping by the riverbank, in a secluded corner away from the bustle of the village, enjoying the sun on his skin. On another day, maybe the wave of bitterness and rage wouldn’t have felt so jarring, would have just mixed with his own. But it was a good day and he was in a good mood, so the contrast hit him like a wall. He was on his feet in an instant, alert and focused.

There was no one here expect from him, and the knot of resentment getting closer.

He grabbed a kunai in one hand, closed the other around a scroll in his pocket. He was acutely aware of how far from any help he was and regretted Akito and Akira’s presence, who had left just a few minutes ago to go do what foxes did of their time.

Maybe it was on purpose.

Two men appeared on the path. One broad and tall, cutting an impressive figure in his black cloak printed with swirling red clouds. He had pale, blue skin and a strange, shark-like face, framed by a forehead protector covering his ears. On it, Naruto recognized the symbol that once adorned Haku’s mask – Kiri’s mark.

Except it had been crossed out.

The sword in his back was so large it almost grazed the ground.

Despite the impressive sight, it wasn’t the one Naruto felt immediate repulsion toward. The second man was ordinary looking compared to his companion, of average height and build, though it was hard to tell under that same black cloak. He also had a sword, a simple katana at his waist. Nothing showed of his face, hidden by an orange mask, pierced of a single hole for his right eye.

And his right eye, beyond the mask, was of a shape and shade Naruto knew well.

He knew to look away then, always wary of the glint of the Sharingan. More so right then, because that man certainly wasn’t a Konoha shinobi, wasn’t an Uchiha. Whoever he was, the deep hatred in his heart was strong enough for the Kyuubi to react to it, and Naruto felt compelled to take a step back, to put some distance between them.

“We were just looking for you, Uzumaki Naruto.”

The voice was light, almost joyful, as if this was just a chance encounter between casual acquaintances. Naruto’s grip tightened around his kunai.

“Why?”

“We need you to come with us.”

“I’d rather not.”

“You don’t have a choice.”
The other man was grinning – his teeth were pointy and sharp like a shark’s.

Naruto was seized with the certitude that he couldn’t win against the two.

He raised his kunai.

“Come get me then.”

The shark-like man couldn’t have looked more pleased by that. He reached for his sword and with impressive speed considering his build and the size of his weapon, he charged at Naruto, who realized too late the bandage around it unraveled that this was no mere sword – it was covered in what resembled scales, and a kunai wouldn’t do much against it.

He didn’t get to find out how little. A second and the telltale sound of a shunshin later, someone else was standing between Naruto and the sword, raising a sword of their own and deflecting the blow, before grabbing Naruto’s arms to flicker them both out of harm’s way.

“I told you I hated when you did that,” Naruto grumbled when Shisui let go of his arm, head spinning from the high-speed movement.

“And I told you to stop goading your opponents like a moron, especially the ones stronger than you.”

Shisui still had his back to him – still stood between him and the two foreigners. Naruto didn’t like it. He didn’t need protection, and certainly not from him.

“What are you doing here?”

“What do you think?”

Couldn’t Shisui ever mind his own business.

“Shisui, isn’t it? Shisui of the Body Flicker. We’ve heard much about you,” the masked man said. He seemed to be the one in charge, out of the two. His tone was still pleasant, conversational.

“I can’t say the same for you,” Shisui shot back lightly. “Though I recognize your friend from the Mist.”

“Oh? I’m flattered,” the shark man said.

“Intel is everything. Kisame, isn’t it? You’re a deserter from Kirigakure.”

“And you’re going to die very soon,” the man answered with great delight. He swung his sword in a few practice moves, and it wasn’t hard to imagine what its sharp teeth could do to someone’s body.

Naruto knew well Shisui’s fighting style. It had been deemed “the most annoying style in the world” by many shinobi in the village and out, since it consisted mostly of Shisui flickering around, impossible to catch, and teasing his opponents to great frustration and fatal mistakes. Naruto had raged over it many times.

Yet when that man, Kisame, charged again, Shisui only ducked and deviated the massive blade with his sword, barely moving his feet. Kisame’s next swing forced him to sidestep, but he went back to his original position right away.

It took a second for Naruto to understand why.
He jumped to his feet, anger overtaking the instinct telling him to stay clear of that fight, away from those men. At the next hit, when Shisui dodge, Naruto was right behind. Crouched down, he sprung up, smashing his head under Kisame’s chin. The man cursed, took a few steps back.

“I don’t need your protection,” Naruto spat out angrily. Shisui rolled his eyes,

“Now is not a time for a petty tantrum Naruto! These are not ordinary threats!”

“And you can’t take them both on your own!”

Naruto was not overly confident in his abilities to stand his ground in his situation, not when his instincts were screaming at him to run tails and run, but he added more than zero to Shisui’s skills, and that was something.

For some reason the idea of leaving Shisui to deal with this on his own was repulsive enough for him to easily shut down the gut feeling telling him that they weren’t strong enough, that they needed to run.

“Help is on the way,” Shisui said under his breath. He seemed confident enough. He had to be. Or they were screwed.

Naruto wasn’t used to feeling this way. There was something about that masked man that set him on edge, that sent the fox reeling inside of him, and what, Naruto wondered, could put the fearsome Nine-Tailed Fox in such a state?

They had no choice but to fight either way – soon the shark man was on them again, and when they split to avoid the blow, the masked man stopped Shisui from regrouping with Naruto.

“Sorry, but we’re on a bit of a schedule. We need to wrap this up quickly.”

Shisui chuckled, at ease with that sort of playful display while fighting for his life. Naruto found it exasperating. Unfortunately, he didn’t have much time to dwell on it, for he had his own opponent to worry about.

The sword caught him in the shoulder, and even though he managed to go with the momentum and avoid being thrown away like a ragdoll, he immediately understood that the sword’s unusual shape and size weren’t its only danger.

Naruto had tested his chakra vacuum seal often enough on himself to recognize the sensation.

Shisui and the masked man hadn’t moved at all, locked in a staring contest probably as violent as Naruto’s own fight, though nothing showed of it. Shisui still managed to chip in.

“Be careful of that sword. It eats up chakra.”

“Couldn’t have guessed,” Naruto muttered angrily. Kisame laughed, still apparently having the time of his life.

“Intel is everything.”

Naruto would have stuck his tongue at him if Shisui could afford to look in his direction.

“You have some strength to spare boy,” Kisame said with his grin full of teeth, and it sounded like a compliment. The Kyuubi chakra was untouched, the fox reluctant to pull his weight this time, and Naruto could only be thankful for whatever lineage he had. Tsunade had said the Uzumaki
were known for their huge chakra reserve, hadn’t she?

It was harder than it looked – and it looked plenty hard already – to avoid that sword. Especially because every time it grazed at Naruto and drew more energy from him, it seemed to get bigger and bigger. Naruto would have sworn the sword was having as much fun as its owner.

The two others were still not moving.

“I have to say, your reputation is no underserved, Uchiha Shisui.”

“I’m sorry I can’t say the same.”

Shisui’s voice was more strained though. Whatever was happening inside their head, it wasn’t nearly as pleasant as that meaningless banter.

Naruto had to think of something.

But that Kisame was no joke, and apart from escaping his giant sword and a Water Bullet Technique that was very painful, Naruto couldn’t do much else. He gritted his teeth through the chakra and skin being ripped off his body by the sword – if Shisui heard him, he would focus away from whatever battle he was fighting against the other Sharingan, and they couldn’t have that.

Maybe it was even the plan, Naruto thought, seeing that Kisame wasn’t actively trying to kill him. It looked more like a fun game to him.

Or maybe he was just like that.

“Come on kid, this is boring. Try something.”

As annoying as he was, that wasn’t a bad suggestion. He had to try something.

Preferably something dangerous and stupid, though it would annoy Shisui.

The advantage of seals stored into scrolls was that if the seal failed, well, that was on the scroll. It was harder to power and control, but at least if something went wrong, it wasn’t his body that would explode.

He didn’t know how to make chakra vacuum seals with his own body anyway. What would be the point? It’s not as if he would ever run out of chakra.

So he got as scroll out. A strong one.

And the next time the sword came down on him, instead of dodging, he opened his arms and wrapped around it with the unrolled scroll.

“Fuuinjutsu, Chakra Vacuum Seal!”

Ninja paper didn’t tear so easily, even the mediocre ones Naruto could afford. He hugged it around the sword, held on as Kisame waved it around, annoyed. It was only a matter of who could soak up chakra the hardest, and the scroll had an advantage – it was empty, for now. Nothing to draw from there.

The sword shrunk in his arms. By the time Kisame had the unpleasant idea of slamming it – and Naruto – against a tree, the boy had jumped out and rolled away, clutching the scroll to his chest.
It was thrumming, loaded up to the brink. The sword was twice as small as it had been a minute ago, and Kisame looked pissed, but excited too. Bloodthirsty.

"Intel is everything," Shisui said again, hints of pride in his voice even if he could only follow what was happening from the corner of his eyes.

His eyes were crying blood though. He was sweating buckets. And his opponent seemed to run out of patience.

“And what do you think about that intel?” he asked.

On the periphery of his vision, Naruto caught his vanishing form, there one moment and gone the next. Less than a second later, the man was in front of him, and there was nothing Naruto could do but watch the slow run of his sword’s end speeding toward his head. He had not time to get up, no time to even raise an arm and try to stop the blade, no time at all.

Another second, the blade disappeared from view, replaced by the black of the Uchiha, their fan glaring at Naruto from a broad back.

And the next moment, the sound. Wet and sharp, like paper tearing up. The point of a blade burst through the red of the fan – the white of the handle immediately took on the same color. Something warm splashed on Naruto’s face.

He watched in abject horror, frozen in place, listened to the sound in reverse at the blade was pulled out, heard a painful cough tear itself out of Shisui’s throat.

“Good one,” he rasped out, before collapsing at Naruto’s feet.

They all felt it this time. Everyone, even the civilians, even those who had zero sensibility to chakra. It’s not even that they felt it – they recognized it. All those who were old enough to remember the fateful night of Naruto’s birth paused in whatever they were doing and looked up, gripped with the same dread.

The crushing aura of the Nine-Tailed fox rippled through Konoha, bitter and overwhelming, and panic rose instantly as all shinobi geared up for a fight, as terrible memories assaulted all minds. It was as if they could feel the grief already, see the damage, taste the pain and terror.

But then, something curious happened.

The Fox was there, with them. And then it wasn’t.

After just a few seconds, the sensation disappeared completely. The village turned peaceful again. The people blinked as if waking up, certain they had hallucinated for those who couldn’t see the same confusion mirrored on those around them.

There was no trace of it left.

What are you doing? What are you doing?

The fox was screaming, howling really, but it was as if it was underwater, and Naruto barely heard its raging voice. Or maybe it was him who was underwater? No, because then he wouldn’t have
heard Sasuke’s voice so clearly, like the boy was right next to him, screaming in his ear.

“I told you you had to stop the blood!”

Naruto’s vision was blurry, veiled by a red haze that made the blood flowing through his fingers hardly distinguishable from anything else.

But he could feel it just fine.

He was kneeling on the forest floor by Shisui’s side, both hands buried in his chest, and that order in Sasuke’s stilted voice was the only thought in his mind.

“You have to put pressure. You have to stop the blood.”

They were training near the river, throwing shuriken and kunai at each other. Sasuke was annoyingly good at it as always, having inherited his clan’s notorious aim and precision. Sakura was faring well too – Naruto was far less performant, having no patience for the art.

He wasn’t paying attention, and Sasuke, focused on his targets, was paying too much not in the right place. It was inevitable then, that a kunai Naruto threw in frustration was followed by a sharp cry of pain and an angry “Naruto you moron!”

Sasuke was holding his thigh and managed to convince Sakura to go fetch some help without chewing Naruto out first. There was a lot of blood. Naruto remembered feeling completely helpless, useless, as Sasuke clutched tightly at his leg.

“Shouldn’t we take it out?” Naruto asked, pointing at the kunai. He was panicking a little because it was a lot of blood and when would help arrive? Sasuke huffed.

“No. Always better to keep it in, you'll do more damage pulling it out and it kind of stops the blood.”

It wasn’t doing a very good job at it. Sasuke was very pale, and in pain.

“Come help me!”

“What-what should I do?”

“You have to put pressure. Here.”

Naruto replaced Sasuke’s hand with his own, squeezing hard around the wound despite Sasuke hissing in pain. He kept insisting – “don’t let on, come on, keep the pressure” – as his hands started to glow green.

“It’s the first thing to do. Put pressure. Stop the blood. People bleed out fast.”

“How do you know that?”

“I’ve been studying.”

Of course he had.

“You should learn some things too,” he chided.

“I don’t get hurt.”
“Not for you! You have to know how to help your teammates!”

Naruto didn’t say that he didn’t need to because Sasuke and Sakura were the only teammates he would ever have or want, and they knew this kind of thing, so it was fine. Sakura came back with a medic, and it occurred to Naruto that she would have done a better job than him at keeping the blood in, putting the pressure. But he would have done a terrible job at getting help, on account of most people avoiding to look in his direction, let alone hear him speak and speak to him in turn.

“All right. You’ll teach me things.”

Naruto was pressing down on the hole in Shisui’s stomach, trying not to think about the first advice – don’t pull the blade out – and the fact that the hole went all the way through and that blood was gushing out from the back too. Granted, he couldn’t think about much. He could only focus on the one thing – keeping as much blood as possible inside Shisui’s body.

They’re going to kill us. Is that what you want? What is wrong with you?

The fox was worried – Naruto could understand. Neither of them wanted to die. But there was no part of Naruto’s mind that could care about their enemies, still very real somewhere above him. He thought he could even hear them talking.

But how could he care, when Shisui was bleeding out under his hands?

Shisui couldn’t die. He couldn’t die. Naruto couldn’t fathom it. For a second the fox had taken over, when Shisui had fallen, when Naruto had seen his ashen, still face, his unfocused eyes. For a second, he had wished to rain hell and lay waste on everything around him.

But Shisui was alive. Shisui was alive. He had to be.

If he died…

No. No. He couldn’t. It wasn’t possible. He couldn’t.

“This is quite touching, but we have to go,” said one of the voices outside, one of the men. Maybe he tried to get closer, to grab him. Naruto couldn’t tell.

The demon’s chakra sprung out on its own, slammed the man away. This was the reason why Naruto was seeing red – he was enveloped in it, and Shisui too. He couldn’t tell if it was his doing or the fox’s, who was controlling what or what was happening.

He didn’t care. He had to keep the pressure.

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The first thing that crossed Fugaku’s mind, when he stumbled upon the scene near the river, was that Naruto had killed Shisui.

Immediately after the thought he could hear Sasuke’s disappointed voice in his head, see his disapproving glare that was his default expression when dealing with his father nowadays. Fugaku thought a lot about this face, its quiet judgment, its naked disapproval.

Can’t you do better? it kept asking again and again.

Shisui was still, too still, bleeding on the ground. Naruto was above him, shielding his body with his own, and with the Kyuubi’s chakra oozing off of him, keeping its assailants at bay. It wasn’t
reassuring in the least to see that it seemed to have a mind of its own, but that was a problem for later, much later.

There were two men. One he identified as Hoshigaki Kisame, former member of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist, not one to be taken lightly. The other had nothing to identify him, no hitai-ate, no visible trait.

Except for the unmistakable thrum of the Sharingan.

They both turned toward Fugaku and the few Uchiha with him. A moment later, Hatake Kakashi and Maito Gai appeared from another direction, followed by other jounin.

Neither of the two intruders looked particularly worried by that.

“Shall we?” Kisame said, impatience in his voice. Fugaku called up his Sharingan, felt his fellow clan member do the same.

The masked man sighed.

“It’s no time for war yet. Let’s go.”

“Really? Come on, you’re no fun.”

“Kisame.”

And that was the most worrying sight of the day, Hoshigaki Kisame falling in line at this stranger’s mild voice, putting his sword away with no further complaint.

“’Til next time,” the masked man said. There was something of a smile in his voice.

They vanished into thin air.

Not a shunshin. Their presence was gone – they had teleported away.

“What the hell,” Kakashi said at his side. Fugaku shared the sentiment.

Naruto hadn’t moved at all.

Throughout the whole exchange he hadn’t even raised his head, focused solely on where his hands disappeared in Shisui’s mess of a wound. This was the priority now, Fugaku thought, with the usual ease he had for practical thinking. He made to get a closer look at Shisui, assess the damage.

He was mercilessly repelled by the red chakra.

“Naruto!” Kakashi exclaimed as he too tried and failed to reach the boy. They couldn’t tell if he could even hear them – he seemed lost to the world. When Inabi tried to approach next, he was flung away hard enough to break a branch in his flight with a sinister crack.

He was still breathing, but he didn’t get up. Fugaku cursed under his breath.

“Let us through Naruto. He needs care now!”

He could as well have been talking to a wall.

Tenzo appeared with a few masked Anbu, took stock of the situation quickly enough. Kakashi had restraining seals in hand already and Tenzo knew what he had to do. They had to contain Naruto if
they wanted to save Shisui’s life, but who was to say he wouldn’t hurt his caretaker in the process…

Tenzo was already signing when a powerful voice stopped them in their track.

“That’s enough.”

Fugaku held back a frustrated sigh. The Godaime had just arrived at the scene.

“Shisui is not going to make it if we don’t do anything!” he exclaimed, uncaring of the rudeness of his tone. Were they to spare the jinchuuriki’s feelings now too? Shisui was going to die.

Can’t you do better?

Tsunade didn’t even deign to acknowledge him in any way. Instead she walked calmly to the boy and knelt in front of him, at a safe distance from its destructive chakra.

“Naruto.”

Her low, gentle voice reached him when their scream hadn’t – he raised his head, ever so slightly, listening.

“Naruto, you have to let me through. Shisui needs help.”

“I have to keep the pressure.”

He was pushing his weight down on the wound, blood splattered all over his arms, his chest, his face too. Shisui was groaning weakly, unconscious but by no mean resting.

“You’re right. You did good, and I’m here now. I can take over.”

“I can’t let go!”

The red chakra flared. Tsunade didn’t flinch.

“I can take over,” she said again. “I can heal him. Do you remember? I’m a medic. That’s what I do.”

“Will he die?”

At last Naruto raised his head to them, though he focused only on Tsunade. His eyes were red from the Kyuubi’s influence, and red from tears too, face broken down in desperation, anguish plain as day even through the red haze. Fugaku was taken aback. Almost looked away.

“He can’t die,” Naruto pleaded with the vulnerability of a child praying for something he had no control over.

“He won’t,” Tsunade answered without hesitation. “I promise. I will save him. But you have to let me through.”

She didn’t wait for an answer as she started approaching again, slowly, crawling on the ground until she reached the crimson mist still dancing around the boy.

It yielded to her presence and she put her hands on Naruto’s, gently pushing to replace him, green light glowing as soon as it touched Shisui’s still body. Tsunade nodded at Kakashi, creeping up in Naruto’s back. He seized the boy by the waist and pulled him away as Tsunade, in the same move,
straddled Shisui’s hips and focused entirely on the wound on his chest.

Fugaku had to fight off panic as the Kyuubi chakra flared, as he was thrown back twelve years ago and looking at the village falling in front of his very eyes. Naruto struggled, screamed, trashed in Kakashi’s grip and the sense of foreboding was overwhelming, the absolute terror of being faced with something they couldn’t control, couldn’t tame, couldn’t beat.

Like then a corner of Fugaku’s brain narrowed its focus to where his wife and sons were, trying to convince the rest of him that they were alright, safe in the refuge and that he couldn’t just give it all up to go find them. He had to fight and protect what could be, had to uphold his duties, had to…

Naruto broke free and rushed toward Tsunade and Shisui.

The woman didn’t even glance in his direction. Naruto froze a few meters away from them, visibly struggling against some unknown forces, though it was hard to tell if he was making an effort to move forward or backward.

After a tense moment where they all stood still, ready to leap at him, ready to restrain him and drag him down to be chained if necessary, he spun around, reached for Kakashi, but instead of the hit they thought they would see, he tore from the jounin’s hand the restraining seal he was clutching and slammed it onto his own forehead.

Kakashi was barely fast enough to catch him before he dropped unceremoniously to the floor, unconscious. The Kyuubi chakra was gone.

He had battled it himself.

“He’s stable. Shizune!”

Unflappable as ever, the Hokage’s assistant rushed to her master’s side. She opened a storage scroll and drew a stretcher from the paper that she laid next to Shisui.

“What are you waiting for?” the Godaime barked at the staring jounin. “Help us!”

It was what spurred them back into motion – they moved Shisui to the stretcher, Tsunade still perched on top of him, though careful to balance her weight on the wooden handles. The jounin carried them without complaints, back to the village, to the hospital.

Fugaku too snapped out of his trance, ordered for his men to spread the news, that the threat was most likely gone for now but to stay on high alert and search the village, that Shisui was hurt and Naruto… He looked at the boy, small in Kakashi’s arms. Tenzo was checking on him quietly, none of them knowing quite what to do.

“Should we…” Tenzo started. He didn’t finish the thought, and no one did for him.

It had been an easy decision to make then, when Kakashi had brought an unconscious Naruto back to the Hokage Tower, to have him brought down to the cell, hidden away. None of them could shed the fear of the Beast edged deep inside their heart, and nothing seemed able to battle it, least of all the compassion they didn’t have for the host.

Can’t you do better?

“I’ll take him to the hospital,” Kakashi decided, and in the pause that followed, he waited to see if someone would object, if they would stop him. Fugaku almost asked, if the boy was stable enough, if it was worth the risk.
Can’t you do better?

He followed in silence.

.

“Tekka!”

The man froze and turned heels, but he wasn’t quick enough to avoid Sasuke backing him into a corner next to his house. For the sake of propriety, Izumi and Itachi only joined when the man was stuck. They could count on Sasuke.

Sasuke didn’t care about propriety.

“I really need to go, Sasuke, come on.”

“Just tell me what’s going on. Please.”

Izumi and Itachi had barged into the training ground earlier and dragged Sasuke away without any explanation, under their cousins’ dumbstruck gaze, thought the youngest had been advised to go home too, and the oldest to rejoin the Police Headquarter. Itachi had stayed stubbornly silent, while Izumi was more diplomatic but equally tight-lipped on what was going on.

Sasuke had spotted Tekka outside after more than an hour of walking circles in the living room and seized the chance.

He did his best pleading expression, hoping to sway the man who always had a soft spot for children. Tekka glanced at the three of them before letting out a defeated sigh.

“I can’t tell you much. The threat is gone for now, that’s all I know.”

“Are you sure?” Itachi asked, a little frantic.

“Yeah. The intruders left and…”

Tekka trailed off, but he had said too much already.

“What is it? What?” Izumi pressed, just as nervous as they all were. The jounin pondered away for a moment, but he was weak to their plea. A good chance they hadn’t run into Inabi or Yashiro.

“They came for Naruto.”

“Is he alright?”

“He is. There was... Shisui interfered.”

They knew to pause then. They knew by his face, by the way he had stumbled over the words. They knew to breathe and prepare themselves for the next question.

Sasuke was the least patient, so he was the one to ask.

“And is he alright?”

Tekka didn’t look away.

“He’s in the hospital.”
He wasn’t dead then. He wasn’t dead. Sasuke lashed out at that small comfort – Tekka would have said it if he was. Shisui wasn’t dead.

Yet.

Sasuke shook his head.

“Where is Naruto?”

“He’s there too. He’s unconscious now, but he’s fine.”

“I want to go.”

“Sasuke…”

“Please,” Sasuke begged, turning to Izumi and Itachi who were the ones who had a say in the matter. “I need to… I don’t want him to wake up alone.”

It was best not thinking about the state he would be in. Especially if Shisui…

Sasuke shook his head again.

“Are you sure they are gone?” Itachi asked, uncharacteristically worried. Tekka nodded.

“I came to deliver the news to the elders. We’re still on alert, but your father believes we’re safe for now.”

“Alright. Thank you.”

Sasuke looked at his brother, waiting for a decision that wouldn’t come. He didn’t understand why he looked so thorn, so reluctant to step out of the district, of the shadow of their house. He had looked so lost earlier, when Izumi had led them in, not refusing to answer Sasuke’s question as much as not hearing them at all, lost in his own head.

What was it, he wondered, that could put Itachi in such a state, that he wouldn’t want to rush to his best friend’s side?

“Okay,” he agreed after an eternity.

Sasuke exhaled a sigh of relief, and they rushed toward the hospital.

.

Why did you stop me? Why not fight? Why?

I had to save him.

Why?

I don’t want him gone from this world. Not now. Not for me.

What would it change? That’s what you humans do. Dying.

Others don’t matter.

But he does?
Yes.

Why?

The house will be empty if he dies. No one will be waiting for us anymore. He smiles when he sees me in the morning. There is food ready, we share it together. I am part of his world. I don’t want it to disappear.

We should have killed these two. To avenge him.

I’d rather all three of them be alive, than all three dead.

And what if he dies? What then?

He won’t die.

Will you finally let me do as I please?

He won’t die!

You don’t know that.

“He won’t!”

Naruto was sure he would find a cage, that the world would again be cut in pieces by the bars, dark in the dim light of a single candle casting deep shadows on the rock. His hand was bond by something – he jerked it away, but the grip held, and he started to panic, unable to recognize where he was and what was going on.

“Naruto!”

Sasuke.

He stilled. Sasuke’s hands were clutching his own – he was sitting on a chair next to the bed Naruto was lying in, the room unfamiliar yet still recognizable.

“It’s fine. Everything is fine. You’re safe in the hospital. It’s fine.”

Sasuke’s worried expression and the shadows of exhaustion on his face didn’t give much weight to his words. Naruto didn’t care anyway. There was only one thing he needed to know.

“Shisui.”

He sat up even as his body protested, his limbs stiff and heavy as if he’d been sleeping for a year.

“Don’t… you’re still…”

“Shisui.”

He tried to get up – his legs gave out under him, sending him crashing down to the hard floor. There was pain, but he couldn’t tell where. His mind was foggy and slow.

“Stop it, stop!”

“Where is he? I need to…”

What if he dies?
It wasn’t possible. Naruto couldn’t form the thought, couldn’t imagine it and the future that would come after, if Shisui had left for good, if he could never see him again. The demon was looking forward to it, and that was because it knew Naruto wouldn’t be able to keep control, wouldn’t be able to keep his emotions in check and prevent them from overpowering him, from opening the floodgate through which the demon would slip and take over.

He could picture the devastation the Beast longed to bring down upon this world.

“Naruto!”

Sasuke slapped both his hands on Naruto’s cheek.

He held on, crouched on the floor so that their eyes could meet because Naruto hadn’t even been able to get back on his feet, and he looked sad and terrified and that, Naruto remembered, would only get worse if he lost it. Sasuke wouldn’t be able to stop him. No one would be.

He would hurt a lot of people if he let the fox roam free. People he didn’t care about, and people he did. The fox didn’t make the difference.

“Calm down. Calm down, okay? I’ll take you to him. So stop… I’ll take you to him. You don’t have to hurt yourself.”

Sasuke helped him to his feet. He hooked their arm together to help support his weight, and Naruto wanted to protest but didn’t. They made their way out of the room, down some corridors and stairs. No one paid them any mind.

Sasuke guided them to a different wing of the building, into a hallway that ended into a big double door, firmly closed. Chairs lined the walls and some of them were occupied – Itachi and Izumi were there, Sasuke’s mother too. Naruto made to step forward – Sasuke stopped him.

“We can’t go any further,” he said, pointing at the sign above the doors. It was glowing red in a bunch of kanji Naruto could only sort of figure out. “The surgery is still ongoing.”

“Surgery?”

Was Shisui opened raw on a metal table beyond that door?

“Tsunade-sama is there. She’ll save him.”

At least Sasuke was as unable as Naruto to contemplate another outcome.

“We just have to wait.”

And so wait they did.

People came and went. Sasuke’s father conversed quietly with his wife for a while before coming to Naruto, wanting to know what he remembered of the attack, what he could tell them. Thankfully he didn’t ask for them to step aside or be alone – Sasuke stayed by his side as he recalled what he could. Naruto had to tell him that they had come for him, that they wanted him to go with them.

That it was his fault. That, he didn’t say, but did he have to? It was obvious. Was it not for him… and was it not for Shisui and his stupid care that even that nameless shinobi had been aware of…

Sasuke’s father didn’t comment on any of it. He lingered for a while after that, eyes on the big doors, before going back to his duties. Sasuke tried to ask, but Naruto fell back into silence.
Several of the jounin dropped by too in between duties. Shisui had a lot of friends. Hayate, Sakura’s teacher, with the woman he lived with, others Naruto couldn’t name. Kakashi and Tenzo, whom Naruto couldn’t look in the eye, because Kakashi had the seals and Tenzo had this weird wood thing that they knew could restrain Naruto with ease, and they had not taken him to the cage this time, but it maybe wasn’t off the table and he knew he had hurt people again and why had they even brought him here? Why not down again?

Naruto ignored them so that he wouldn’t give in the urge to ask.

Hyuuga Tokuma came too, though he didn’t stay long. He didn’t talk to anyone, didn’t ask how things were going. He just exchanged a loaded gaze with Naruto, who was probably the only one present who knew him and who he was.

Sakura stayed for a while and Sasuke’s mother took the opportunity to force him to come with her and eat something, since Naruto had refused to move and Sasuke had refused to leave his side. Sakura held his hand and said nothing.

For hours and hours, the doors didn’t open. The light stayed on, glaring red in the bleak white of the corridor. Naruto’s mind was blank, void of any meaningful thought, focused solely on the sign, willing it to switch off, on the door, willing it to open.

On Shisui, begging him to survive.

He couldn’t leave. It wasn’t fair. Naruto lived in his house – they lived there together. He had said he would always be welcome there, that it was his home too. He couldn’t just go and break that promise like that. Especially not for him, for the idiot mistake of trying to protect Naruto.

The light glowed red, red, red.

Until it didn’t.

They sprung up to their feet as the door opened from the inside and out came Tsunade, disheveled and exhausted. She blinked at the small gathering, confused, and Naruto fell to the back, unable to face her suddenly, remembering the river and how she had pleaded with him, how distant her voice was but close still, close enough to hear, to cling on to.

She too had promised, so that would be two promises fulfilled, or none at all.

“How is he? Is he okay?” Izumi asked, forgetting property to grip the Hokage’s hands, pleading.

Tsunade gave her a tired but gentle smile.

“He’s stable now. He’s not entirely in the clear yet, but the worse is over.”

“Can we see him?”

Naruto didn’t hear the rest. He was shaking with relief, feeling nauseous and wrong-footed all of the sudden.

He’s alive. He’s alive. Shisui’s alive.

Life resumed then. The future came back into being something he could envision, time could flow again. Though Naruto didn’t think he would ever be free of this very new fear, that he had never experienced until today and was sure to haunt him from now on.
He had never given much thought on death before.

“Naruto? Naruto?”

He snapped back to the present to meet Tsunade’s concerned face. It was the first time he realized how tall she was, towering above him. It should have made him squeamish, threatened by her huge shadow, but for the first time in his life he felt the urge to huddle closer, to hide inside.

He took her hands in his. He could still see them covering the wound, taking his place. He only now noticed that there was no blood left on his hands and arms, that he wasn’t wearing torn and bloodstained clothes either. It had been washed away in his sleep, just like she had washed her hands, gotten rid of Shisui’s life spilling away. It was hard to believe there was still any left in his body.

His hands had barely kept life in it, but hers had saved him.

He brought them to his forehead, pressed them against his face. She had promised – “I will save him” – and she had. Her hands, they had done it.

They were warm.

She had done it. She had kept death at bay, kept life within. She had managed to power through her panic by sheer willpower, by clinging to Naruto’s imploring face, by her stubborn refusal to see yet another young die for nothing. She could think of nothing more appealing than sleeping for a hundred years now, after she had scrubbed her skin raw to get rid of the blood that was no longer here but she could still feel clinging to her skin, hot enough to burn.

Except she couldn’t move from Naruto’s embrace, from the tight grip he had on her hands he was cradling like something precious, something to be worshipped.

She couldn’t bear to think of what would have happened if she had failed. Of walking out of the operation room and facing him, only to tell him that Shisui’s life had slipped away from her grasp.

Now that he was here she wanted to examine him too, for even if the wounds he had sustained during the fight were mostly gone, he looked beyond exhausted, unusually pale and shaking like a leaf. But as soon as the moment had come, it was gone – he let go of her hand, took a step back, and then ran away.

“Give him some time,” Itachi said to his young brother when he made to go after him. The boy looked torn, but he complied. Tsunade watched them walk away, following a nurse to the room Shisui would be settled in.

“Shizune?” Tsunade called. The woman had assisted only on a part of the operation, mostly running around to keep Tsunade updated while she was held up in there, elbow deep into Uchiha Shisui’s chest.

But of course she materialized at Tsunade’s side as soon as she was called.

“I’m here.”

“I need…”

Her head turned before she could finish the thought, and only Shizune’s strong grip prevented her
from collapsing.

“You need to rest,” Shizune confirmed for her. Tsunade let herself be guided to her office and the uncomfortable cot crammed in a corner. She was asleep before hitting the pillow.

She spent most of her time at the hospital the following week, monitoring both Shisui’s reconversion and Lee’s condition, since Marco had unearthed some obscure procedure from an old medical book, and she had to be sure Lee’s body could handle it before proposing it to him.

She also wanted to keep an eye on Naruto.

The boy had taken to sleep and pretty much live at the foot of Shisui’s bed, and there was no uprooting him. Shisui was yet to wake – as long as he didn’t, Tsunade had no hope to see Naruto leave his side, expect from when Haruno Sakura dragged him forcefully to the gardens so that he saw the light of day at least a little.

Other than him, there was always an Uchiha or two watching over Shisui during the day. Fugaku’s sons more often than not, with or without Izumi. Itachi was here most often – he stared, unblinking, at his sleeping friend, looking haunted and regretful, though not much more than he usually did.

She hadn’t dug in more than necessary into the Uchiha and Danzo’s affair. She knew enough, and she didn’t want to form too quick judgments on events she hadn’t been here to witness, willing to give them all the clean start she was having herself in a village where most of those who had once known her were dead or gone.

Of Itachi, she knew what Izumi had been willing to tell her, and the portrait was bleak enough already. In his desperate vigil over Shisui’s sleep, she saw a feeling that was easily recognizable, and that was mirrored in Naruto’s sleepless watch.

Guilt, in both of them.

The Uchiha were in a frenzy to find that wandering Sharingan, with no luck for now. They had known of it for years with no lead whatsoever of its whereabouts, and now it had come straight to them without any trouble at all, before escaping them once more. From what she had understood, Itachi had met him before.

Even for shinobi like the two that had attacked Naruto and Shisui, it would be no easy feat to breach Konoha’s wards. And a quick investigation had proven they hadn’t. Which could only mean they knew someone who had opened it for them. Or that they came from the village themselves.

Jiraiya was gone gathering intel and he had promised her answers on the matter – he seemed to know the men already, or at least where they came from. As to what they had come from, they had made it clear.

For that reason too, she had no interest in sending Naruto away from her sight.

He didn’t ask anything. When she made the round and checked on his friend, he looked at her every move but he never asked. It was for the best, maybe – she worried still, for Shisui had yet to wake up and things could still go wrong, they always could. She didn’t trust herself to hide it from if he asked.

But he didn’t. He didn’t talk much to those who visited either. He wasn’t really there with them, wasn’t fully back from that moment in the forest where he had been holding Shisui’s life down in his bare hands.
He was still waiting.

Shisui can’t die, Naruto kept thinking in a loop. He didn’t understand why he didn’t wake up, what could be so broken in his body that he couldn’t get over it, and no reassurance could keep this terror at bay. It was all he could do to keep writing it on the walls of his mind, a wish, a prayer.

Shisui can’t die.

Why not, the Beast asked, cruelly curious.

If he dies now, it will be my fault.

And he would never be able to bear that. It made no sense. It wasn’t supposed to be that way. Shisui couldn’t… He couldn’t care that much. So much that he would get in front of that sword, so much that he would put Naruto’s life before his own. Naruto didn’t want it. He didn’t need that kind of bond. He just wanted Shisui to wait for him at the kitchen table when he was running late, to meditate with him on the terrace facing the garden, to burn incense when they couldn’t sleep. It was enough. The warmth of that house where he was allowed to return to, it was enough. He didn’t want more.

Not if this was what it would lead to.

People kept coming, to visit Shisui, because Shisui had many friends and everyone loved him. What they must be thinking, Naruto pondered, when Shisui was in that state for him, of all people, when it was his fault. They said nothing, but Sasuke was so worried, and Izumi was so sad, and Sasuke’s mother kept looking at Naruto with an expression he didn’t understand and they had to know, they had to. Itachi was the worse, hovering in silence as they both perfectly ignored each other, looking lost and guilty, which was absurd.

If there was a guilty one, out of the two of them…

Shisui had to live. Didn’t he know that? Didn’t he know that between him and Naruto, the choice was obvious?

Shisui can’t die, when I’m still here because of him.

Naruto waited.

Chapter End Notes

Happy 2020 my friends.

I kept the fighting short because I didn't know what to make of it lol. It wasn't the point anyway. I have the nagging feeling that I'm forgetting stuff and setting myself up for continuity issue but I don't have the courage to read back on the previous chapter to make sense of it. I should really take more notes.

I have no knowledge of medical things and injuries and blood and stuff. But to my defense canon didn't either.
I would like once again to thank everyone who keeps reading and commenting on this story. This became quite the monster this past year and I'm very grateful for all the love it received. I hope you'll keep enjoying this, I'll do my best! Love you all.
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

Turning point.

Chapter Notes

I’m back on the doubting-myself-and-my-writing train, so I know I won’t manage to improve this chapter to my satisfaction no matter what I do. The solution is obviously to post it as it is lol.

Some elements in this were suggested to me by a reader who has my undying gratitude. And also I’m about to make good on some promises I made to some of you ages ago haha. I do keep my words.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tsunade went back to her office, intent on taking a nap, and had the unpleasant surprise to find Fugaku and Shikaku waiting for her.

She had been studiously avoiding all of them for the past few days, content for now to focus on the hospital and her patients, something she had missed, she had come to realize.

“Shisui didn’t wake up yet?” Fugaku asked. She was used now to the blunt, unpolished version of his concern and brushed off his rudeness. She wasn’t exactly a model of politeness herself.

“Not yet. His body needs time to heal.”

“Are you sure he will make it? Are you absolutely sure?”

“Who’s the medical expert here?” Tsunade retorted, infuriated. Fugaku grimaced.

“We need to be sure,” Shikaku said, always so damn calm and mild. Tsunade felt like an unruly brat next to him, and in her foulest mood, she was convinced he did it on purpose.

“Why?”

They looked offended, just for a second, as if it was outrageous of her to ask. Yet she was right – they gave up the pretense quickly. Fugaku pinched his lips.

“You saw what happened back there. We need to know if Shisui could still die. We need to be prepared. In case…”

“In case Naruto needs to be restrained,” Shikaku finished through gritted teeth. At least they had the decency to look bothered by the idea.
“He restrained himself just fine.”

“We can’t rely on that.”

“Same during the chunin exam. No one intervened.”

“We still don’t know what happened then.”

“What are you saying? Shisui won’t die. But if he was to, as it’s bound to happen someday, then Naruto will have to go through it, as all people do. With our help.”

“We can’t just leave it at that, Hokage-sama.”

She clicked her tongue, fed up already with a topic she had done her best to avoid until now. She didn’t want to think about Naruto as an issue to be dealt with. She didn’t want to see him as what he was for the village.

An asset and a threat. But what about the boy himself?

“What do you suggest then? Just put him in jail?”

“That’s exactly what we’re trying to avoid!”

She frowned at Shikaku and understood then that as she was angry at them, they, too, were angry at her.

“What are you talking about?”

Not the same thing as she was, obviously. The two men exchanged a loaded gaze – she felt the urge to smack them on the head.

“If we don’t find another solution, then it will have to be the cage.”

“What cage?”

They decided with another look who would be the one to explain it to her.

Shikaku told her about the prison cells under the Intelligence Department. About the deepest of them, the wards in the walls, the special metal of the bars.

The damn chains.

“Has it been used before? For him? He’s been there?”

“Once,” Fugaku confessed. “Two years ago. When he found out about… his condition. He didn’t, ah, take it well.”

The man had to be aware of how he sounded, how inaccurate, understated his retelling when she could imagine what had happened. How Naruto must have felt. And that cage…

“Do you mean he didn’t know? Before?”

“No. It was decided that the truth about the Kyuubi’s sealing would be kept from the younger generation, including him. So that he wouldn’t suffer from his peers’ judgment.”

“And did it work?”
Another embarrassed look. This was getting old.

“Not exactly, no. The kids don’t know because their parents were forbidden to tell them. But that didn’t mean they couldn’t… advise them, to stay away from him.”

Ah, she could finally put a finger on the sentiment showing more and more on both their faces and body language.

It was shame.

“I see,” she said blankly, because she had gone in here to take a nap and this was too much shit to learn at once. She knew how the villagers could be, shinobi and civilians alike – how petty, how narrow-minded, how stubborn. If they had had to qualm isolating Naruto from his entire generation, they couldn’t have treated him much better in other areas of his life.

She did wonder where his animosity and harsh exterior came from. She had assumed it was simply teenage angst showing early.

She almost laughed at herself, remembering how she hated it as a teenager, to see all her struggles and raging emotions be swept away by that simplistic explanation. The boy was obviously suffering, but the youth’s problems were so easy to dismiss in the face of their own.

“So. Shisui can’t die,” she said to go back on the topic at hand, eager to be done with that whole conversation.

“Shisui, and everyone else Naruto cares about,” Shikaku confirmed.

“The list is short.”

It wasn’t said with any animosity or reproach. Fugaku was stating a fact. “The list is short”. Not that Naruto was uncaring.

But who cared about him?

No one had been able to tell her who was looking after him before Shisui, and she was starting to think it was because this question had no answer.

“Since he wasn’t aware of it, I imagine he never received any guidance toward gaining control over the Tailed Beast,” she affirmed more than asked since the answer was obvious. She received matching looks of puzzlement for her efforts. “I’ve seen it done,” she added as an explanation. She had heard of some of the other jinchuuriki. She had even met one.

“It’s a venue to explore,” she concluded. Jiraiya could probably do something about it. If need be she could simply order him to stay in the village and train the boy. She wasn’t the damn Hokage for nothing.

“For now we’ll just… keep an eye on him,” she concluded lamely, grimacing at the inadequacy. He wasn’t a misbehaving child. It was so much worse and they were so powerless to it. Not for the first time she cursed those who had put the burden on his shoulders and theirs, who had saddled the village with that absurdity. What good had come of it? What was the point?

She thought she could hear her great uncle answer in her head.

“You’ll see the point when you go to war.”
And she hated how absolutely certain he sounded that this would happen. That was it, wasn’t it? All they had done until now, all they kept doing still. It was the goal they had in mind.

Was it no jinchuuriki, no war or no war, no jinchuuriki? Did it even matter? With or without the Tailed Beasts, they could wreak chaos and destruction just fine.

Sometimes it felt to her that it was all they were ever good at.

Rise and fall, rise and fall. On and on, indefinitely.

In and out. In and out.

Naruto stayed focused on Shisui’s chest, the only part of his body moving, the only proof he was still here, still of the living. For two days now he could breathe without a respirator – a good sign, surely.

Naruto didn’t understand why he didn’t just wake up.

He had never been sick in his life, except for an upset stomach when he ate something bad. He had never had an injury that was an issue for more than a day – or an hour. Losing blood, tearing flesh, it wasn’t a concern to him. And Shisui looked fine. From his viewpoint at the foot of the bed where he was seating carefully so as not to crush Shisui’s legs, the mattress dipped in the shape of his body with how much time he spent in that spot, he looked at Shisui, and Shisui looked fine. Pale and not very healthy, probably, but like he could wake any moment.

What was going on in his body, that he didn’t? Why didn’t he open his eyes?

“What’s wrong with him?”

Naruto shrugged, and it disturbed Akito wrapped around his neck, perched on of his shoulders.

“His body needs time to heal,” he answered, parroting the words Tsunade kept repeating.

“Why?”

“…I don’t know.”

Akito spent a lot of time here with Naruto. He had been worried, when he had come to visit and had seen Naruto standing guard in the hospital room, and he had decided to stay. When Naruto had asked why, the fox had said “I wouldn’t want to be alone if my brother was in this state.”

Shisui wasn’t Naruto’s brother. But Naruto had said nothing.

“Someone’s coming,” Akito warned, ears fluttering around. Naruto nodded and got up, ruffled the cover a bit, and slid under the bed.

More and more he hid, because too many people came into the room and he didn’t have the energy nor will to talk to them all. The Uchiha were the worse because they tried to care for him too, as if he was the one that needed it. As if it wasn’t his fault Shisui was like this. Itachi didn’t care for him of course, but the weight of his emotions was so dark and heavy Naruto had to exit the room while he was here. For the others, he simply hid under the bed.

They weren’t fooled, probably, but they never tried to fetch him under the bed. Sakura would have, but he didn’t bother hiding from her – it was worse if she had to look for him first, and she only fed
him snacks in the hospital garden while chatting his ear off about the village gossip and life, before sending him back to the room without ever suggesting he did something else. It wasn’t so bad.

Once, Hinata had come too, with her father. The Hyuuga clan leader hadn’t stayed for long, but she had, folding origami cranes with nimble fingers from one of the uncomfortable chairs.

“Prayers,” she had whispered, when he had asked what they were. Her presence was calming and he hadn’t gone to hide, but she didn’t come again.

He huddled under the bed, propped against the wall, and watched the door open, a pair of feet walk in. It was Tsunade.

He debated with himself – on one hand, she would fret over him too, ask when he’d last eat, when he’d last sleep, if he was okay, as if he was going to be any more cooperative with the answers than he had been the hundred times she had tried before.

On the other hand, he needed news. He needed to know. Shisui wasn’t waking up. Wasn’t that weird? Wasn’t it alarming?

She moved around the bed, checking what it was she checked when she came here, and he was about to roll out of his hiding spot, maybe scare her a little just because, when someone else walked into the room.

“Tsunade. Jiraiya is back.”

It was Shizune. And Jiraiya… The old pervert that claimed he knew Naruto’s parents.

“He has news, he wants to talk to you as soon as possible. He said he would wait for you in your office.”

“I’ll go after I’m done here,” Tsunade replied.

“Are you sure you’re alright? Your chakra…”

“I’m fine, Shizune. I have enough left. Don’t worry about me.”

Naruto had snuck into the operation room a few days ago. He had seen the seals, massive, on the floor, requiring the strength of two or five or ten people, so complex he couldn’t begin to unravel it, and needing to be maintained for hours at times. No wonder she looked so exhausted these days.

Maybe he would help her with that.

Shizune left the room and Tsunade resumed her routine, humming to herself.

Naruto didn’t avoid her as much as he did all the others, and if her insistence on checking up on him and trying to make him eat and sleep was annoying, it wasn’t the reason why he hid now.

It was soothing, being here under the bed, huddled against the wall and the nightstand, listening to her bustling around, talking to Shisui as if he could hear her and talking to herself too. Her hands working her magic, keeping Shisui alive.

They were both safe here, with her. There was trust, that’s what it was.

He trusted her.
And yet, he also needed to know.

“Akito. Can you call Akira here?” Naruto asked as soon as she left and he had returned to his place on the bed. The fox nodded and disappeared, only to pop back a few minutes later, brother in tow. Akira was wearing a patterned kimono and looked displeased, but he often did when visiting Naruto.

“What do you want now?”

“I have a present. For your mother, and you.”

Naruto produced the scroll from his pocket, the one he had used to stop Kisame’s sword. He had no use for it – he had plenty of storing scrolls full to the brim with his own chakra from his various experiments with it, and it wasn’t like there was any danger of him running out of chakra in the first place.

Besides, the sword was filled with a lot of different types, mixed together in a chaotic mess, and Naruto couldn’t imagine what he could possibly do with it.

But the foxes surely could.

“That’s… that’s a lot,” Akira said, surprised, when inspecting the scroll. He tried to push Akito away, who was leaning over his shoulder to get a sample too.

“Taste weird,” the small fox said. But he didn’t look put off.

“And what do you want in exchange?”

“I don’t…”

Naruto gave up on the lie even before it was fully out. It was no use, lying to a fox.

“I do need a favor. But it’s a gift. It’s yours even if you can’t help me.”

It was an ongoing mission to get himself on Akihime’s good side. He hadn’t seen the fox matriarch again since he had signed his contract, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t keeping an eye on him. And he was sure Akito told her everything.

Akira threw the scroll behind him – it disappeared into thin air, back where they lived. Naruto was dying to learn that trick, but that would have to wait.

“What’s the favor?”

“They’re called the Akatsuki,” Jiraiya declared once he had knocked back his cup of sake. Tsunade bit the inside of her cheek, struggling today to resist the urge. But she had promised – no alcohol while she worked. Uchiha Fugaku eyed the man distastefully. Such a killjoy this one, but for once Tsunade agreed with him, for she too would have preferred for Jiraiya not to sway sake under her nose.

Shikaku looked like he wanted to hoard that bottle for himself. As for Kakashi, who knew? She didn’t bother to try reading him.

“They’re a sort of mercenary group. They take on any sort of assignment, for a price. According to my information, most hidden villages have hired their services at least once, and increasingly in
recent years.”

“Including Konoha?” Fugaku asked, always on board to ask the unpleasant questions.

“The name is familiar,” Tsunade sighed. She had read it somewhere, she was sure, on one report or another. It wouldn’t be that surprising either way – it sounded like something Danzo would have been quite fond of, even with his own private army available.

“What does that have to do with coming here then? With Naruto?” Kakashi asked. Jiraiya swallowed down another cup before putting it down on Tsunade’s desk – if some ink smeared on the paper beneath it, she would have his head. He crossed his arms.

“It was hard to get a confirmation, since information is scarce, about the organization and about the jinchuuriki both. But from what’s I’ve gathered, and with what Naruto reported of their words, it’s fair to assume there are hunting down the Tailed Beasts and their host.”

It wasn’t much of a stretch really – what other interest could Naruto have for them?

“Why?” she sighed, barely a question, since she assumed no one could answer it anyway.

“That’s anyone’s guess for now,” Jiraiya said, echoing her thoughts.

“Do you think they managed already?”

He shrugged.

“If any hidden village lost their jinchuuriki, they didn’t advertise it. We know that Karatachi Yagura is dead, and his Biju most likely died with him, and Kumogakure still has a firm hold on its two. As for the others… We hear very few from Takigakure, though I believe their jinchuuriki to be fairly young. Both of Iwagakure’s are older and might be unaccounted for, I would have to dig further. The Six Tails… never resurfaced, after Uzushio’s fall.”

Hidden in the village that had crossed them out of the map no doubt. Though it was hard to believe Kiri alone could have wiped out small but powerful Uzushio. Who had gotten custody of their jinchuuriki then? That couldn’t have been a smooth transaction.

“I heard though, that Suna’s delegation was attacked on their way back.”

“What?”

“It looks like they were after the One Tail too. I’m positive it was the Akatsuki, and that they failed. The boy is confined to their village now. Rasa won’t take any chances.”

“We didn’t hear any of it.”

“He wouldn’t want words to spread I assume.”

Tsunade reclined briefly against the back of her sofa, closed her eyes with a sigh. Usually she didn’t like being the only one sitting down, but she was dead on her feet and standing was just an unnecessary pain at this point.

“What do we know about them?”

“The Akatsuki? Not much. They don’t have that many members, but they’re all-powerful. Some famous missing-nin, like our friend from Kiri. It’s possible they have their base of operation in Ame, of all places.”
 Truly, what could that miserable, war-torn country offer, besides a hideout for a mercenary organization? It was rather spectacular, how they had all firmly turned away from the Land of Rain and never looked back.

“It also appears that… Orochimaru might be a member. Or was at some point anyway.”

She laughed at that, strained and bitter. That was right up his alley, wasn’t it? Jiraiya glanced at her with a pained expression, but she couldn’t handle his grief now, on top of her own. She looked away.

“They are going to try again,” Shikaku said. Mumbled really, mostly to himself, spilling out a thought he had been mulling over from the beginning of this conversation. Shikaku was concerned with the practical – he had a talent for prioritizing, and right now this was, indeed, the top priority.

They would try to get Naruto again.

“He can’t leave the village for now. We have to watch him closely.”

“He’s used to wandering the woods alone,” Tsunade remarked, thinking about the clearing where they still met from time to time, where she showed him what she knew of fuuinjutsu and he tried in vain to best her in taijutsu. Not leaving the village wouldn’t change much for him – he was already confined, even if it was nothing official. But if that was what was next, keep to the streets, stay away from the thick woods where he could easily get lost into and got to pretend like he was on his own, free to wander…

Once again, he was to pay the price of their machinations.

“We don’t have to tell him as much,” Fugaku suggested.

“It won’t take long for him to piece it together,” Kakashi snapped back.

She nodded. Naruto wasn’t an idiot. And he already knew, more than they seemed to believe. She didn’t know to what extent, but she could hear it in how he spoke sometimes, in the bitterness he carried. He wasn’t blind to the role he had in the village, the position he had been pushed into.

“Another attack could trigger him. Especially if other people are involved again,” Shikaku said carefully. She knew he was dissatisfied with where they had left that topic the last time. He wanted concrete solutions, things he could enact, things that had a chance to work.

“Could you look into it, Jiraiya?” she asked, turning to her friend. “He needs to gain control over it.”

She put too much emphasis on the word "need", she sounded too desperate. But if he could truly learn to reign in the Kyuubi, if they could rest easy, knowing that it wouldn’t escape his grasp, then it would get better. The mistrust would ease, and he would get stronger too, strong enough they would have to worry so much about sending him outside and losing him to another village. He could step into the role of a protector. He could find purpose.

“I will help him,” Jiraiya promised, solemn.

“And until then?” Shikaku pressed, relentless. “You know we only have one solution.”

“We already talked about it,” she cut, voice hard. He was mad at her for avoiding the subject, but what was she supposed to do? Agree that they would lock Naruto in a cell when the need would arise? She couldn’t say that. They would find something else. Or Naruto would manage on his own
because he had done so before and she could only have faith in him.

Kakashi’s gaze weighed on her, scrutinizing, but for once there seemed to be some sort of approval in his stance and face. They agreed on no prison for children then. What a victory.

“Security will have to be reinforced either way. What do we know of their power level?” Shikaku asked then, stirring the conversation away from any moral quandary or emotional tangent, exactly as he had done when talking Tsune down from going after Hiruzen after Kamui and Hokuto’s death. From there stemmed his efficiency, but also her reserves toward him. Try as she may, she knew she would never reach that level of detachment.

“Not much. Why?”

“Do we have to expect a larger scale attack?”

War? The word echoed between them without having to be pronounced. It was from the attacker’s very lips too – “It’s no time for war yet,” the masked man had said. Enough shinobi with enough strength could cause a lot of damage, especially without the confines of diplomacy and interest of a hidden village.

How ironic really. The split of the jinchuuriki between the various hidden villages was to be a deterrent, that would prevent war between them, and here it could be the catalyst bringing wars to their doors. Then again, it never even work, did it? The Second Shinobi War happened, the Third too. The jinchuuriki were only marginally involved. So what was even the point? And Uzushio…

Custody of the Six Tails didn’t save them from extinction. Kirigakure had spun a tale of belligerence and unspeakable offense after the fact, but the disappearance of Uzushio’s Bijuu made it clear what their goal had been, even if it had never reappeared. Kiri had never swallowed getting only one when Kumo and Iwa had two, and Uzushio was the easiest target.

Tsunade wondered – had the Tailed Beasts been free to roam the earth, would they have sprung up quite as much damage as they did on all on their own?

“How far will they go? What is their goal?”

Shikaku was just thinking aloud at this point. They had no way to answer that for now. But they could expect another attempt, had to think about how to counter it, how to protect Naruto and the rest of the village.

There were footsteps outside the office – Shizune came in, looking troubled.

“Was there someone else here?” she asked, looking back at the door.

“No. Why?”

“I thought I felt…”

She shook her head. Shizune could nag all she wanted, but she was at least as overworked as Tsunade herself, if not more. Tsunade had taken the habit of blackmailing the young woman into taking care of herself just as her mentor did. If Tsunade had to go to bed, Shizune did too. If she had to eat, they ate together. It wasn’t a bad system.

“Sorry. I was elsewhere. The teams sent out after the intruders have just returned. Do you want to hear them now?”
“Yes. Bring them in.”

The other men took it as the dismissal it was. Only Shikaku stayed behind to oversee his jounin’s reports and general state. Ah. Another one that was overworked.

“I’ll start reorganizing the internal defenses,” Fugaku said on his way out. It fell on the police force to protect Konoha’s citizens inside the walls. He took the attempt on Naruto and Shisui’s condition as a personal failure, especially seeing that one of the intruders had the Sharingan. They still couldn’t tell if it was stolen or not.

“Please do. And Kakashi…”

“I’ll watch over Naruto.”

It was hard to say how displeased he was. He was fond of his team, or so she had been told. But Naruto wasn’t so fond of him, and Kakashi’s sudden hovering wouldn’t go unquestioned by the guarded boy.

Another nail in the coffin of Naruto’s trust in this place, in them. Was it all she could do for him? Condemn him to an even narrower future, under threat now on top of everything?

The shinobi left, others entered in their stead. The day went on, her duties never-ending, and she struck Naruto from her mind, as she had to.

“Naruto? You can let go of me now.”

Akira’s voice was mild but Naruto realized the grip he had on the fox’s body had to be painful. They had walked an entire district away from the Hokage Tower.

He released the fox and Akira jumped to the ground, taking his cover with him. Naruto had needed to know. Needed to hear what was being said, what was decided, what he had to expect. And the foxes were good at hiding, good enough that none of the adults had felt him, eavesdropping just outside the office, until Shizune had come because Shizune was better than most at this sort of thing. She always knew when Naruto was coming.

He had heard enough by then anyway.

Naruto supposed that Akira was still in hiding as no one seemed to notice a fox in a kimono walking by his side. They wandered the streets aimlessly, for Naruto was unable to decide of a direction. He felt too restless to go sit on Shisui’s bed. The idea of going back home made him sick.

As for the forest…

He was reasonably certain someone would stop him on his way, and completely certain that he wouldn’t be able to bear it. And now wasn’t the moment to snap.

If he snapped, he would go back in the cage.

“You know we only have one solution. We already talked about it.”

Of course they had. Tsunade was nice, but she was still the Hokage. They needed to be prepared, right? For Naruto to lose it, to get out of control. For the moment he would need to be put down.
Not killed, no, never, nor cast out. They wouldn’t let go of him. He was too precious.

They all were.

Precious, but not like a treasure was. Not so that they would be cherished or cared for.

Precious, but not loved.

In Kiri, in Kumo, in Taki, in Iwa. In Suna too, of course, Gaara confined now just as he was, protected, sheltered.

Protected, but not loved.

Kiri, Kumo, Taki, Iwa, Suna. And Konoha. Nine of them, targets now.

He wondered. If there was something to be done about all this.

Do you know them? Are you the same?

The Beast stayed quiet these days. Ever since it had almost broken free of the constraints of Naruto’s body, and Naruto had shoved it back down by the sheer force of his will to keep Shisui in this world. Naruto remembered how the red chakra had sheltered them then. It was as if his emotions had commended it, but at the same time he wasn’t in control at all, it wasn’t his mind, his will.

Had his emotions been that strong? Or had the Beast… what, understood? Complied?

Maybe it simply didn’t want to die. But there was no saying those men wanted them dead.

Missing-nin don’t go around collecting Biju for the fun of it all, the demon scoffed.

Well if it's a weapon they want, shouldn’t you be happy? Don’t you want to go to war?

To that, Naruto got no answer. But it wasn’t approval radiating from the cage. The topic changed quickly.

I know them.

It was almost reluctant.

Are you the same? Naruto asked again. Are you close?

The fox snorted, disdainful, but it was confused too, maybe even a little lost. As if…

Don’t you know?

Leave me be.

No matter the Tailed Beasts anyway. It wasn’t them Naruto wanted to meet. To nine Tailed Beasts were tied nine jinchuuriki, nine people like him who had a monster in their mind.

Hunted now.

Trapped, too?

Naruto couldn’t think.
There was a pop, and Akito was walking by their side, though he quickly jumped into Naruto’s arms instead of trying to keep up the pace with his short legs.

“Are you alright? How did it go?”

Akito was ever so curious, but neither foxes understood a thing about Naruto’s life and feelings. They didn’t get who he was, who was or wasn’t his friend and why, why he was sad and why he was angry. They lead vastly different lives and humans’ quarrels were greatly puzzling to them. Akito still asked. Naruto struggled to answer.

“Aren’t you going back to the hospital?”

This, they understood. Worry for a loved one too close to death’s doors. And yet they didn’t understand at all.

He couldn’t go back. It was his fault.

It was truly his fault. He knew before, the men had told him, but it was confirmed now. If they had breached the village’s wards, it was to get him. If they had hurt Shisui so, it was to get him. And if they did it again, and if people tried to interfere and if they got hurt too, it would also be his fault. It was him they wanted, him they would hunt down, regardless of who got caught in between. Him and the demon buried in his entrails, the both of them a prize now, and a threat in yet another way. A threat to all around them.

And no one, no one would get injured protecting him again.

Decide then. Make up your mind.

Shut up.

What is holding you back?

He was jolted out of his thoughts by Sakura appearing in his face and nearly head butting him.

“Hi there Naruto!”

She was bad at that forced cheerfulness thing. Sasuke caught up to them, probably abandoned in the middle of the street when she had raced to catch Naruto.

He didn’t know their face was exactly what he wanted to see until he had them just before his eyes.

“Are you alright?” he asked, quite nonsensically.

“…Fine,” Sasuke answered, puzzled. “Hm, and you?”

Naruto wasn’t fine, because Naruto kept seeing Shisui on his hospital bed and they had to be fine, all of them, for him to be too.

But they wouldn’t be, would they? They would come again, those men, and Sasuke was so righteous and Sakura was so stubborn, and what if they were the ones with him next time? They wouldn’t run away, they wouldn’t give up on the fight to save themselves. Naruto recalled a time in front of the memorial, the endless list of names, how they had talked about sacrifice, protection, love.

“That’s not for you to decide,” Sasuke had said, when Naruto had declared that he wouldn’t ever let anyone die on his behalf. Sasuke would do as he pleased, for sure.
This new fear didn’t leave him, anymore. How fragile they were, how easily they could be injured or killed. He would be fine, he healed easily. But them?

“It’s Akito, isn’t it?” Sakura said out of the blue to the little fox still in Naruto’s arm. Akito hummed, sounding pleased. The next moment he had jumped in Sakura’s arms, who fumbled a bit with his writhing body.

“Hello Sakura! Hello Sake.”

There was a pause, just a few seconds of bewilderment. And then…

Sakura’s laugh was loud and boisterous, tears gathering at the corner of her eyes almost instantly as she wheezed through her hilarity. Sasuke was comically subdued compared to her, eyes crinkling and shoulders shaking in silent laughter, lightly biting his lips as if it would help him reign it in.

Naruto laughed too. He laughed to see them laugh, he laughed to Akito’s confused, pouting face, to Akira’s scolding that it was “Sasuke, Sasuke!”

This small thing there, the space created by the three of them in the middle of the street, the undignified snorts and smiling eyes, it had to be this, that people deemed worth protecting.

“This is Akira!” Akito exclaimed, to deflect the attention.

“It’s nice to meet you, Akira,” Sakura said easily, unfazed, at if this was perfectly normal. They hadn’t asked any questions about the foxes after the Forest of Death. Then again, there hadn’t been any time really. So much was going on then and still went on now, it felt like they had no time at all, to do anything, not even think. And when they met they skirted away from the subjects, eager to preserve the peace, walking on eggshells because everything felt so fragile, unstable and unbalanced, ready to shatter at the lowest whisper.

It was just another thing they couldn’t talk about.

Akira squirmed under the girl’s attention and got angry at Akito when his brother laughed at his embarrassment. Naruto couldn’t help but tease Sasuke too, wondering aloud if he ought to pick up that “Sake” nickname for his friend.

The mood didn’t feel quite so heavy then. Until Naruto asked where his friends were heading.

“We were going to see Shisui again”, Sakura said. *And you*, she didn’t add, since it was obvious. After all visiting Shisui wasn’t of much interest. He wouldn’t wake up.

“Let’s go then,” Naruto said with a shrug, knowing he had failed entirely to sound as detached as he hoped. The two foxes bid them farewell and disappeared, not needing to look after Naruto now that his friends could take over.

That made quite a lot of people that worried about him.

.

Sakura knew that look on Naruto’s face.

She had come to recognize it. She had scolded him before, about doing it out there in public where he could walk into a post or someone else, but he did it without thought probably, and so always at the most inconvenient time.
His eyes stared at nothing and his movements were slow, since he wasn’t even inhabiting his own mind right then, not really. The telltale signs that he was talking to the Kyuubi.

So she had run to him to smack him out of it, because he was in the middle of the street and he couldn’t get lost like this here. It wasn’t safe.

Strangely enough, she had noticed the foxes only after getting closer, even though it wasn’t something she should have been able to overlook. Especially the one called Akira, who was standing straight and wearing a brightly colored kimono. She had rolled with it though. Above all she wanted to get Naruto out of his own head, back down here with them.

Their walk to the hospital was filled with inane chitchat. She mentioned that Shikamaru was out of the village with Choji and Ino for his first mission as a chunin team leader, and the mood soured slightly. Sasuke hadn’t stepped out of the walls since his promotion, and it shouldn’t have been that big of a deal, but she couldn’t help thinking that the reason had nothing to do with the lack of mission or any doubts in Sasuke’s abilities.

She had an inkling the three of them were well aware of it. She changed the subject.

They stopped in the hospital’s garden to gather some flowers. It wouldn’t look much besides the one from Ino’s shop that Sasuke’s mother had brought a few days ago, but it wouldn't do to go empty-handed. Even if Shisui clearly wouldn’t care.

There was no change to his condition. Sasuke, the most knowledgeable on the matter, assured it wasn’t out of the ordinary, though he was still just as anxious as the rest of them to see the older Uchiha open his eyes. Sasuke had been devouring medical books and treaties lately, taking a leap in his studies of medical practice. He always asked the nurses questions when they came to check on Shisui, though he refrained in front of the Hokage. Sakura felt shy in her presence too – meeting the Hokage was bond to be intimidating, but there was something extra off-putting in seeing the woman here, as a doctor, tending to their friend, especially seeing how familiar she was, at times, with Naruto.

They stayed for a while, talking quietly as though they would disturb Shisui’s sleep, when they knew for a fact that the building crashing down on them wouldn’t do anything to rise him from his slumber. Naruto was restless, agitated. He wouldn’t say why. He was strangely reluctant to see them go, asked where they were going, to do what. As if he worried.

Still he stayed behind when they left, no doubt to spend yet another night curled up at the foot of Shisui’s bed.

She and Sasuke waited to be outside the hospital and back into the streets, almost holding their breath until they could talk between themselves. More and more it felt like they were some spies documenting their friend’s behavior, observing him closely before debriefing in a quiet corner. Naruto wouldn’t like it if he knew. But they needed to get this out somehow.

“I talked to Ino before she left,” she started. “It’s certain that they came for Naruto.”

Ino had upped her spying game quite a bit since she had been turned down for the internship at the Intelligence Department. Sakura believed she wanted to build her case both on her efficiency at gathering intel, and on the weak spots of the Department who spilled too many words in the streets. Vindication and the wish to improve all that could be improved – Ino often managed to combine both motivations.

“At least if we’re stuck here, we can watch over him,” Sasuke said, voice tight.
It had to be it. Sakura still got chills thinking about Sasuke telling her, teary-eyed and haunted, how Naruto was when he woke up, how desperate he had been to find Shisui, how stuck he was until they got confirmation that the man would pull through.

How he could see the demon waging war all this time, Naruto ignoring him by sheer force of will, by the magnitude of his worry for Shisui overlooking easily the demon fox.

But what if Shisui had died?

So now not only was Naruto stuck here, but they were too. It was meager comfort to know that this was the result of Naruto’s attachment. This was what they got to show for it. No dangerous missions for the demon’s friends. No risking them dying and setting him off.

It made her want to scream herself raw, to break something.

“Shisui needs to wake up soon”, Sasuke added, and he worried for his cousin, but that wasn’t all of it. All his emotions seemed tied to Naruto these days. Shisui had to wake up, so that he could reassure their friend that he was fine, that Naruto was not at fault, that he didn’t regret it. Naruto slipped into anger sometimes at Shisui’s actions, and they couldn’t make him understand. Shisui had to be the one to tell him.

“What are we going to do?” she asked. Her voice wavered around a rising sob. It was just too much. Those men had slithered into the village so easily, they had tried to take Naruto away, they had almost killed Shisui who was very strong and not so easily defeated. What did it mean? Weren’t they safe? What could they do?

She was afraid. She couldn’t help it. The future scared her. Not knowing anything scared her, not knowing what was going to happen, feeling so powerless, so useless. It was too much for her.

Sasuke took her hand. They held on too tight.

The days were getting shorter. The sun set a little earlier every day, stretching long shadows in the hospital room, dark by the time the nurses did their last round before night. They switched off the light on their way out, and when Naruto crawled out from under the bed, he didn’t bother turning one back on. He had a pretty good night vision.

And Shisui looked less unhealthy in the dark.

He sat at the foot of the bed as always, knees drawn to his chest and wrapped in his arms. He stared at Shisui’s face without really seeing it, lost in thought and oscillating between the outside world and the sewers down below, where the fox stared too, accusing.

Its confusion was palpable at Naruto’s raging emotions. Compared to it, the demon’s were simple. It was mostly rage and a thirst for freedom, and not much else. A base they had in common, but Naruto had so much more piled on top of it, he couldn’t make sense of it any more than the demon could.

He needed to say it. He needed to talk to someone.

“I don’t want to leave,” he told Shisui.

It was weird to realize this only now when he had never wanted to leave more and never had that many reasons to. But it was the truth.
Shisui didn’t answer of course. The Beast did instead.

*Stay then.* Full of disdain.

“I don’t want to stay either.”

Naruto buried his head in his arms. The demon was right – it would have been easier not to have any love at all. Not to care.

He didn’t want to be alone. He didn’t want to leave his friends behind and not see them anymore. He didn’t want them out of his sight, where he wouldn’t know what was going on with them, if they were happy and safe, if they needed his help. He didn’t want to live without them.

He hated that he didn’t have a choice.

Because he couldn’t stay, he couldn’t. Things would get better, maybe. But when? He couldn’t wait that long. What would he do? Wait here for some unknown enemies to try and snatch him, watch them tear their way through his world to reach him? Watch his friends either leave without him with no guarantee of return, or get stuck too, just because he was incapable of handling their loss?

Stay here, knowing others shared his fate and were still out of his reach, unknown and never to be found? Knowing that Gaara was alone miles and miles away, with the same bleak prospect, the same hopeless future?

If he left, he could find them.

The idea wouldn’t leave him now that it had taken form. They could choose a different future. If they were together, who could stop them?

Besides, they were in danger too. He had to help them. He had to do *something*.

The bed stirred.

Naruto jumped to his feet to rush to Shisui’s side, whose eyes struggled to open as he let out a pained groan. Naruto looked around, at a loss for what to do. There was a pot of water and a glass on the nightstand – that was good, right? Water.

“What…”

The scratchy whisper startled Naruto so bad he spilled most of the water on himself, though he hardly noticed. He had the good sense to switch on the lamp on the nightstand and choked on a breathe when finally, finally, he got to see Shisui’s eyes.

“Here,” he said lamely, presenting the glass as if it was a shield.

The endeavor was mildly successful – Shisui couldn’t sit up and Naruto’s hands were shaking badly. But some water did get into the man, and he looked grateful for it.

“Naruto?” he called, as if he had doubts. “Naruto? Are you alright?”

Naruto nodded dumbly, voice squeezed shut.

Shisui relaxed then, the panic receded. He didn’t ask more, didn’t ask where he was and how long it had been and what was going on. He sunk into the pillow.
He *smiled*.

“Good. That’s good.”

Then he looked up and his eyes widened. He lifted a hand, though it seemed to cost him, to rest it on Naruto’s cheek, cupping his face.

“Don’t cry.”

Oh, so that was why the room was so blurry all of the sudden.

Naruto felt very detached from his emotions. The anger he had against Shisui, for his carelessness and stupidity and the way his mind was on Naruto even now. The sheer relief and the maddening fear, that he would slip away again, that this was all a dream, that it wasn’t as good a sign as it seemed. He gripped Shisui’s hand, pressed it against his face, hid into it because the tears wouldn’t stop no matter how hard he tried. He wanted to yell and to snuggle closer, he wanted to run away and he wanted to hit Shisui in the face.

He gripped the hand tighter.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry," Shisui said several times. Which was absurd. Naruto was the one who had to apologize. His voice was low, not quite there. He was half back to sleep. “I’m glad you’re okay. It’s okay.”

“It’s not,” Naruto croaked around a sob. Shisui chuckled, unbearably fond.

“It’s okay. It’s okay, Naruto. It’s okay.”

Naruto panicked again when Shisui drifted away, but his breath just evened out and didn’t stop entirely. He didn’t have the same stillness he had had a few minutes ago, it didn’t look like he would sleep through an explosion anymore.

He was just asleep.

Naruto stayed for a while longer, just to be sure. He should have called someone probably, to check on Shisui, make sure he was alright. But he was gripped with a sudden sense of urgency, and his time was limited now.

If he was still here come morning, if Shisui opened his eyes to the light of day, then Naruto would stay by his side.

It had to be now.

He set Shisui’s hand down carefully on the mattress and took a few steps back. He easily broke the soft skin of his thumb – it was always raw and fragile from the invocations, even if Akito showed up more and more uninvited these days. He was curious about the human world, always asking questions Naruto did his best to answer, although he was barely more knowledgeable than the fox. Akito didn’t know, didn’t get Naruto’s status as an outcast. He didn’t understand that his friend wasn’t a regular member of human society.

“Summoning!”

To think a few months ago he could barely sign that jutsu.

"What is this? We were sleeping Naruto!" Akira hissed as soon as he arrived. Akito rubbed his
eyes, confused.

“I need some help.”

“What…”

Akira stopped then. Naruto wondered what it was – his red, humid eyes, his chewed up lips, the defeat on his face and in the posture of his body. He wondered if it was that obvious.

“Are you sure?” Akira asked ignoring Akito’s confused look. Akira understood better than his young brother. And Naruto had asked him before, just in case.

He had already agreed.

“Could Akito watch Shisui? Just for a little while,” Naruto said instead of answering. Akito was quite lost, but he didn’t ask, only nodded, solemn.

“You can count on me.”

Naruto grabbed Shisui’s wrist, squeezed once. He didn’t know what to say, so he said nothing. He dug up one of his storage scrolls from his weapon pouch – the ones where he kept the full Chakra Vacum Seals, since he didn’t know what to make of them.

“It’s not for you,” he warned Akito when he put it down on the nightstand. “Well, you can have a little. But not too much! It’s for the old ma’am.”

He wasn’t sure she would understand, but hopefully she would use the chakra reserve and go easier on herself. It was the least he could do, as repayment for Shisui’s life. Akito nodded seriously and took Naruto’s place at the foot of the bed while he left the hospital with Akira. He had to keep the momentum, to keep moving. Time was on short supply, but that wasn’t even the main issue.

He knew that if he stopped, he would change his mind.

Some streets were already asleep while others were coming to life, colored lantern and music announcing the awakening of the night entertainments. Naruto usually avoided these areas, but he wanted to go, one last time.

“Go ahead,” he told Akira, who was already wrinkling his nose at the agitation. “I’ll catch up.”

He didn’t need to be told twice, and Naruto entered the Red District on his own.

As a child he had often found respite around here, where business wasn’t so respectable and people weren’t keen on paying attention to anyone or anything, where he could wander unnoticed and uncared for.

And the women were always nice to him. Feeding him sweets and smearing lipsticks on his cheeks when he entertained them by pulling pranks on the men being rude and dismissive.

He walked between the bars and the music hall and remembered when he had thought about moving in here, becoming a dancer or a magician and forget about the rest of the village, the rest of the world. Join a traveling show even, say goodbye to this place. It wasn’t an option though. He had no parents and no family, yet there were still people to keep him in his place.

He recognized a few faces, got a few nods and half-smile. Only one person stopped him though.

“Oi, Naruto! Come here, come here!”
It was the old pervert, Jiraiya. His face was red from the sake he had in hand, and he was sitting between two giggling women who kept filling his cup and ordering more.

Naruto rolled his eyes, but complied, curious despite himself. And not about to pass the chance of lifting a fat wallet and making that man’s life harder.

“How are you boy?” he asked, voice loud, when he had pulled Naruto by his side on the bench.

“Fine.”

“I know about your friend. But don’t you worry! Tsunade is the best. She’ll have him back on his feet in no time.”

Naruto hummed, sensing he didn’t have to say anything for the man to keep talking.

“She tells me you’re learning fuinjutsu right? She says you’re quite good.”

Another mindless noise of assent. The man drained his glass.

“I could teach you a thing or two you know.” He laughed at Naruto stiffening, elbowed him hard enough to almost throw him off the bench. “I have nothing on your clan, but I’m not that bad!”

Naruto wondered why this man was being so familiar, why he acted like they were friends, like he cared. He was a stranger. And Naruto didn’t like him.

Tsunade had asked him to teach Naruto control too. But what did that man know?

“Look, I’ll give you something. A gift. To get us started.”

From his weapon pouch, he produced a kunai.

The shape was strange, unlike Naruto had ever seen before, with three blades instead of one, but what drew Naruto’s eyes was the seal wrapped around the handle. He couldn’t decipher it, and it wasn’t the style he was used too. It was sure to be powerful though.

"I was your dad's," Jiraiya said. Naruto’s hand retracted involuntarily. "He had boatloads of it, but I'm afraid very few remain. I never could get the hang of it myself, but I’m sure you’ll figure it out, heh? I’ll try to show you how it’s supposed to work.”

The woman sitting on the other side of the man tugged at his haori, claiming his attention.

“Tomorrow, yeah?” the man said, half question half statement.


He pocketed the kunai carefully, and took the opportunity to pull the man’s wallet from his clothes. He put a few bills on the table under the woman’s amused look and took off.

He pondered at it. “Tomorrow”. Tomorrow could be like any ordinary day, it could begin and end without anything of note happening.

But it would probably end up being the most important day of his life. It was always “tomorrow”, “next week”, “next year”. “Later”. “When you’re older”. “One day”.

Well, this time, it was “now.”
He made quick work of the remaining distance to Shisui’s house. Naruto had the key, of course, though they rarely bothered to lock the door. Still, he entered on the first floor anyway, through his bedroom window. He didn’t want to open the front door, to cross the threshold.

He wasn’t coming home.

He grabbed a clean scroll, some ink. He could have prepared it before – he didn’t know why he hadn’t. He didn’t want to have to explain it if someone saw it.

Or he didn’t want to think about having to use it.

“I’ll take you far enough that they won’t be able to follow us,” Akira promised.

Packing was a matter of a few minutes, with how little Naruto had to his name. Apart from a pile of scrolls, with brushes and inkstones for fuuinjutsu, it was just a few clothes and not much else. Shoving it all in a backpack, he almost missed a black shirt that wasn’t his, that he had forgotten to return. He debated about leaving it, but in the end, it joined the rest in his bag.

From the bottom of a drawer he unearthed the seal Kabuto had given him before he left. Akira eyed it with distaste.

“Are you really going to that snake?”

“I have nowhere else to go.”

They would come after him, as soon as they realized he was gone. The adults had made it clear that he couldn’t be lost, that the village wouldn’t ever let him go. They hadn’t been able to find Orochimaru though. Naruto knew nothing of the outside world, he couldn’t hide on his own. Even if the idea of going there made his stomach turn, he had no choice.

He bled on the paper, almost expecting to see Kabuto, or the red-haired girl, or even Orochimaru in person pop out of the seal. Instead, true to Akira’s word, the ink unfolded to reform into a black, shiny snake.

In an instant Akira was on it, trapping it under a paw, fangs bared. The snake hissed, displeased.

“I need some directions,” Naruto said, chuckling despite himself at the incongruence of the scene. The snake kept hissing and spiting until Akira finally let go of it. It managed to look affronted while it curled up on the paper in a tight spiral, with only its head breaking the pattern to point West, before it disappeared back into the paper.

“I guess we’ll start with that,” Naruto said with a shrug, hoping the instructions would get a bit clearer later on.

He looked around the room. In the end he had spent less than three years here, yet he was reluctant to leave it. The small desk, the undone futon, the window on the garden, the plants lining the shelves, it was sanctuary, a harbor in the storm.

His eyes landed on the picture of team 7, proper on the desk next to a pile of old magazines.

It was the kind of thing you were supposed to leave behind, that would wait for you until your return. But was he ever coming back? It was too scary to wonder.

Shisui had said that this was Naruto’s home too. That he would always be welcome here. The door would always be open.
That wouldn’t do much, if Naruto never came around to push it again.

He packed the picture carefully in an old shirt. He also secured the house key in one of his bag pockets, even if it didn’t make any sense. In case he did return. In case he never did.

He went down the stairs next, in the kitchen, to pack some provisions and water. A lot of food had gone bad, the vegetables, the milk, since no one had set foot in the house in more than a week. He couldn’t help but clean it out as best as he could, throw away what needed to be, going as far as to take out the trash. He didn’t want the place to feel abandoned, when Shisui returned to it.

He caught sight of the jar sitting on the top shelf.

He had next to no money on hand except for the old man’s, seeing how they had barely completed any mission lately, and that most of his funds had ended up there, in the jar. Shisui had never taken a single ryo out of it. It still sported its tag – “Naruto is being stubborn Jar”.

He quickly climbed the shelves to grab it and empty its content in his pocket, feeling dirty and miserable. He didn’t know what was worse between returning it empty to its spot or getting rid of it. In the end he couldn’t decide, and he shoved it in a cupboard behind pots and pans, before quickly going back up to his room.

Where someone was waiting for him.

“I had a feeling,” Sakura said in a whisper.

He wasn’t sure if she was angry or just disappointed, or even scared. She was trying to look stern, arms crossed and brows furrowed, but there was distress in the pinch of her face, the clenching of her fingers.

“You can’t leave.”

“Yes I can.”

“No but… I know you can! But you… you can’t.”

He kept her back to her, stubbornly avoiding her gaze. Soon enough though, he didn’t have anything left to do. Nothing but to face her.

“Don’t do this. Please. Please, don’t.”

“I can’t stay here!”

“Yes you can! Things will get better, they will.”

“They’ll only get worse!”

“But we’ll be here with you! You won’t be on your own. You don’t have to be!”

He did. It was exactly the fate he had been condemned to, on the very day of his birth. To be apart. To never belong.

“What make you think you’ll be enough?” he spat, because it hurt, it hurt, everything hurt and if it had to be this way, then so be it. He wouldn’t show weakness nor doubts. He wouldn’t let her see.

“We could, if you’d just let us,” she shot back just as sharp. She gave as good as she got now. She was far from the shy, quiet girl trailing after him at the Academy.
She had changed, she had grown. And she didn’t need him anymore. Sasuke didn’t either. They had each other, they had the other kids, the sensei, and their family too.

They would be just fine, without him. Why did they even want to hold him back? What did it change, if he was here or not?

“I’m leaving, Sakura.”

“No you’re not.”

“I am!”

“I won’t let you.”

The atmosphere changed in an instant, tension rising up a notch. Fighting her was the last thing he wanted, but there was no mistaking the determination on her face. He felt a surge of anger at her insistence – why was she doing this? Couldn’t he make his decision, couldn’t she respect it? Did she have to be a guard to his prison too?

“Why not? Why?”

“Because this is your place! You belong here!”

“I don’t! I never have, and I never will!”

“You belong with us!”

He bit his lips on the next retort. Because that was…

"That's not the same," he mumbled weakly. She looked confused for a few seconds before she caught his meaning.

By then he had closed the distance between them, snuck a hand behind her back. She opened her mouth to say something he would never get to hear, for he threw his hands at the nape of her neck, knocking her out in the precise way she had painstakingly taught him.

He caught her before she could fall, laid her carefully on his futon, keeping a string of “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” just in case she could somewhat hear him. The night was well into its course now. He couldn’t wait any longer.

He picked up a scroll he had laid aside. He wished he could have written her a message, to explain maybe, why he had kept it and why he was gifting it to her now.

But Naruto couldn’t write.

He slipped the scroll into her weapon pouch and turned off the light before rolling open the other scroll he had prepared.

“See you, Sakura,” he said lamely. He didn’t want to think about when they would see each other again. If they would, even. He didn’t want to think about Sasuke either. The pain in his chest, it would fade, surely. “Akira, I’ll leave the rest to you.”

He went to stand on the seal, signed his mudra, and disappeared into the paper.
The sky was barely lightening on the horizon when Sakura opened her eyes.

She was immediately seized by nausea – Naruto was heavy-handed when it came to this kind of technique, despite how many times she had pestered him to be more delicate. She would have to go over it again with him next time they trained.

Which would be…

She bolted upright and almost turned up the content of her stomach. She didn’t let that stop her. She scrambled to her feet, stumbled her way downstairs and out in the dormant streets.

No trace of Naruto of course.

It wasn’t a decision that was worth a single thought, to dash toward the Uchiha district instead of doing anything else more sensible, the things she was supposed to do – warn a jounin, go to her instructor, report to the Hokage. They would hunt Naruto down and bring him back by force and she didn’t want that, he wasn’t a criminal, she wouldn’t set them after him. They could handle this.

They would bring him back.

In other circumstances she would have died of nerves at the idea of invading the district uninvited. As it was, she barely registered what she was doing and had snuck into Sasuke’s garden in record time, but she couldn’t recall which door led to his room. Why was this house so big? It was only four people there, really…

She was about to give up and just pick a door at random when she was stopped rather abruptly by a blade pressing against her neck.

“Sakura? What are you doing here?”

Itachi lowered his sword in an instant, but she didn’t dare move anyway. Sasuke’s brother always made her feel both scared and sort of excited. Today it was only fear, though it barely made its way through the mess of her emotions.

“I need to talk to Sasuke. It’s urgent. I need to see him now.”

She registered distantly that she was trespassing into the property of a clan leader at sunrise, that she had no right to be here and that Itachi could very well have her arrested for this. Or even arrest her himself. Was he in the police force too? What did Sasuke say last time? She had been listening but she was drawing a blank now. She was frozen in place, mind reeling, she wasn’t even sure what she was doing here anymore.

“Sakura?”

She must have spaced out, for Itachi had had the time to fetch his brother and bring him to her, bleary-eyed and shivering in his pajamas. The older Uchiha was nowhere to be seen and she should have paid attention to that surely, to make sure he wasn’t listening, because who knew what he would do. Who knew what was going to happen.

“Sakura, what is it?”

Despite her best efforts she couldn’t keep her voice from cracking.

“Naruto is gone.”
Chapter End Notes

We're in the Zone people!

We're also over 300k HOLY SHIT and over 3000 kudos...The Fuck. I still can believe I wrote something so freaking long. I know I say it often but I'll never be over it lol.

Also be advised that I took creative licenses with the story of Uzushio, for we have no information on its fall and they weren't supposed to have a jinchuuriki, the Six Tails was always Kiri's. But I did not know that going into this bit and I wanted to keep it as it was, so yeah. The theory that it was Kiri ending Uzushio, I read in other fics though I can't tell which one. Maybe it will come up again, maybe not. Who knows. Not me.

Thank you for reading. Tell me what you think! See you.
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

The village wakes up and Naruto is gone.

Chapter Notes

I feel like it feels like I'm stalling but I'm really not x) next chapter or the one after that will be the last for this part, depending on how much fighting I want to write lol. I can't believe we're getting to the end of Part One. I can't believe how long this thing is.

Quick reminder that I do my best with updated and I have a life. Next chapter will come when they come. I hope you'll enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Are you sure about this?” Sasuke asked nervously. Sakura clicked her tongue, annoyed – probably because it was the sixth time already.

“I told you, I’ve done this a million times before! Stop freaking out!”

Somehow, knowing that Sakura had climbed the Yamanaka flower shop to sneak into the Yamanaka compound “a million times before” wasn’t as reassuring as she thought it was. Sasuke glanced around them at the deserted street, wondering what they would tell to someone catching them here at this hour.

“Come on, keep up!”

He obeyed and followed her across the tree which branches spread over the compound walls. On the other side, it led close enough to the main house and a balcony that Sakura assured was attached to Ino’s bedroom. Sasuke had to have faith that they wouldn’t end up knocking on clan leader Yamanaka Inoichi’s window.

Fortunately, it was indeed Ino who opened the glass door after a short while, sleep ruffled but already alert, frowning with a mix of worry and annoyance. She wasn’t alone though.

“Sai?” Sakura asked, both for confirmation and explanation. Ino shrugged.

“I couldn’t sleep last night,” she declared, oddly forceful.

“Shin is here too?”

“He’s out of the village. Joined the caravan going to the capital as a guard. First time.”

There was probably something Sasuke was missing here, something that explained why Ino was sort of defensive and why Sai was looking at the side, expressionless yet clearly uncomfortable. Sasuke didn’t know them well enough to get it.
“We need your help,” Sakura stated, leaving the topic deftly. “It’s Naruto.”

“He’s gone.”

They turned to Sai who elected not to meet anyone’s eyes and just stared straight ahead. He had a real talent to make people uneasy – or maybe it was just Sasuke.

He was also completely deadpanned, as if he knew for sure.

“How do you know?” Sasuke asked, displeased. Why did he know?

“It’s a guess. I figured it was only a matter of time.”

He seemed so unsurprised, so unfazed by an event that had Sasuke and Sakura entirely blind-sided. What was so obvious about it? How did it make sense?

“We’ll talk about that later,” Sakura said urgently, resting a light but firm hand on Sasuke’s arm to stop his train of thoughts and the questions he wanted to ask. “You’re the best we know at tracking, Ino. We need to… we need to bring him back.”

“Why?”

Sasuke was getting seriously annoyed at that guy. Sakura cast him an incredulous look.

“Why what?”

“Why bring him back?” Sai specified with the slow voice you use for people you think won’t get what you’re trying to explain to them.

“What… we have to!”

He looked unconvinced. Ino waved it off.

“How long ago did he leave?”

“I’d say around midnight?”

“Do you know where he was going? What gate did he take? What direction?”

Sakura shook her head helplessly and Sasuke tensed up even more. This wasn’t good, at all. They were short on time and supply to get anything done about this – with tracking dogs or some long-range scanning techniques, they could probably pick up his trail, but here… Ino’s pinched expression only reflected this.

“I’m sorry, Sakura. I can’t…”

“I can help.”

Sai’s ability to drop bombs into conversations was uncanny. The worst thing was he pretended like he wasn’t aware of it, but Sasuke would forgive him anything, if he was telling the truth.

“The ink I gave him for calligraphy, I make it myself. If he has some with him, even on a scroll, I can track it.”

“Does he know about this?” Sakura asked, uneasy.
“No.”

“It’s just something he does,” Ino asked, aiming for reassuring. It wasn’t. And having to rely on Sai’s apparent stalking habits didn’t sit well with Sasuke, but he wasn’t about to take a gift’s horse in the mouth. There was just one thing.

“Why would you help?” he asked, suspicious.

“Why not?”

“If you think he’s right to go.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“But that’s what you think.”

Sai smiled and didn’t deny it. Such an irritating smile. Sasuke did his best to be agreeable and polite to all, because he had been raised with manners, but Sai made it hard not to grab him by the shoulders and shake him in all directions until genuine emotions dropped off him like fruits from a tree.

“I think it’s important to say goodbye,” he said, tranquil and sweet, clearly stating he didn’t think for a second they would be able to hold Naruto back. Sasuke breathed through his nose, in and out. He had to stay calm.

“Great,” Sakura said with a clap of her hand, putting a lid on that whole conversation. “Then we can…”

She stumbled then, seized with nausea. Sasuke had the reflex to grab her arm before she lost balance – she was terribly pale, even in the dim light of early morning.

“You’re not recovered yet,” he said. She would remain nauseous and weak for half the day at least. It could have been less, had Naruto been any gentler, but it could have been much worse too. It was a result of his lack of finesse, not a deliberate attempt at staling her. But still…

“No.”

“No. I’m coming with you.”

“You’re not in any state to do so,” Ino shot back sternly in Sasuke’s place, knowing he couldn’t spell it out in so many words. They had to move fast and she couldn’t keep up in her state. He squeezed her arm, caught her gaze.


The protest she had ready died on her lips. She bit it down angrily, feeling guilty, he knew, for having let Naruto slip away, for failing to stop him. And frustrated now not to be able to fix it herself.

“You’ll still have to pass the gates,” Ino warned.

“It’s fine, I can use a henge. Some people are used to cross back and forth – as long as I’m out, it doesn’t matter if it raises suspicions later.”
He turned to Sai, who produced a brush seemingly out of nowhere and, after dipping it in a small portable pot of ink, drew a jumble of lines into Sasuke’s hand, which turned out to be a couple of mice. He signed, and they surged to life, agitated in Sasuke’s open palm, though he could barely feel a thing. Sai kept his eyes close for a moment, searching, before nodding.

“They will lead you to him,” he assured, neither resigned nor pleased, nor showing anything at all. Sasuke wondered how Ino could stand it, she who was so expressive and outspoken. Then again, most people thought Naruto didn’t have any feelings either. It was just a matter of knowing their language and tells.

Of bothering to look for it.

“Thank you,” Sasuke said, heartfelt. He was grateful, especially seeing that Sai himself didn’t see the need to do this. He was close to Naruto though, they were friends, Sasuke knew, bonded by something he didn’t quite get. They shared an understanding of some sort.

Sasuke didn’t want to contemplate that Sai might understand Naruto better than he did.

Sakura took his hand, stirring him away from his thoughts.

“Let’s go.”

If there was one thing more boring and terrible than gate duty, it was gate duty at night. They had to be more on guard and aware since threats were more likely to come under the cover of darkness, while it was impossibly dull and uneventful, the rare visitors and shinobi leaving or returning from a mission disinclined to linger for small talks.

Fortunately the sun was rising, and with it the sweet release of their shift coming to an end. Yamanaka Ichinosuke stretched his arms high above his head, getting even more jittery now that the wait was coming to an end. At his side, Namiashi Ryoma gave out a light snore, dozing off chin in his hands for the umpteenth time tonight. Ichinosuke rolled his eyes and kicked his friend’s chair hard. Ryoma startled and flailed around, narrowly avoiding toppling off his chair.

“What was that for?”

“We’re almost up, the next team will be here soon. Try to look professional for once!”

Ryoma grumbled but did as he was told, straightened his clothes and wiped the sleep from his face.

“We’ve been chunin for three years, three years! How come we still end up stuck on those shifts?”

Ichinosuke glared at his friend with the most disdain and reproach he could muster, and Ryoma had the good taste to squirm, uncomfortable.

“Alright, alright, I know why,” he said, waving a hand around. “don’t look at me like that.”

“Next time you’ll think twice about trying to eavesdrop on the jounin strategy meeting!”

“Hey, you agreed!”

“I wouldn’t have if I knew how bad you still were at basic stealth!”

It was an old argument between them. As a Yamanaka, Ichinosuke was naturally inclined to and good at snooping, but for some reason Ryoma’s curiosity and compulsion to stick his nose in
everything – and especially things that didn’t concern him – was even worse than his.

But Ryoma was more of a heavy lifter than of a subtler kind, and he didn’t have the skills to back up his urges. That didn’t stop him from trying.

And that didn’t strop Ichinosuke from following.

Tenzo-taicho was a good captain, fair and good-tempered, but he was also inflexible. The worst thing was the calm, even smile he always wore when he sentenced his subordinates to night gate duty or a day of organizing the Archives. But Ichinosuke couldn’t even be mad at him – it’s not like they didn’t deserve it.

He cast a quick look at the clock – just a few more minutes. Activity would pick up at the gates as soon as the sun was up, but Ichinosuke and Ryoma would be on their way to their bed by then. They could only catch a quick nap before they were due for morning training – Tenzo-taicho had made it clear that they would be punished again if they were late.

Ichinosuke tried to be subtle about craning his neck to spot the next team coming their way. He did spot two familiar silhouettes, but they weren’t who he was looking for.

“Isn’t that Izumi and Hana?” Ryoma commented.

It was. The girls waved at them awkwardly but didn’t approach to greet them. Which, fair. They weren’t that close and if one or both were leaving on a mission, they probably didn’t have time to spare. And yet they stopped at the edge and shared hushed whispers for a while, bent close, forehead almost touching. Hana took Izumi’s hands in hers, they shared a loaded look. Then the Uchiha girl was gone, and the Inuzuka approached them, apologizing for their rudeness, saying that Izumi had received urgent orders and that the proper mission form would get to them soon. Ryoma waved it off as nothing – it wasn’t uncommon on time-sensitive assignments that the gate was warned after a shinobi’s departure. Chunin and above had the right to come and go as they pleased anyway, as long as it was recorded.

Ichinosuke penned Izumi’s departure into the register, making a note for the next team to wait for the assignment order. Both boys watched the girl leave, looking dejected and wistful.

“You don’t think…” Ryoma whispered.

Gone was the fatigue from his face – his eyes were glistening with excitement, the way only good gossip could make them.

“No,” Ichinosuke said, painfully aware it was of no use.

"They've been super close lately."

“Yeah, nothing better than grief to jumpstart a relationship.”

Ryoma sobered up a little. Kamui and Hokuto’s death was still fresh in their mind, as was the pain that had followed.

“But it’s not just that!” Ryoma insisted. “I’m telling you, they’ve been hanging out. Hana even goes to visit the Uchiha district!”

“And how would you know that?” Ichinosuke sighed, already seeing another night gate duty taking from in their close future. Tenzo-taicho didn’t like gossips – it was a wonder he hadn’t kicked Ryoma out of his team.
“I just do,” Ryoma said smugly. He seemed to think that gathering better gossip than his Yamanaka friend was a worthy fit or something.

“Please don’t go starting any rumors,” Ichinosuke pleaded.

“What, me? I wouldn’t!” Ryoma exclaimed.

The tragic thing was he probably believed that.

(He didn’t last more than a few seconds when Mion Mion and Sanshiro arrived to replace them. In the excitement they missed another silhouette crossing the gates swiftly, gone before they could spot it.)

“HANA! Why didn’t you tell me you… were… huh. Hello, Izumi.”

Both girls threw puzzled looks at Kiba who had just barged into Hana’s break room, throwing the door hard enough for it to bounce back on the wall. The handle would probably leave an indent in the pastel yellow paint. A few of the animals resting in the other room let out small noises of distress.

“Kiba. What is it?” Hana asked. She sounded calm, her usual sweet smile in place, but Kiba looked nervous and Izumi could understand why. Hana sure knew how to make a threat while looking inconspicuous.

“I… it’s… it’s nothing, really. Nothing at all. I’ll leave you to it.”

“Kiba!”

He stopped dead in his attempt to make a quick exit. Izumi tried no to laugh at the uncanny resemblance he had with a scolded puppy. His dog was hiding in his vest, not any braver facing Hana’s wrath.

“It’s just, words spread that you… and Izumi… and I can’t believe you wouldn’t tell me!”

“Tell you what?”

“That you two were dating!”

“What?”

Hana lost a bit of her composure and Izumi nosedived into her cup, face flaming. They were just sharing breakfast! Where was that coming from?

“Where did you hear that?” Hana asked, a little less assured than before.

“I heard Shinko at the tea shop telling Himuka that Ryoma had told Sanshiro and Mion Mion that he saw you two at the gates this morning… that you were seeing Izumi off and that you two…”

It was too much for the poor genin who surely didn’t expect to have to retell those events in front of them both. He was the redder of the three, though Izumi wasn’t too far behind. Hana was the most composed because of course she was. Unfair.

But beyond that stupid rumor, Izumi caught on something far more troubling, and exchanged a quick glance to Hana that told her she had thought the same thing.
“Ryoma said he saw us at the gate? This morning?”

Kiba nodded pitifully before he too caught up with the situation. He looked between the two girls.

“Wait. You’re not on a mission,” he said dumbly to Izumi.

She got up, mind racing. What was going on? It could be just a mishap, of course, the rumor mill wasn’t the most trustworthy source of information. But if Namiashi Ryoma was an incorrigible gossip, he was also a reliable one, and they were of the same promotion at the academy – he wouldn’t have mistaken her for somebody else.

“We need to…”

It was the moment a huge black crow chose to tap at the window, making them all jump. Izumi was the fastest to recover, because she knew who that was.

“It’s Itachi’s,” she said as an explanation as she opened the window. The crow extended a foot to which was attached a small piece of paper. It was Itachi’s favored means of short-distance communication, especially within the village, though he used it sparingly, as few messages required such urgency, or couldn’t be delivered in person.

She unrolled the paper, anxious for the news it carried, and was taken aback when it was, unexpectedly, a good one.

“Shisui is awake,” she whispered, light-headed with the overwhelming intensity of the relief washing over her. Finally, finally, things would go back to normal, they could put this nightmare behind them. But…

“Should we…”

“Let’s go to the hospital,” Hana said firmly. “The Hokage will probably be there anyway.”

Izumi sighed with relief at the decision behind made for her. She didn’t want to have to choose between her duty of reporting the events at the gate and her urge to go see Shisui.

“Kiba, can you find Ryoma? Tell him to meet us there. Tell him it’s urgent,” Hana told her brother.

“No problem,” the boy agreed, having recovered for his earlier embarrassment and affecting now the seriousness of a shinobi on a mission.

Hana fed a threat to the crow almost on reflex and Izumi couldn’t help a fond smile at the bird’s delight. It had to be a welcome surprise, she imagined, as crows were about as appreciated as the boy who took it upon himself to befriend them. Hana locked the practice and put up a note on the door warning she would be absent for the morning. Izumi felt guilty about dragging her away from her work like this, but she was too grateful to say a word – she was a bit unsteady on her feet and having her friend with her was more than welcome. Hana was involved anyway, somehow.

They rushed to the hospital. For a split second as they neared the right door Izumi imagined that she had misread the note, or that it was a mistake, that she would find Shisui as he had been these past few days, still and quiet, barely alive.

But when she stepped into the room, already crowded with both Fugaku and Mikoto here as well as the Hokage and Shizune, the sanin Jiraiya, and Itachi of course, Shisui was well and truly awake, sitting propped against a few pillows in his bed. He looked tired and worn out but he smiled when he saw her – she had a hard time swallowing down a sob.
Had they been alone she would probably have jumped on him and hugged the life out of his body. As it stood, she approached him with measured steps and squeezed his hands into her, eyes shining.

“Sorry for worrying you,” he said easily, smiling fondly. She couldn’t help but respond to it, letting the tension and worry of his long sleep be washed away by the warm, fond expression on his face.

“When did you wake up?”

“Just an hour ago,” Itachi said from the other side of the bed. He was sitting on the window frame, a preference of his especially when a room was full. His eyes were glued to Shisui’s face.

Izumi looked up at him, swept the room. That’s when she noticed.

“Where is Sasuke?” she asked, puzzled at the boy’s absence. “And where…”

Puzzlement turned into worry. She took the measure of how serious everyone looked, so grim for such a joyful occasion.

“Where is Naruto?”

“Kakashi is looking for them,” Mikoto said. “We don’t know,” Izumi heard.

She glanced back at Hana.

There was no way this was a coincidence. Naruto had stood vigil over Shisui for ten days, barely setting a foot outside. What could possibly keep him away from him? If he wasn’t here, then…

“Hana! Hana, I found them!”

Kiba burst into the room with his usual finesse, followed by Ryoma and Ichinosuke, out of breath and flustered. Ryoma started apologizing immediately.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to spread any secret, I’m sorry! You…”

He blinked at Izumi then.

“You’re… back already?”

“I never left.”

“Oh shit. Then who… Oh shit.”

“What is going on here?”

The Hokage commanded everyone’s attention as soon as she spoke. Ryoma was falling over himself, obviously not expecting to go from groveling for a distasteful rumor to explaining himself to Tsunade-hime in person. Ichinosuke stepped in then, though he looked barely more composed.

“We spotted Hana sending Izumi off at the gate early this morning. Hana told us the mission assignment would come later. It is nothing unusual, we didn’t think anything of it. I’m sorry, Hokage-sama.”

“You’re right, it’s nothing unusual,” she sighed. “You did nothing wrong.”

Of course they hadn’t. After all gate duty was primarily for watching who came in, not out.
Because no one was a prisoner in the village, right? No one was forbidden to leave.

No one except one.

Kakashi popped up at the door, merely batting an eye at the more than crowded room.

“Well?” Fugaku asked, and Izumi had never seen him so agitated, though it wouldn’t be obvious to who didn’t know the man.

“I could only find Sakura, but I didn’t get any word from her. She’s waiting in your office, Hokage-sama.”

The woman nodded and dismissed him with a wave. She looked terribly weary.

“Shisui, I’m keeping you here for the time being, but you’ve recovered fine. You two, go back to your duty,” she said Ichinosuke and Ryoma, “We’ll call for you later so that we can write down your statements.”

She left it at that and exited the room, Fugaku and Jiraiya on her heels. After a comforting press on Izumi’s shoulder, Hana left too, ushering her brother out and leaving the rest of the Uchiha between themselves in the room.

“I’m glad you’re awake, Shisui,” Mikoto said softly, sincere despite the worry clouding her face, before leaving too, no doubt to look for her second son.

She wouldn’t find him though, would she?

Shisui spoke as soon as it was only the three of them.

“I think Naruto came here last night,” he confessed, eyes a bit glazy, unseeing. Izumi got closer, Itachi too, both claiming a seat by each side of the bed, both claiming one of his hand.

"Sakura came to fetch Sasuke this morning. Naruto left,” Itachi said as an answer. Izumi's eyes widened, incredulous, but Shisui just chuckled sadly.

“I know. I figured.”

“Why didn’t you say something?” Izumi asked, though she knew already. Itachi shrugged.

He had confessed to them as easily as he had kept it to himself in front of the Hokage and the others. Itachi wasn’t a good liar as much as an absent one. It wasn’t the sort of things he questioned – he hadn’t betrayed his brother to the higher-ups, and he hadn’t betrayed Shisui’s feelings.

“Tell me what happened? After I was hurt,” Shisui asked, pleading, smile slipping off his face now that they truly understood what was at stake.

Izumi set to recollect.

Tsunade was loathed to admit it, but she had grown used to the authority she had as the Hokage. Not that she had ever had a problem making her voice heard and orders followed – “bossy” had been used more than once to describe her, and Hiruzen used to say she had “natural authority”. Natural or not, she could command and lead.

But the title gave it an extra layer. Konoha people respected the Hokage greatly, and didn’t want to
disappoint nor cross them. The deference could be addictive, if she wasn’t careful. She didn’t want to let it get to her head.

So, she was used to it now. And though she had argued plenty since taking the hat, she had never felt as defied as she did now.

Facing a pink-haired twelve-year-old girl.

She had met Haruno Sakura a handful of times, though only in passing. She had seen her at the chunin exam of course, holding her own against Fugaku’s kid. She had looked promising then.

And she looked even more promising now, sitting on a chair in the middle of the Hokage office, facing the Hokage herself, as well as her jounin instructor, another sanin and the head of the Intelligence department, and still stubbornly refusing to open her mouth.

According to Kakashi, she wasn’t a very good liar, and she hadn’t even try. When he had found her and asked about the whereabouts of her two companions, she had simply clicked her mouth shut with a finality that was still holding now, and that no amount of coaxing and menacing had managed to crack.

Tsunade had called Inoichi in to scare the girl a little, she wasn’t about to properly interrogate a child. But they needed to know of Naruto and Sasuke’s whereabouts.

“Sakura, please. You have to tell us. They could be in danger,” Kakashi tried again, though without much conviction.

The girl was obviously aware of that. She looked worried, and Tsunade was sure she was fighting against herself not to spill everything and send help to her friends. But why not do it then? What was she afraid of?

“Alright, that’s enough then,” Tsunade declared dramatically. She walked back to her desk, took out a piece of paper with a flourish.

“Since we don’t have any further information, I have no choice but to declare them both deserters on the run.”

“No!”

Tsunade let her brush hover, ready to write.

“No? Why not?”

“It’s…”

Sakura looked away, torn. She had been worrying at her bottom lip, enough that it was red and swollen, enough that she would draw blood soon. Tsunade didn’t understand why she was so reluctant.

“They’re not… They’re not. They’re coming back.”

“Where did they go?”

The girl gave a small shrug, still avoiding eye contact.

“Sakura, Kakashi is right. They’re not safe, out there alone.”
“I know that.”

“Do you?”

“Yes!”

She was clenching her fists on her lap, fierce, angry.

It clicked then. It dawned on Tsunade’s mind with such clarity she wondered why she didn’t understand before.

She knew why. Because they always forgot the kids could think, dammit.

Sakura must have seen something on her face, spotted some kind of understanding, because she started to ramble, panicking.

“Sasuke… Sasuke will bring him back. He will. They’ll both come back. No one else has to get involved. There’s no need to…”

That was it. That was why Sasuke had snuck out of the village and Sakura had hidden the truth instead of coming to them. Not because they wanted to be the ones to bring him back and not because they wanted to keep it a secret. But because…

“Do you think we will hurt your friends, Sakura?”

She tensed up.

“Naruto… you can’t just force him. Sasuke can talk to him. You don’t have to…”

“Do you think we will hurt him?” Tsunade asked again.

“You have before!”

Sakura retracted back into herself after the outburst, but she didn’t apologize or even look like she regretted it. The adults were struck speechless, and that was it once again, their mistakes.

The kids knew. They weren’t stupid. They talked, they thought, they pieced things together. They even probably knew…

“I know… I know you won’t let him go. But please, please, just don’t…”

_I know you won’t let him go._

Tsunade leaned against her desk, pinched the bridge of her nose to will away frustrated tears. Why did they always end up in this kind of mess. How did they manage to get it wrong every single time.

Kakashi went to kneel in front of the girl, whose emotions were overflowing now as she hiccupped around broken sobs. It was too much for her, though she was still holding on.

“Sakura. Let me go after them. I’ll protect them both, I swear. Please, trust me.”

“I-I do. But, but Naruto…”

“I won’t hurt him. I won’t.”
“I know you don’t have a choice! I know you don’t have a choice, and he doesn’t either! I know he can’t leave, I know!”

How did she know, Tsunade wondered. What did she know. Who told them. Did they figure it out on their own, once they learned what harbored Naruto’s body? Or did someone pushed the idea to them, opened their eyes to the bleak truth? After all, Naruto had befriended Suna’s jinchuuriki. And he had met Orochimaru – around the same time. There were also the men who attacked him and Shisui in the forest.

How foolish, to think kids could be kept out of the loop. They had figured it all out. Naruto had figured it out.

And he had made his choice.

Fugaku entered the office, done with rounding up all the chunin on gate duty the previous night for a recollection of what they had seen, though Tsunade doubted it would be that simple. If nothing had been reported yet, they had noticed nothing suspicious.

“Why aren’t we on the move?” he asked, disapproving, and understood without an answer when he looked down at Sakura, who held his gaze despite her obvious uneasiness.

"She still hasn't talked? What the hell are you waiting for?" he exclaimed, calling out Inoichi who was staying in a corner with no apparent will to move.

“Calm down, Fugaku,” Tsunade said quietly, though there was the undercurrent of a threat in her voice. It was ineffective.

“Calm down? We don’t know what could happen, we need to find them, now. Sakura!”

She jumped and recoiled, but still she held her ground, still she faced him head-on. Tsunade was truly impressed.

“Sasuke will succeed,” she affirmed again, stubborn to bout.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. You don’t know what Naruto’s capable of!”

“Naruto won’t hurt Sasuke!”

“Are you sure?”

She hesitated for a split second, fear showing through her resolved expression, but she didn’t let it through.

“Yes. He won’t. Not on purpose.”

“Is that supposed to be any better?”

“We hurt each other all the time!”

That gave Fugaku a pause. Sakura had jumped to her feet, though it didn’t get her much of an advantage height-wise.

“We train and we hit and kick and we practice ninjutsu, and we always get hurt! Naruto has hurt Sasuke before and Sasuke has hurt Naruto too, and just because he heals faster doesn’t mean it doesn’t matter! Naruto matters too! And if they’re hurt, it will be on you! It will be your fault.”
Kakashi stepped in deftly when it almost felt like Sakura was going to throw herself at the older Uchiha. He pressed her face against his chest and she fought it for a short while before she slumped in his embrace, bursting into tears. Fugaku was completely taken aback, and he sunk into the chair she had just vacated, taking his head in his hands to try and sort out his thoughts.

His son was missing after all.

“What did he say?” Tsunade asked gently, as if that whole exchange had never happened. “Naruto. You saw him leave, didn’t you? What did he say?”

It was a gamble, but the right one. She had indeed been there.

“He said… he said he didn’t belong here,” Sakura said, muffled from her face still mushed into Kakashi’s jacket. He stroked her hair, encouraging. “It’s not… He talked about leaving for a while. But we thought maybe if we… Maybe if…”

How long had that been going on? Naruto, eaten away by his place in the village and his thirst for a different future, his friends, trying with all their might but powerless to see him through it? They had never said a word, to anyone, had they? Months, years, shouldering their burden, the trials of their young friendship.

All the others, where were they?

Couldn’t she have paid more attention to the boy. Couldn’t she have been… She shook her head. Now wasn’t the time to think like this. They had no idea where the Akatsuki was standing, they could easily find Naruto out there. Regardless of Sakura’s accusation, regardless of Naruto’s value, Tsunade just wanted him to be safe.

“Will you tell us what you know, Sakura? So that we can bring them both back?” she pleaded quietly.

The girl nodded. She had won them enough time anyway – Sasuke would catch up to Naruto, and maybe manage to persuade him to turn back.

But Tsunade doubted it. And what would they do then?

Sakura told them about meeting Naruto in his room, about waking up hours later and going to her friends for help. Sasuke, and then Ino, Sai… but no adults.

“Kakashi. Gather a team and go after them. I’ll leave it to you.”

“Yes, Hokage-sama.”

“You have to bring both of them back. Do you understand?”

He bore stoically the heaviness of her meaning, gave the barest nod.

“Yes, Hokage-sama.”

He left after a last pat on Sakura’s head, prompting Fugaku into motion too. She trusted Kakashi wouldn’t let him be part of this mission – she let him go.

“Shizune. Take Sakura home, will you? She’s to stay there for now. No wandering.”

Tsunade silenced the girl’s protest with a stern look, and Sakura finally seemed to recall her place and who she was trying to argue with. She hunched over herself, ashamed, but still not regretful,
still convinced, Tsunade knew, that she had done the right thing.

“You can fetch some of her friends,” Tsunade added. “To keep her company.”

It was as much to keep an eye on her, but this whole affair proved that the kids would sooner turn to each other than to the people in charge, so she didn’t put much faith into them. But Sakura had to be in great distress, her two close friends gone who knew where with no protection and no back-ups. She shouldn’t be alone at a time like this.

It was only Jiraiya and herself left in the office then. She could slump into her couch as she desperately wanted to. He came to sit next to her.

“I never thought… I didn’t think Naruto was this far gone,” Jiraiya said absentmindedly, mostly to himself. It was rare to see him like this, surprised, caught out. Always so carefree, so unbothered. The weight of other’s plague wasn’t something he was used to account for, especially for kids, whose life they always considered so easy, their struggles so dismissible.

“And yet,” she said bitterly.

They had had no idea. And yet.

When she had rushed to Shisui’s room in the morning, warned by a nursed that he had woken up, and seen the empty spot at the foot of the bed where Naruto should have been, her first thought hadn’t been “He’s been taken”. It was a very real possibility, they now knew, yet she had barely considered it. She had been convinced right then that he had just decided it was enough, that he wasn’t hiding somewhere and that no one had forced him out either.

It was risible, how they were all so surprised, and yet weren’t. Not really.

“Go do your things, will you?” she told her friend, because she couldn’t afford his comfort for too long, they both had more important things to do. “This cannot get out of the village. I can trust you with this, right?”

He nodded gravely and left.

Orders given, everyone set on their task, she was left alone in her big office, nothing to do but wait for some news, passive, useless.

She took the sake bottle hidden into her bottom drawer and threw it out the window before she gave in the urge to down it all in one go.

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Kakashi put his foot down of course, and he was right to, when Fugaku demanded to be part of the departing team. He outranked the man, technically, but the Godaime had put Kakashi in charge and he wasn’t one to be bullied into any decision.

Fugaku cast Mikoto a betrayed look when she put a hand on his arm, urged him to let it go. Kakashi was right, they couldn’t get involved. Fugaku wasn’t in his right mind, and no team captain would want him near any mission in that state.

She found Tekka and unloaded the ongoing affairs to him before taking Fugaku home. The fight had left him, and he didn’t protest. They sat with steaming tea at their kitchen table.

They waited.
She couldn’t wrap her head around it fully. Sasuke gone, her little boy miles away from the village, no one knowing where exactly. He didn’t use to be so brave – she recalled his first day at the Academy, how shy he had been, reluctant to let go of her, even if course he had done his best to show nothing of it.

Most importantly though, he didn't use to be so defiant.

He enjoyed the rules – he always had. Made a point to follow them, to obey. Though they had to be explained to him first, as he would ask “why, why? Why do we do this, why do we have to? Is there a reason?”

And it had better be a good one.

As he grew up, he had developed his own set of rules too.

It was world-changing, how easily Sakura and he had made their decision. A few years ago, he would have warned someone else immediately – his parents at the very least. But she understood now that first and foremost, those children's loyalty was to each other. Sasuke hated to step out of line, to break the rules. If he believed he was right to though, because it was unfair, because he needed to, he would without a second thought.

For his friend, he hadn’t hesitated for a second.

“If Naruto loses control…” Fugaku mumbled somberly, eyes in his cup.

“I don’t think that’s the kind of hurt we ought to worry about.”

Naruto had stopped himself from hurting Shisui, and he would again, she was sure, for his love ran deep too, as deep as Sasuke’s, even if he didn’t want anyone to acknowledge it, not even himself.

But would that be enough?

She feared how Sasuke would come back to them. Be it successful or not, things would be different from then on, now that they were aware of this strength and weakness in their children, of a very different perspective than those of their parents that they had developed entirely on their own, with no one the wiser. Aware too of Naruto’s rebellion, which she didn’t have the slightest clue how they would handle.

She thought of his pain, deep enough to prompt him on this perilous path, and she was so ashamed of herself she could barely breathe through it. She hoped they would get another chance, to do better, while knowing they didn’t deserve it. She hoped they would be safe, at least, that they wouldn’t break their heart against each other.

Mostly though, she just hoped and wished and prayed, for their son to return to them.

“You’ll come back, right? Both of you.”

“We will.”

“You need to… You have to, okay? Even if you have to... to break his legs or something, just... If he leaves, if he really leaves…”

“Stop. I promise. I promise. We’ll both come back.”
Sasuke had shed the henge as soon as he’d been out of sight from the wall. He felt kind of bad about having borrowed Izumi’s face and hoped it wouldn’t cause her any trouble, but it was the best option – someone he knew well enough to copy, that wouldn’t raise suspicion nor unwanted attention. Sakura had insisted to see him off at the gates, so Hana it was, as they were often seen together lately.

He was following the ink mice through the thick forest. They ran faster than normal mice, of course. They even seemed to adapt to his own pace, never too slow nor too fast, jumping from tree to tree a few meters ahead of him. He hadn’t paid any attention to the path they were taking – he hoped they knew the way back too.

He didn’t think about it for now though. He couldn’t even picture it. The way back. There was a big dark block in his future, preventing him from seeing any further than a few hours ahead. From the point where he would reach Naruto, the future was blank. He had no idea what to expect, what he would do, say, what Naruto would do and say.

He resolved he would figure it out when it happened.

Which he had no way of anticipating either – the mice didn’t talk, couldn’t tell him if they were closing in or still far away. Naruto had to stop at some point, right? But he had much better stamina than Sasuke. But maybe he wasn’t running at top speed, if he didn’t suspect he was being followed. But wouldn’t he assume he was anyway?

Sasuke had to reach him, or he would go crazy.

He kept thinking about Sakura’s word, the worry on her face – or well, Hana’s. How long before they realized something was amiss? How long before Sasuke – and Naruto – were pursued?

Above all else, he had to get to Naruto first.

He knew why she was so scared, why she was so adamant he brought him back at all cost, even if he wasn’t going to “break his legs”. If Naruto slipped away now, that would be it. He would become a deserter, a traitor, and a lost asset the village would want to recover. The village, and others too, from what Sasuke had gathered. He wouldn’t be a runaway teenager.

He would be a hunted target.

A mission then. “Bring back the suspect, no matter what.” A criminal even? Depending on what he did from then on… Where was he even going? How did he hope to survive, out there on his own, with no resources, no ally, half the shinobi world on his trail? And the men from the forest too? Who would protect him out there?

They would catch him sooner or later. A prisoner if it was foreign shinobi, worse probably if it was the ones after him for some darker purpose. And if it was Konoha…

If he was brought back kicking and screaming, against his will, or worse, in chains, then it would be over too, in another way. He would never forgive any of them. They could never reach out to him again. He would be lost to them, forever.

So Sasuke had to convince him. He had to change his mind.

He had to.
“The dogs will pass messages and report to the others as soon as the kids’ trail is spotted. All set?”

Gai, Asuma and Kurenai nodded to Kakashi, each flanked with one of his ninken, the best they had at tracking. One team for each gate – Sasuke had used the Western one where they now stood and where Kakashi would start with Tenzo, but they couldn’t rule out it had been a diversion. The boy’s henge was good enough that it would have jumbled his scent too – the trail wouldn’t be that easy to pick up. They couldn't afford to send more people though, couldn’t spare too much of their defensive forces. And they needed to remain discreet for now, lest they advertised to all who had eyes set on them that they had lost their jinchuuriki.

Of him, they had found nothing. However he had managed to sneak out of the village, he had left no trace behind him.

The Godaime had left Kakashi to form a team, and if his friends were skilled and capable jounin, he had to admit it wasn’t really what had played into his choice here. When in distress, shinobi always fell back on those closest to them, and he was loathed to admit that he was no exception. He trusted them the most – they would handle this with care.

And they had shown up, immediately and without question. It was heartwarming.

Fugaku had wanted to come of course, and then to send Itachi or Izumi or any Uchiha, but it was Mikoto, strangely enough, who had talked him down firmly, arguing about personal stakes and his own duties, even when she probably wished badly to go too. It was any parents’ lot though, to watch their children go on missions without them, with no say on the matter and no hand on their fate. In this, Sasuke and Naruto were Kakashi’s responsibilities, his to take care of.

He had to bring both back no matter what.

“Keep the updates coming.”

“We will, don’t worry.”

Kurenai and Asuma disappeared. Gai put two heavy hands on Kakashi’s shoulder, weighed on him a grounding look, before doing the same

Kakashi let out a long, measured breath, forcing his mind to shift focus on the task at hand. Tenzo stood by his side, stoic and unreadable as usual. The memory of the night they had both chased Naruto down through the woods was an unwelcome one - he swiftly pushed it out of his mind.

Sakura was waiting near the demarcation line, carefully on the right side. Kakashi spotted Ino and Sai a few meters away, tasked with walking her back home and stay there with her, as she was ordered to stay put for now. No doubt would they find a way to stay in the loop, with Ino’s uncanny and frankly annoying snooping skills.

“I’m sorry, sensei,” Sakura said with a small voice, eyes on the ground and shoulders hunched. He wondered what she was apologizing for – for letting Naruto leave and Sasuke go after him, for not telling anyone, for the things they had kept from him? He couldn’t fault her any of that. If they hadn’t felt safe and trusting enough to come to him, it was his own damn fault. If Naruto had managed to build up an escape plan and was far enough gone to act on it without him ever noticing a thing, it was his fault too.

He put a hand on her shoulder, shook her a little so that she would look up. He smiled, hoping to look reassuring, steady.

“Don’t worry too much. Everything will be fine.”
He had absolutely no ground to make that kind of promise, but what else was he supposed to say? She nodded pitifully, taking the comfort, however small and meaningless.

Kakashi turned away with a wave, Tenzo on his heels. It was the second time she was seeing someone off at the gate in less than a day.

“Let’s get to work,” he said as soon as they had stepped out of the walls. Pakkun and Bisuke set to sniff around, trying to locate Sasuke’s scent.

“There is one, that split in four directions,” Pakkun said.

“Decoys?”

“Likely.”

Kakashi summoned two more of the ninken, set each of them on one of the trails and Tenzo with one too.

“As soon as you can confirm whether it’s a fake or not, tell me,” he ordered, before letting them go. Tenzo nodded without a word, never one to spend them needlessly. Pakkun stayed by his side.

Kakashi had never had much luck in life, but as he started to follow the dog on the trail he had picked at random, he found himself praying, for once, to strike the right one out.

To be able to reach his students in time.

.

No time has passed when Akira opened the seal and released Naruto.

He had wondered what it would be like inside the storage scroll, but there was nothing, as if he’d been asleep. There was no telling how time had passed for his body either. Was he hungry, tired? Could he die in there if he stayed too long?

Questions for another time.

He blinked at the light, the sun already above the tree line. It had to be mid-morning, though Naruto wasn’t good at this kind of estimation.

“How far are we?”

“Far enough. But I didn’t want to go further without checking the direction.”

The fox was panting slightly, though he tried to hide it. Naruto offered a hand. Akira snubbed it, at first, but relented after a while and climbed onto Naruto’s arm to settle on his shoulder.

“Thank you, Akira,” Naruto said, heartfelt.

He swept an eye around him but this patch of forest was pretty much the same as all the others he had encountered, albeit thicker than the woods inside Konoha’s walls. He had no way of knowing where he was exactly, but he didn’t care. What mattered was where he was going.

He rolled up the storage scroll and took out Orochimaru’s seal, brought it to life again. The snake uncoiled lazily, sniffed the air as if it looking for a sense of direction. Finally, it spiraled back on itself and settled into a new position.

Head pointing almost dead left to the direction they had been heading in until now.
"Dammit," Naruto cursed under his breath, folding the paper back. He had hoped the general direction would remain unchanged, so that they didn’t waste too much time while Akira was running blind. It was probably on purpose though, that the seal didn’t point directly to its master. Or maybe they had just gone too far on that track.

No matter. He had to keep going.

“Are you staying?” he asked the fox, trying to sound uninterested. He didn’t want to ask him to – Akira had done more than enough for him, and it didn’t sit too well with Naruto, be it because the fox was that kind or because the price Naruto would pay them for it was that worthy.

But he didn’t want to be alone either.

Most of his focus was set on not thinking about Konoha, about what could be happening there right now. Sakura had to be awake already. What would she do? Raise the alarm? Go after him? He had no way of knowing.

Maybe he never would.

“Why not? I don’t have anything better to do,” Akira said, just as nonchalant. Whether true or not, Naruto didn’t linger. Akira settled in his hood, and Naruto set out to run.

Every once in a while he would check with the snake, to be sure he was on the right track. He couldn’t tell if it was adjusting to his trajectory of changing instructions altogether. He didn’t have a choice but to follow it anyway.

Until a few hours later, when he neared a large river and the snake refused to come.

“What the hell?”

Naruto bled on the paper, to no avail. The seal stayed silent. Naruto forced himself to remain calm. It didn’t make sense that it would just randomly stop working. There had to be a reason.

A reason other than Orochimaru screwing him over massively.

He explored his surroundings a bit, without much hope. There was nothing there of note, except, when he walked further up the river, an impressive waterfall which roaring sound echoed across the valley. More impressive though were the two giant figures carved directly into the rock, of two shinobi facing each other, one hand on their sword, the other raised in the seal of confrontation.

Naruto had no idea who they were supposed to be, nor why would anyone bother with such a huge monument, in such a random place. What he knew was that it was absolutely not subtle enough to be hiding any secret lair. This wasn’t the place he was looking for.

So why?

“Naruto,” Akira piped up, poking out of the hood. “Someone is coming.”

Oh.

Could that be it? Could the seal feel it somehow? It would make sense that it wouldn’t allow its owner to be followed.

Naruto prayed hard for it to be just a random passerby, knowing full well how dim the chances were, especially after Akira confirmed that whoever it was, they were coming straight to them.
It made sense, and yet took Naruto completely off guard, when Sasuke stepped out of the tree line. He looked equally surprised, which was stupid – wasn’t he after Naruto?

“What are you doing here, Sasuke?”

“I came to get you.”

“I’m not lost! I know what I’m doing!”

Naruto didn’t like the pained look on Sasuke’s face.

“Just go back with me, please. No one has to know! But if you leave…”

“I don’t care. They can try and get me. I won’t go back, I won’t.”

“I can’t let you go.”

They were surrounded by the rush of the waterfall, the breeze traveling down the valley. It was only the two of them here. It felt like it was only the two of them in the entire world.

But they wouldn’t have been here arguing like this if that was the case.

“And how do you plan on stopping me?”

Had it been only the two of them, they would never have had to fight.

Izumi left, eventually, to try to see what was going on, if she could get any information, if she could help. But Itachi didn’t move. He kept to the chair in the corner of the room, drawing quietly, while Shisui looked at the window, dozing off and waking up without having a say in the matter.

“What do you think they will bring him back?” he asked the silence blanketing them both, not really expecting an answer. The sound of the charcoal mine scratching the paper didn’t stop or even stutter, but Itachi spoke after a pause, though of course not for something so mundane as giving a straight answer.

“Do you want them to?”

Shisui closed his eyes, took a few deep breaths to steady himself. He should have been eager to go home, to get out of that bed and that room, but now that he knew what he would find, he wasn’t too keen anymore. Because the house would be empty. Naruto’s things would be gone, his room abandoned.

It hurt to think about it.

But then the alternative, now that Naruto had truly made a run for it, the alternative, if they did bring him back, wasn’t much more pleasant. Naruto sulking alone in his room, unreachable, impervious to any attempt at getting to him.

Or worse – the house still empty, because Naruto wouldn’t submit, would have to be kept somewhere else, somewhere they were sure he couldn’t escape again.

His eyes landed on the scrolls aligned on the bedside table. No one had noticed them at first. He ought to give them to Tsunade when she came back, for they were for her no doubt. Naruto had not rushed out, had not followed a passing impulse. He had long thought about it. And he had made his
decision.

Shisui was missing him already. Somehow it felt like an answer in itself. He had accepted that Naruto was already gone.

That he could only settle and wait for him now, wait for him to return. For some reason, he didn’t doubt it would happen.

Some day. But not today.

Chapter End Notes

So yeah, one big fight, tho not nearly as big as in canon cause like, they don't, actually want to fight each other? It'll be mainly feels-sharing haha. I know most of you have been sold on Naruto leaving for a while and don't agree with Sasuke and Sakura trying to hold him back but I believe they make some good point and they're like twelve and don't want to lose their friend I think it makes sense. But well, you're all free to root for who you want lol.

Sprung more random OC to you, I really like populating the village haha. See you soon!
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

Valley of the End.

Chapter Notes

Have we been waiting for it or what. This is heavy on the feels as you can imagine, and I had a hard time cramming in all I wanted them to say to each other, but I hope it will still make some kind of sense. The fighting is not that developed because... y'know.

Hope you'll enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sasuke was so young, the first time he had joined in on a training routine, he didn’t remember it at all. In ninja families and clans, it came along with walking and talking. He had very old memories of mimicking the older kids as they went through their drill, copying their stance, the movements of their hands and feet. The games they played also revolved around this, organizing their mock training with stretching and muscle development and yelling “come on, come on!” when they tried to hold on to their position during core building exercises.

Sasuke had always liked it.

He liked going through the positions, one after the other, trying to keep balance and drop as low as possible. He liked going through the motion, punching and kicking the empty air faster and faster, perfectly in control of his whole body, of every muscle involved, pushing beyond the exhaustion, holding on.

He didn’t remember when it started. What he did remember though, was the first time he had to put those moves into practice.

He was young still – five maybe. He had tried the techniques against other kids before, but always in mock fighting, always to hone their precision and control. But then had come the day when they were to fight for real. Not to hurt the other of course, or put them out of commission, but still, the instructions then, for the first time, was to win the fight.

He remembered not liking that at all.

It hurt. They had to hurt each other. They had to make it so that the other would get down and not get up, to trap them in a way they couldn’t escape from, or to push them to give up. Sasuke didn’t do well the first few times. He had the theory down, he was strong and flexible and he had good instincts and reflexes.

But he didn’t want to fight.
It had become easier after a while. The only way not to get hurt and not to hurt either was to get good enough, that he wouldn’t take any hit and could carefully control his own.

He came to like sparring with people he knew and trusted, testing their techniques and moves, almost dancing. But he never got past his dislike for pointless pain, received or inflicted. He never told anyone, of course. He had an inkling Itachi knew, and Itachi maybe even was the same. Itachi taught him shurikenjutsu and Katon and helped him explore his Sharingan, but they never sparred together.

Naruto certainly didn’t know. Naruto was always down to fight.

Back at the Academy, they spent a lot of hours in taijutsu practice, and even if instructions were to hold back, because it was counterproductive to have the students knocked out or stuck at the infirmary all the time, it didn’t mean they followed through. Naruto was bad at this, holding back. But most importantly, the others were bad at holding back on him.

Or they just didn’t try.

Everybody knew Naruto didn’t get hurt. Didn’t stay hurt in any case. He was always provocative and mean, always taunting. And most of the kids wanted to fight, for real, and they weren’t allowed, but Naruto wasn’t the same. Because Naruto was always down to fight, Naruto didn’t really get hurt, and no one would care if he was anyway.

There was only ever Hyuuga Hinata to be gentle with him, but then again, she was gentle with everyone. She too was often the target of rougher than needed spar, but they knew better than to go after the Hyuuga heir.

Sasuke didn’t want to be the odd one out. He never said anything. He went hard on Naruto like everybody else. Even after they started to train together, even after they became friends, because Naruto was always going hard to, he didn’t seem bothered by any of it. Just like, Sasuke supposed, he didn’t seem all that bothered by the teachers’ constant scolding and the kids’ disdain. Naruto didn’t seem bothered by anything at all.

Should he have done something sooner? Said something? Why didn’t he see, even back then, how miserable his friend was, how far gone already? It just didn’t feel like it was that big of a deal. Childhood was supposed to suck anyway. They were weak and irrelevant and couldn’t do anything, couldn’t participate in the big decisions and the important missions. They just had to get through the Academy and the training, and then they could be ninjas and finally gain a place in the village, do something useful. Until then…

Until then they could only fight between themselves.

Sasuke was lost in thoughts and memories, regrets and longing, as he wondered what if, what if. He ran, surrounded by trees, then and suddenly he wasn’t. The sky opened up above him – there was a river, a waterfall, a monument of two giants facing each other he knew he ought to recognize but didn’t, and…

“What are you doing here, Sasuke?”

He had almost forgotten that he was supposed to catch up. Jumping from trees to trees that all looked the same, busy overthinking, he had forgotten what he was chasing in the first place. Or maybe he didn’t want to catch it, not really. He would have been fine running like this forever, Naruto’s shadow just a few steps ahead.
He would have followed him anywhere.

But now they were face to face and it wouldn’t happen. Either Naruto would be the one following, or he would make it so that Sasuke couldn’t.

“And how do you plan on stopping me?”

As usual, Sasuke didn’t want to fight. As usual, he would anyway.

“Are you alright?”

“I am. Why?”

“You’re very quiet.”

It was impressive that for how little Tenzo’s expression ever changed, he still managed to carry across many emotions and thoughts – right now, deadpan sarcasm.

“Am I usually talkative?”

The answer was no, of course. But there were different qualities to a silence, and Tenzo was reserved, but that wasn’t it this time. He was tensed and somber and yes, quiet, in a tightly wound-up way, lips carefully sealed and face set in a deep scowl.

Above all that though, Kakashi simply knew his friend well.

They only had a few minutes to spare, catching some rest while waiting for the messages passed back and forth between the ninken to reach them, before they would resume the chase. Pakkun needed to adjust their trajectory, but he was fairly certain they were gaining ground on Sasuke – they were much faster after all.

“We’ll catch up with Naruto soon enough,” Kakashi said conversationally. “We don’t even know if he’s really… We don’t know where he’s going. We won’t run into… anyone. Don’t worry.”

“I’m not worried.”

Tenzo didn’t make any effort to lie. He didn’t have to – he could just keep saying completely outlandish stuff with a straight face and repeat the same bullshit over and over until whoever trying to get an honest answer out of him simply gave up in frustration. Kakashi had seen plenty fall to it – others, not him. Lately Tenzo mostly used it to fuck around with their friends, to see how long it would take before Gai realized that Tenzo didn’t actually believe kunai grew up on trees.

It had been a while since Tenzo had so blatantly tried to hide his feelings away. Kakashi knew to fly right through it though.

“Orochimaru told Tsunade-hime that he was after the boy, but that doesn’t mean that’s what we’re dealing with here. I can’t imagine what Orochimaru would want with him.”

“I can.”

A good thing Kakashi was far better at the lying thing. Tenzo looked like he regretted opening his mouth, but, recognizing defeat, he went on.

“Orochimaru has always been attracted to rarity above all. There are nine jinchuuriki in this world,
not one more. It’s about as rare as it gets. And it will be a blow to the village too.”

Double the prize for the rogue Sanin. Kakashi felt a bit guilty, pushing Tenzo to talk about it like that, but it was sorely needed, unpleasant as it was.

“Then I can’t imagine why Naruto would run to him anyway.”

“I can.”

That one was more surprising.

Tenzo sighed heavily, no doubt seeing clearly through Kakashi’s poorly disguised strategy to have him open up a little on the matter. It was a testimony to how shaken he actually was, that he didn’t put up more of a fight, that he gave up so easily. He had been on edge ever since the Chunin Exam and the Third’s death. Their timing was terrible, but if Tenzo was willing to talk now, then now it would be.

“You know I don’t remember much. But… Most of us, he didn’t take against our will.”

Tenzo had very few memories of his childhood. He was an orphan, both Chunin parents killed during the Nine-Tails attack – that was about as much as they knew. It was the same for most of the children victim of Orochimaru’s experimentation. Kids that no one would miss, easy to snatch away. But…

“What did he promise you?”

“I don’t know. I don’t recall. But I…”

There was a long pause where Tenzo balanced between going on and shutting down, or even bolting right then, and Kakashi balanced between urging him on and backing off. He sucked at bringing comfort.

“I remember taking his hand.”

Kakashi had to get up then, walk a few steps, make a show of looking around to see if Pakkun was coming back, because he couldn’t bear the expression on Tenzo’s face. As muted as it was, Kakashi had known him for years. His anguish, his regrets and shame, he could see them plain as day.

It was something he had often heard, about Orochimaru. How good he was at winning people over to his side. Not any people though – he was already an outcast long before being a criminal too. Yet there were always those willing to follow him. Fellow outcasts, the ones no one else wanted.

Didn’t it go exactly the same for Anko? She wasn’t any more talkative than Tenzo on the subject. It could have brought them closer together, but their shared history had the opposite effect – they avoided each other like the plague, incurably tight-lipped and wary around one another. Anko was Orochimaru’s apprentice when Tenzo was locked up in his lab, and maybe they couldn’t get past that. Or maybe it was something else.

Maybe they were both ashamed. Of having been willing, of enjoying the attention even, no matter how briefly.

“I don’t know Naruto,” Tenzo added, barely loud enough to be heard. “But yeah. I can imagine.”

Kakashi knew Tenzo didn’t mean it as a reproach, but he took it hard all the same. What did it say
about him, about how poorly he had looked after his team, that it seemed plausible to Tenzo that Naruto would answer to Orochimaru’s call?

Deep down, he knew the answer.

It wasn’t like he wasn’t aware of Naruto’s pain, of his rage and resentment, his confusion and frustration over the injustice in his life that he didn’t understand and didn’t deserve. Kakashi was well aware of it all.

And he had said nothing and done nothing because he had thought that Naruto would just…

Endure.

Like he did.

Like they all did.

It just didn’t occur to him that Naruto would act on it. It wasn’t how this went. They were supposed to…they had to make do with these wounds. They kept going despite it all, because life was as it was and they couldn’t change it. All he could do was try to make it easier, until Naruto learned to live with it.

Such was their world.

Konoha had very few deserters, and trials for disobedience and treason were rare. The only one Kakashi could think of was…

Yeah, he had learned that lesson early on. Just endure. There was nothing else to do. Endure, or succumb. He didn’t think he had been taught. It seemed as natural as breathing.

But the kids hadn’t learned it at all.

It was Naruto, of course. Naruto in front of the monument, “What’s the point of dying for that place? What is so great about “the village” that you all want to die for it?”. Naruto faced with Hyuuga Neji’s pain, “if you hate it so bad, why don’t you just fight it?“.

It was Naruto, but not only him.

Sasuke and his indignation in Wave Country – “Why can’t we help? We’re just going to leave?” Sasuke who wanted power – the power to change the world around him. It was Sakura too of course, “if they’re hurt, it will be your fault”. Sakura and Naruto, determined to protect him even if she knew what that entailed.

It was Yamanaka Ino, disrespectful and unafraid, ready to voice her opinion on anything, to anyone. Nara Shikamaru, stubbornly refusing to contribute in any way. Hyuuga Neji and his quiet rage. Even Itachi had been steadily placing himself against his father.

It reminded him of Obito, a little. Obito didn’t understand either, why they had to fight so, why they had to die. It’s not like any of them did, but Obito, unlike all the rest, though it was something they ought to change. He was the only one Kakashi knew, that ever believed that, ever dared to voice it aloud. To say something so revolutionary as “I don’t want me or my friends to be hurt and die. No matter the reason.”

Expect to protect said friends of course. Self-sacrificing bastard.
It was dreadful, to realize out of the two lessons – “obey”, “protect” – one had far deeper roots in his mind, and not the one he would have preferred. Because Naruto had his place in the village, his role to play. They couldn’t save him from it.

Could they?

“We’re on the right track,” Pakkun said, popping up next to Kakashi and not making him jump. Tenzo got back to his feet, neutral and laidback as if nothing was amiss.

“The others will be joining us soon,” the dog added. “And one more thing…”

“What? What is it?”

“There is someone else. Between Sasuke and us.”

“Are you sure?”

“Certain. But I don’t know who it is.”

An enemy on their trail already? Or just another reckless kid?

“Lead the way then.”

Naruto turned away, Sasuke jumped in front of him. Naruto tried to sidestep him, Sasuke tried to grab his arm. Naruto threw a fist, Sasuke dodged… Before they knew it, they were fighting.

Naruto’s fox had quickly popped out of existence, making it one less thing Sasuke ought to worry about. He fell back on defense but made sure he was always in Naruto’s way, getting the other boy more and more frustrated, as he seemed eager to put a quick end to the confrontation.

“Let me go, Sasuke!”

“No!”

A kick in the plexus – Sasuke rolled away, breath cut out of him, but when he jumped back to his feet despite the pain, anxious to keep Naruto in his line of sight, the boy hadn’t moved further.

“Did they tell you to bring me back no matter what? Is that it? Is that your mission?”

It took Sasuke a moment, both because he was focusing on his wheezing breath and because he didn’t get what Naruto was saying. Until it dawned on him.

“No one sent me. Sakura came to me alone. We didn’t tell anyone.”

It shouldn’t have been that surprising. But Sasuke was quickly learning that what he and Naruto knew and took for granted were vastly different.

“Why?”

“Why? We… you’re our friend.”

He couldn’t voice the feeling aloud. It was too daunting, too much.

He was too cowardly.
“So it’s me you want to keep,” Naruto said. Sasuke frowned, puzzled.

“I… yes.”

“Well you’re the only one.”

“What?”

Naruto sighed, frustrated. Sasuke held back a jab – he was trying, it wasn’t his fault if the other boy made no sense. It had always been hard to talk, and to understand each other, but never harder than right now.

“The people they’ll send after me. It’s not me they want. I’m not…” – a small sound, like a whine of pain, desperate and wanton – “I’m not Naruto. Do you understand?”

He did.

He did, but he didn’t want to say it. He didn’t want to acknowledge it or think about it because the worse thing was he knew all this, he knew, he understood, and he knew too that he could do nothing about it, that they were no promise he could make and trust he could uphold, because the world was stronger than them both.

He knew, and yet…

“You are to me.”

“It’s not enough!”

He knew that too.

Naruto charged again, probably so that they would stop talking, face bitter and regretful at having said that so bluntly. On all account fighting with their fists was easier than with words.

The easy way out.

Sasuke recognized the grip Naruto had on his arm – before he could activate his paralyzing seal, Sasuke threw him off with a spin, sending him past the river bank and into the water.

He followed, hot on his heels in case he tried to bolt. Unbidden came the memories of when they had learned this, balancing on the calm river back in the village, right after their return from Wave Country. Naruto had just started wearing his mask – for a while they had seen it more than his actual face.

The mask was still here, dangling in Naruto’s back by the chord that had slid down around his neck. It painted a nice target. It was petty and meaningless, the urge to smash it, but hard to let go still.

“Why can’t it be?” Sasuke asked in a small voice as they faced each other on the water. It wasn’t a question for Naruto, not really. Maybe it was for the world at large. Why couldn’t it be enough? Why were they so powerless, so small?

He activated his Sharingan and Naruto immediately looked away. Right, because they were not experimenting now, weren’t testing anything, playing around with what they could do.

This time, Naruto had to be wary of his eyes.
Sasuke closed the distance because he couldn’t bear it, wanted Naruto to look at him again, even if just so that he could block him. They fell into a display of their evenly-matched taijutsu level. Good for practice, not so much when they were actually trying to win.

“Where will you even go?” Sasuke shouted between a kick and a dodged elbow. “What are you going to do?”

That was a sensible argument at least. What were they doing here? What path was Naruto following?

His friend bristled, displeased with the question.

“I’ll manage. It doesn’t concern you.”

“Of course it does!”

“Why?”

They always ended up there one way or another. Always at some point Naruto would let transpire that simple truth – he didn’t understand others caring for him. Years down the line, and it still wasn’t something he could handle.

And it still wasn’t something Sasuke could explain.

What words could he put on it, on how he worried about his friend, how he wanted him to be happy and safe so that he wouldn’t worry anymore. How it hurt when Naruto hurt and how it hurt that he couldn’t ease that hurt in any way. How he wished life was sweeter on them both, so that they could just enjoy it and not doubt so much. How he wished Naruto would smile more and how that would make him smile in turn.

There was no way of saying all that.

“You’re my friend,” he said lamely, frustrated at how little it meant, how limited the word. Naruto made a disbelieving noise – another concept he had trouble grasping.

“How are we supposed to look after each other if you’re gone?” Sasuke went on. “How will we…”

*How will I protect you?*

“Didn’t you see what happened?” Naruto shot back. “Shisui almost…”

He choked on the words, distressed still even if Shisui was fine now, the danger had passed, he didn’t die.

“They’ll come back. Them and others too. And what then? I won’t let anyone get hurt for me again.”

“That’s not for you to decide, if…”

“Don’t they hate me enough already?” Naruto cut forcefully, voice rising. Sasuke couldn’t help but wonder if he was saying something else then.

*Don’t I hate myself enough?*

“It will be my fault. If more deaths and destruction befall us because I’m here…”
“It’s not! It’s not our fault if this is the price…”

“I won’t pay it, I won’t!”

Because he would be the one to pay, in the end. He would be the one they blamed, the one deemed responsible, even if they wouldn’t let him go either. It was so stupid, so unfair, it didn’t make sense.

“You have no idea… Sasuke, what if Shisui had died, for real? What would you have done, what would people have said? And me…”

Sasuke violently refused to think about it. Shisui was fine. He was fine. But Naruto couldn’t help himself.

“I was so mad.”

It shouldn’t have been such a big deal. Who could reproach him his anguish and despair, faced with death in such a way? But Naruto wasn’t allowed this either. It was too dangerous. He couldn’t feel too much.

So, so unfair.

As if to echo his words, red eyes met Sasuke’s own as the air filled with the suffocating feeling that went hand in hand with the red chakra oozing off Naruto’s body. He was faster, hit harder, the next time he attacked. But he had to be careful not to meet Sasuke’s eyes, and that made him less unpredictable than he usually was.

A twirl and a turn and he managed to lock Sasuke into submission.

“You’ll be fine without me,” he said decisively.

Sasuke wondered if it was an accusation.

Unable to free himself, he released the control he had over the chakra in his feet and sunk abruptly below the water, slipping through Naruto’s grip, weakened by his surprise.

“That doesn’t mean I want to,” he said as he regained his balance, knowing he sounded childish. “I don’t want you to be my enemy,” he added, a little pleading, because that was where they were heading and it terrified him. It seemed inevitable, no matter the issue of their fight. If Naruto came back, he would see an enemy in everyone around him. And if he left, everyone around would make an enemy of him.

“You said we were friends,” Naruto countered, almost petulant, a little desperate. Putting weight on the word this time. But maybe Sasuke was the one who didn’t question it enough.

“I’ll always be your friend,” he said firmly, because that he had control over, that he could swear to and be confident he would never break his words. No matter what. Even if they kept fighting, even despite the blood dripping from Naruto’s nose and Sasuke’s split lips.

Even if Naruto hated him.

“Then let me go.”

Oh but it was so cruel, to play it this way.

“Is it that easy for you?” Sasuke yelled, angry again, hurt also, that Naruto could say it so
smoothly, could be so little swayed. He was wrong though. Naruto frowned too, he too let anger take over the mix of their jumbled emotions.

“It’s not! Don’t say that, it’s not!”

Sasuke was surprised at his vehemence. The Sharingan gave that extra clarity to everything he saw, and it was so for faces too, for all the minute changes, all the muscles twitching and emotions passing through, and maybe that was why all the Uchiha clan seemed so cold and unexpressive to outsiders. What need did they have to display their thoughts openly, when they could read each other so well.

The pain was there, lodged between the rage and the sorrow. Sasuke regretted saying what he had because he knew already. It was mean of him.

He didn’t apologize. Naruto went on.

“Don’t you think I’d stay? If I could.”

“You can.”

“No I can’t. I can’t. I can’t, I don’t want to.”

It occurred to Sasuke then that before trying to convince him, Naruto had needed to convince himself. A little dash of hope bloomed inside his chest, because Naruto was still within reach, Naruto still had doubts, and not all was lost.

“You can,” he said gently, “we can…”

“Don’t you get it? You have your family, your whole clan. You have the other genin, but me? You have the future to look forward to and I can’t even…”

There were so many things he could never do, he didn’t even manage to say it.

“What will you do, if we go back, and they decide it’s not worth the risk, to let me live in the world with you? Who will speak up then? What will you do?”

It was as much a request as an accusation, and it was Sasuke who darted forward this time, as it was either this or plugging his ears with his fingers. He didn’t want to hear it.

Because the answer was easy, of course. He would do nothing, could do nothing. If Naruto was punished, if Naruto was taken away, there would be nothing he could do, they could do, Sakura and him, against the will of the village.

“What will you do when they lock me up?”

“They won’t!”

“They have before!”

Sasuke took the next punch square to the jaw in his surprise. As he staggered on his feet, he saw Naruto’s aborted motion to check on him, worry flickering on his face before it was carefully wiped off.

He felt like crying.

“What are you saying?” he asked, because he was no coward and he would hear it even if he didn’t
want to. Naruto’s shoulders were tensed, his fists tightly closed.

“There is a cage.”

A quick memory then, both of them surrounded by ice, on that bridge in Wave Country. Naruto’s blind panic. “Let me out, let me out.”

No wonder.

Sasuke wished he could be surprised, could refute this, wished he had had any conviction in his voice when he had affirmed that the ones in charge wouldn’t go as far as jailing his friend.

But why wouldn’t they? Didn’t it make sense? Now that they knew Naruto’s thirst for freedom and now that other unknown forces were at play and trying to get their hands on him…

There would be no convincing Naruto to give up on his plan to leave. And so, logically…

“You’ll be fine without me,” Naruto said again. “But me… I have… And you won’t… Who knows. You won’t always be… And what then? It’s not, I don’t, I don’t care, if they hate me. I don’t care if I have only you. That’s not it.”

“I know.”

Naruto had never cared much about being liked. Had never made an effort to be, once he had understood how hard he would have to work for it. But he was right. Having no one on his side meant that anything could happen to him. They weren’t strong enough, they didn’t have enough weight, for it to change a thing.

And what would Naruto think of Sasuke, if he dragged him back to Konoha now only to get him locked away? Sasuke knew it was selfish of him, to wish so badly for his return no matter what. And it was also selfish, that the fear of Naruto hating him was the strongest argument against it yet.

“It can change,” Sasuke said with as much conviction as he could muster. “That power, I’ll have it someday. I’ll change it all. I just need some time!”

He could make it better. He would. Couldn’t Naruto trust that?

“I don’t have any! Do you think nothing bad can happen until then?”

Ah, right. It wasn’t Sasuke who Naruto didn’t trust.

He had often been deeply frustrated at being a child, when he was dismissed from important talks and kept out of every possible loop, time and time again growing up, and it was better now that he was a genin, but it still wasn’t enough. How long before he had a voice at the table, before he could protect Naruto from what scared him in the village?

The other boy threw a bunch of shuriken and dashed toward the waterfall. Sasuke dodged and gave chase, but Naruto as he was now, fueled by monstrous chakra and mad desperation, could easily outrun him. He started running up one of the statues, the one with long hair that Sasuke felt he had seen somewhere. Before he was too high, Sasuke launched a cable in his direction, so that the weighed tip would plunge after circling the other boy. Sasuke grabbed back the cable’s end. He yanked.

Naruto was propelled down, momentum cut abruptly as he sped toward the water. He crashed with
a grand splash and disappeared below the surface. Sasuke let his concern get the better of him and ran up to the spot, anxiously peering at the wavering surface.

Now was a bit late to wonder if Naruto could swim.

The boy broke the surface back though, spluttering and flailing until he could find his bearing on the surface, call up chakra to stand between him and the depth of the river. Sasuke almost apologized, but what good would it do? This wasn’t a pretend fight, as much as he wished it was.

Naruto rose slowly to his feet. All fight seemed to have left him, though there was still fire in his eyes, unbridled fire and rage.

“You can’t ask me… Don’t ask me to wait so long. You can’t.”

Naruto didn’t want him to ask because he wasn’t sure he would say no. It was an advantage to press. Naruto could be reasoned with. He could change his mind.

If Sasuke asked.

We are friends.

What did that mean?

“Is it so hard to understand?” Naruto asked, voice small. They stood in the middle of the river but they didn’t even have their guard up anymore. “Do you think I’m wrong?”

“Of course I do! What will you even do, you…”

“Not that.”

Naruto wasn’t meeting his gaze, but maybe it was just because of the Sharingan.

“Am I wrong to be angry? Do you think we should just bear with it? That’s it’s normal?”

It hurt, that Naruto didn’t make the distinction between Sasuke and the rest of the village. Between his friends and the adults in charge. Why was he so eager to put them all in the same box?

Had they ever spelled all this out in so many words though? Talking was so difficult, they always assumed that they could do without, that surely the other would understand even if it wasn’t said aloud. Sasuke kept telling himself that, knowing full well even plain declarations weren't enough in Naruto's case.

Here they were now.

And once again instead of saying this, instead of hammering the words into Naruto’s thick skull until he finally got it, all Sasuke could think of saying was…

“‘We?’”

Naruto frowned.

“You know there are others.”

“Is that what you’ll do? Go after them?”

“We shouldn’t have to live like this!”
“You don’t even know them!”

Except for the one, of course. Gaara’s departure was still sharp in Sasuke’s mind, the touch, the words, how torn they had both looked, how taken with each other. Why did Naruto feel so keenly for those strangers, why did they matter more than the people in his life?

Naruto shook his head, giving up, and Sasuke knew he had missed the point, but he didn’t know how to make it better. Naruto wouldn’t believe him, if he said he understood, that he agreed, because he thought Sasuke couldn’t, couldn’t relate, couldn’t empathize. Thought he was all alone in this, with no ally and no friends, and Sasuke was powerless to fight that conviction.

“I just want to be free, Sasuke. Why won’t you let me go?”

There was a hint of desperation in Naruto’s voice, of defeat. He was tired. Sasuke was too, he was exhausted as if he’d gone a week without sleep, he wanted nothing more than to drop right there and rest for a while, with Naruto by his side, simply staying still, going neither forward nor backward. Not moving an inch, not giving in anything. Stay there and enjoy the sun, listen to the water crashing down at the feet of those two giant statues that were staring at each other, indifferent to their turmoil. Maybe they could become statues too. Immutable, unfeeling.

Ha. As if Naruto could ever be that still.

It wasn’t an option anyway. Always forward they went, always fighting they were. No time to rest. But Sasuke was tired and Naruto was too, and so he didn’t feel like holding any word back. Surely he could manage, just this once, to say what he really meant, to get the feelings out.

“I just want to be where you are.”

That was all it was in the end. He didn’t want to live without Naruto by his sides, he didn’t want to wake up knowing there was no chance he would meet with him that day. He didn’t want them to be apart. Was it really that much to ask? Why was it so hard a wish to grant? He thought about the words they had exchanged with Gaara, but they were too heavy on his tongue, they wouldn’t come, no matter how much he meant them.

For a brief moment Naruto tethered on the edge of a question, but Sasuke had kept his to himself, and so Naruto did too. Because of course there was another simple way of them staying together – but just as he thought about it, Sasuke suddenly understood why it was so impossible for Naruto to stay.

And yet he felt like if Naruto really asked, if he meant it, if he voiced it aloud…

“*I think it’s important to say goodbye.*”

Damn Sai.

“*Katon! Fire Dragon Jutsu!*”
The flame beast twisted and dashed toward the line of trees before Naruto had fully crossed the river, setting ablaze a barrier of fire that had him backtrack quickly. They were both high-strung and unaware enough that they crashed blindly into each other, rolling on the water surface, grappling at each other with all the ferocity and desperation they couldn’t put into words, couldn’t express any other way. Sasuke took a knee in the stomach, gave an elbow in the face, all the while wanting to stop, wanting it all to disappear. Naruto managed to get back to his feet, Sasuke grabbed the back of his hoodie, yanked back.

Don’t leave. Not yet. Don’t leave me behind. Don’t turn away.

Deft on his feet, Naruto pivoted toward him, ready to strike.

Their eyes met.

Sasuke didn’t mean to dive down, but Naruto's eyes were wide open to Sasuke’s prying gaze, and he had been straining his Sharingan too far to be able to reign it in.

The sewers were familiar by now, as was the cage, and the big eyes shining in the dark, staring him down.

I won’t let you get in the way of our freedom.

He was forcefully expelled by the strength of its will, its determination that was not unlike Naruto’s.

Of course. They too were alike, in some ways.

“Is it for this too?” Sasuke, asked, incredulous, once he was back in his own body and faced with Naruto’s closed expression.

“We will be free,” he answered, though Sasuke wondered if he was really the one talking. There was a finality in his voice that heightened Sasuke’s building panic – it sounded like Naruto was done with this.

Done with him.

He made to pull away. Sasuke grabbed his arm.

The effect was instantaneous, well known by now, of the seal leeching of his chakra at dramatic speed, weakening him by the second. Naruto had wrapped a chakra vacuum seal around his forearm. Nice trap. Guaranteed to have his opponent let go immediately.

But Sasuke didn’t let go.

Not yet, not yet.

Sasuke held on desperately as his strength deserted him. Naruto tried to shake him off, to no avail, with increasing distress as Sasuke weakened.

“Let go!”

“No!”

“Sasuke, let go!”

“No, no!”
He was being stupid and reckless. He couldn’t think of anything else to do. If he let go Naruto would turn away and he would be gone, and it was too much to handle, too painful to bear.

It couldn’t go on forever though. Sasuke staggered on his feet, still feeding the seal on Naruto’s arm with his own forces.

“Sasuke!”

He lost consciousness.

.

Much like that time in the forest, it was Sasuke’s voice that guided Naruto through the panic threatening to seize his mind. “Chakra exhaustion has to be treated seriously or it can be fatal, but there’s not much to do except rest.”

He carried them across the river, propped Sasuke against the hard stone at the massive foot of the statue, crouched by his side to assess the damage. He was still breathing and his pulse was steady, if a bit slow. Or maybe it wasn’t. Naruto hadn’t been paying much attention. What was he supposed to do?

Why was Sasuke so damn stubborn?

Now was his chance of course, but how could he leave like that? He was at a loss.

Sasuke stirred.

“Sas’? Oi, dumbass, wake up, wake up!”

Please, please, open your eyes.

He did, barely.

“You’re such a fucking idiot. Why are you doing this, huh? Why go so far, why…”

Why do this for me?

“I don’t… I don’t want you to doubt… I don’t want you to think we’d let you go without a fight,” Sasuke whispered in a breath, clinging hard to consciousness. Naruto didn’t know how to check on him, didn’t know how worried he ought to be. This wasn’t how it was supposed to go.

No one was supposed to get hurt because of him. No one was supposed to care this much. It was stupid, absurd.

“I’m sorry,” he said, at a loss for better words to add to the pile between them. He couldn’t think clearly anymore. There was still one thing though, that he hadn’t dared ask before, because he feared the answer, but now was as good a time as any, since surely Sasuke would have to recognize now, that Naruto was leaving for good.

“Do you hate me?”

Sasuke’s eyes widened and he frowned, as if he had heard wrong.

“Will you hate me? If I leave?”

If I do this to us. If I’m a traitor.
It sounded stupid and childish yet Sasuke answered with as much seriousness as if he was a sworn witness on a trial.

“No. I won’t. You did nothing wrong.”

And it was reassuring in a way, because Sasuke wouldn’t hesitate then, if he did do something wrong. Though Naruto would argue that he had, seeing Sasuke’s labored breathe and dropping eyes.

Naruto had yet to discover how you could possibly go through life without hurting the people around you.

"Do you?" Sasuke whispered, low enough that Naruto almost missed it. "Do you hate me?"

"For what?"

"For wanting you to stay."

Naruto shook his head, full of disbelief. How did they manage to misunderstand each other so badly, he couldn't tell.

"No. No, no. I don't. I'm... I don't."

Sasuke smiled faintly, dozing off. He'd better have heard. Naruto wanted to shake him, finding him too still for his liking, but he needed to go now. He had lost enough time as it was. He knew if he took the first step, it would be alright. Just the first one, to turn away from his friend, and he would be off, he would resume his journey.

It was easier said than done though.

He needed to know first. He needed to be sure.

“Ask me again.”

Sasuke took a little while to get back to it. Naruto knelt in front of him to meet his eyes, black and bottomless, the Sharingan nowhere in sight.

“Ask me again. Ask one more time, and I’ll go back with you.”

Don’t ask. Please. Don’t ask. Tell me it’s alright. Set me free. Please.

They stared at each other for a long time, still and silent, trying to converse back and forth without saying a word.

Naruto held his breath for a whole eternity.

.

It was the cruelest thing Naruto had ever asked of him.

There was truth in the statement, Sasuke was sure of it. Naruto would keep to his words. If Sasuke asked...

He thought about Sakura, and reflected about how keeping a promise was much harder than he thought it was.
Maybe it was enough just to have that power. To know that he could, if he wanted to, that Naruto would let him decide. It was terrible too, to leave the choice in his hand at the end of the line.

But it was a show of trust, wasn’t it? And a question, a request. To weigh both of their desire, since only one could be fulfilled.

It was Naruto asking permission. Absolution.

Blessing.

Sasuke stayed silent.

He couldn’t resist grabbing Naruto’s wrist though, when the boy went to get up. A flash of pained betrayal crossed his face, but Sasuke had to say it, Naruto had to know…

“I’ll do it. Whether you’re here or not… I’ll change it. The village, this world. I’ll make it a place you’ll want to return to.”

Naruto didn’t answer. He put his hand on Sasuke’s and left it there for a moment, their eyes locked, before gently prying his wrist free of Sasuke’s grasp. He got up. He turned away.

_Say something_, Sasuke pleaded. _Say something._

His eyes were dropping shut again, Naruto’s back getting smaller and blurrier with each step. But he stopped at the edge of the woods and spun back, fell back to his knees. He took Sasuke’s hand, pressed two fingers against his in a seal.

Reconciliation. To close the fight open by the Confrontation seal they had forgotten in their haste, but was held by the two statues towering over them.

“I’ll be waiting.”

Sasuke passed out again.

Naruto made it to the nearest tree before he had to stop and try to remember how to breathe.

He leaned against the trunk but made sure not to look back. Forward, forward, always.

He gathered some blood still trickling from his nose to call up an invocation.

“Naruto! Are you alright?” Akito asked, worried, when he appeared in front of him.

“How are things back there?” Naruto asked back, ignoring him. “Is Shisui…”

“He’s fine. I stayed as long as I could. No one saw me.”

Naruto nodded, relieved. What was he doing… ah, right. Breathe.

Akito looked in his back, puzzled.

“Can I… can I ask you again? Someone will be here soon, I’m sure. Will you…”

“I’ll look after him,” Akito said, solemn, as if it was some great mission he would never dare fail. Naruto felt absurdly grateful for him. He took another breath, another, trying to calm down, center
himself, remember what he was doing, where he was supposed to go.

He saw Akito tense up before the fox piped, “someone’s here.”

Frustrated tears stung at Naruto’s eyes as his body tensed in anticipation. He had no energy left, no will either, he didn’t want to fight, and he couldn’t beat whoever they had sent after him. He just wanted to be left alone, but that wasn’t happening yet it seemed.

When he turned around to confront his new opponents, it was far from being anyone he expected to see.

“You… What? What are you doing here?”

Hyuuga Neji stared with his white, empty eyes.

“I came to make a deal.”

Kakashi felt – and smelt – them before he saw them. He stopped on a high branch, Tenzo on high alert a few meters behind, and let the two teenagers come to them. It took him a moment to recognize them, as his mind was expecting a very different sight.

“Neji?”

The Hyuuga nin was carrying an unconscious Sasuke on his back.

“I found him near the river, about an hour away from here.”

“Naruto?”

“I saw no trace of him.”

Kakashi checked on his student quickly – he wasn’t sporting any graver injuries than cuts and bruises, but he had the sickly pallor of chakra exhaustion, and he didn’t stir despite the examination. Neji didn’t either, stoic and silent in a way that clearly stated he wouldn’t volunteer any information.

“What are you doing here, Neji?” Kakashi asked eventually.

“I followed them out.”

Kakashi truly wondered what the training of that team had been like under Gai, before Rock Lee was put out of commission. Hyuuga Neji was essentially a wall, at all times and to anyone. There was nothing to get out of him.

And Kakashi was in no place to scold him – he had been granted the chunin rank after Hiashi argued it out of the Hokage, so he was allowed to be out there. The why was more intriguing, but it would have to wait.

“We’ll sort this out with the Godaime. Can you show me the way?”

The boy nodded.

“TENZO. Bring Sasuke back to the village.”
They made the exchange quickly and Tenzo took off as soon as the Uchiha boy was secured on his back. Kakashi felt better sending Tenzo, even if that meant potentially dealing with Naruto without him. With some luck, he would have tire himself enough against Sasuke that he wouldn’t have too much of a fight left in him.

That was, if they managed to catch him.

Neji took the lead, going back where he had come from, Kakashi on his heels and Pakkun nearby too, for confirmation. As the boy had said, they reached the river soon enough, quicker even since he wasn’t carrying Sasuke around this time. The river was wide, water thundering in the distance – it would make scent tracking much harder.

It took Kakashi a moment to recognize the waterfall and its two sentinels, the carved out stone, the faces. Out of all places, what were the chances for the boys to end up fighting here? Uchiha Madara and Senju Hashirama stared at each other, indifferent to the tragedies unfolding around them. Had he been more of a philosopher, Kakashi would have found some poesy in the scene.

It was just frustrating though.

“He was on the other side,” Neji said. At the edge of the forest was a bunch of charred trees, most likely from Sasuke’s Katon, and Neji led them further down the river from there, getting further and further away from the monument.

There was nothing of note on the spot he pointed. No trail and no scent leaving the scene, except for Sasuke’s. No trace of Naruto.

How long ago had he been there? Long enough, if Neji hadn’t seen him, especially taking the Byakugan into account.

“How far could you see?”

“About ten kilometers.”

The encounter must have been brief then, Naruto on his way as soon as Sasuke was out, though it was hard to believe he would have simply abandoned his unconscious friend.

Ah, what did Kakashi know? Very little, that much was clear. If Naruto was determined enough… and he had to be, for leaving at all in the first place.

He had left no trail from Konoha, and it was the same here. How was irrelevant, the result was the same.

Kakashi had no idea where to go from here.

“I’ll keep looking. Go back to the village,” he told Neji. “Report to the Hokage.”

The boy obeyed without a word. Kakashi wasn’t used to it.

He summoned the rest of the ninken, told them to look around, starting from where Sasuke had laid, out of it and alone, a few hours ago. He knew it was probably pointless, new how little chances they had to find anything, to pick up the trail.

Still, he stayed, for hours and hours, unable to resolve himself to go back, to give up. Only when the sun dipped below the tree line did Gai reached him, resting a heavy hand on his shoulder to keep him in place.
“Let’s go back, Kakashi. We’ll see what we can do next.”

Defeated, Kakashi could only follow.

“Naruto!”

Sasuke couldn’t see and didn’t know where he was and for a moment he was overcome with panic. He called up his Sharingan, the familiar expanding of his vision reassuring enough that he could force his mind out of overdrive and try to focus on his surroundings.

He was inside, lying on a bed, the room only faintly lit by the moonlight filtering through the curtains. It was enough for his eyes – he recognized one of the single bedrooms of Konoha’s hospital.

His eyes quickly fell down to the bed. To the only other pair of eyes in the room.

“I… I promise I would check on you.”

It was Naruto’s smallest fox. It obviously wasn’t expecting Sasuke to wake up, frozen as it was on the bed, ready to bolt.

“Wait!” Sasuke exclaimed before it could disappear, anxious not to be left alone with his thoughts and questions.

He didn’t need to ask if Naruto was here – the fox wouldn’t be, if he was. Who had brought him back? How long ago? The night was deep, the hospital quiet, but it didn’t feel like that much time had passed. Maybe it was still the same day.

“Will you be back?” he asked – he had to say something.

It was strange to see such human emotions on a fox’s face. Regret, guilt.

“No. I won’t.”

“Oh. Okay.”

Why would they, after all? The foxes belonged with Naruto.

And Naruto wasn’t here anymore.

“You… You’ll look after him, right? Don’t leave him alone.”

Sasuke felt exposed, laid bare under the fox’s scrutiny. There was no mistaking him for a regular fox, when he stared this way.

“I will. I won’t.”

Sasuke nodded and the fox puffed out of the room, of the village, of the entire world maybe, who knew?

Who cared. Who cared where they were, if it wasn’t here.

He had a lot to do, he pondered. There was no time to waste. If he wanted to make good on his promises, if he wanted change to happen, he had to start as soon as he could. He had a goal in
mind, and he would achieve it, no matter how.

For now though…

For now, Sasuke drew his knees to his chest, hugged them close with his bare arms, shivering in the cool air of the room but not finding it in him to care. He buried his head in his arms.

For now, just for now, softly and without making a sound even if he was alone in his dark hospital room, Sasuke cried.

Chapter End Notes

I don't know, I just felt like being really mean.

This is the penultimate chapter of Part 1! I can't believe we made it here lol. One more and this story will be marked complete, I'll launch a different one for the post-timeskip continuation, so don't forget to subscribe to the series if you want to read what comes next ^^

Let me know what you think! And I'm on tumblr here.
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

Moving forward.

Chapter Notes

THIS IS IT PEOPLE. This is the end of part 1. Don't worry I won't be going on a two-year hiatus lol, but I won't be launching Part 2 right away either, I have some planning to do before.

Thank you all so much for your support and for sticking with me until now. We're far from done but still, this feels huge. I hope you'll enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Her son was still asleep come morning when Mikoto let herself into his hospital room.

Just asleep, Kusushi had said, recovering from severe chakra depletion but out of any danger already by the time Tenzo had brought him to the hospital. It didn’t make the vision any less heart-shattering, of Sasuke being carried unconscious by the young Anbu. She intended to sleep at the hospital, but they were still on high alert and she couldn’t just bail out on her duties. The medic-nin has assured her that Sasuke was fine and would stay knocked out until morning.

He opened his eyes as she settled in the chair next to him. There were deep, dark bags under his eyes, stark on his pale skin, paler even than usual.

“Mom?”

“How are you feeling Sasuke?” she asked, gentle, brushing off a few wandering strands of hair from his forehead. He didn’t panic, didn’t ask any question. He stared at her and didn’t even try to look convincing when he answered in a small voice, “I’m fine.”

She knew immediately.

“Did you wake up last night?”

“I… How do you know?”

There were still tear tracks on his face. He had woken up, looked around, and drawn up the inevitable conclusions as to how the previous day had ended.

And she wasn’t there.

She got up, wrapped him into her embrace.

“I should have been there. I’m sorry.”
“It’s fine.”

His voice was tight. He was fighting not to cry again, not in front of her.

She should have stayed.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured, muffled by their embrace. “He left. I failed.”

His matter-of-fact tone broke on the last word. He hiccupped around a sob, tightened his fist on the fabric of her shirt.

“He left, Mom. He’s gone.”

The tears came in earnest.

“He’s gone.”

She couldn’t help but notice how different it sounded from how everybody had said it until now.

“Naruto left the village, the boy has gone missing, we need to find the jinchuuriki.”

But Sasuke, he was already missing his friend.

“I know, I know. It’s alright.”

“I couldn’t… he wanted to leave so bad and he was so unhappy and I couldn’t just… I’m sorry mom.”

Apart from chakra depletion – a favorite of Naruto – Sasuke wasn’t hurt much more than after a slightly rougher-than-usual sparring session. The boys were evenly matched, Naruto wouldn’t have gotten the upper hand easily.

And how far Sasuke would go for him, what could he do? He had run after the other boy, but not because those were his orders, not because he had to.

They just cared about each other. This was all that motivated Sasuke’s recent actions. Disobeying, lying, in what all justified in his eyes for that simple reason. So straightforward, so obvious.

“Sasuke?”

He pulled out of her embrace so fast he almost pushed her.

It was Fugaku who spoke and Fugaku who made Sasuke’s face closed down into defiance as his father marched into the room.

“Sasuke, you’re awake. Are you alright? Is he alright?” he asked Mikoto. A wise move, since Sasuke’s lips were suddenly sealed.

“He’ll be okay,” she said, focusing on the physical. There was nothing much to say about the rest for now.

Maybe she should have lied though, because as soon as Fugaku was reassured that their son wasn’t on death’s door, his behavior changed radically.

“What came over you Sasuke? What possessed you to leave like this instead of alerting me? Or anyone?”
Out with the father, in with the commander. She wanted to protest, but the Hokage and the Anbu commander would be right behind surely, it was unlikely Sasuke would catch a break before he had justified his decisions.

Seeing the stubborn set of his jaw though, it would maybe take more time than they hoped.

“Answer me, Sasuke. You could have been hurt, you could have… This is serious!”

Fugaku couldn’t hope to convince Sasuke that he was asking primarily out of concern, even if he was. Her husband was frustratingly inept at expressing his true feelings, and Sasuke was already half convinced his father didn’t care about him. It didn’t help that Fugaku often gave in to anger when he was overwhelmed, a rampant issue for the men around her.

“Did he tell you where he was going?” Fugaku said, changing strategy. “Did he say anything?”

Mikoto sighed. If there was a question least likely to be answered by their boy now, it was probably this one. Sasuke was frowning hard, lips stubbornly sealed, even when his father stalked toward him and grabbed his shoulder, forcing their eyes to meet.

“Answer me, Sasuke!”

“Fugaku!”

Mikoto caught her husband by the wrist, squeezed tight when he didn’t immediately let go. He did, shaking out of her grip too. He ran a hand on his face, trying to find back his composure.

“Do you realize what this means, Sasuke? For the village, for all of us?”

That didn’t move the boy.

“I love Konoha,” he said, firm despite the shaking in his voice. “But I won’t let it hurt my friend.”

This time Fugaku was too shaken to react in any way. Mikoto couldn’t blame him – who had ever heard such words? Where did this come from? And Sasuke was so calm, so sure of himself. As is if he had thought about this before. Oh, he probably had. He and his other friends, the Haruno girl, the rest of their classmates. Inoichi’s daughter had helped them track Naruto, and how many would have assisted them too, and would have kept quiet like they had?

It seemed so easy for them, what had been unsurmountable for Mikoto when she was younger.

When the village had forbidden her to look after her dearest friend's orphan child, and she had obeyed.

She wondered what her son would make of that.

Maybe it was fortunate that the Hokage decided to step in right then, though Mikoto worried for a second that she had heard that questionable statement.

“Good morning Sasuke,” the woman said pleasantly. Mikoto hadn’t interacted with her much, but she liked the other woman, and that was one of the reasons why, the way she talked to the younger ones. The same way she talked to adults, but not the way she talked to shinobi receiving commands.

“Good morning Hokage-sama,” Sasuke said politely, and Mikoto realized he wasn’t afraid. He wasn’t feeling guilty or ashamed. He didn’t think he had done anything reprehensible, and she was
willing to bet if he was accused of anything, he wouldn’t deny it, no, but he would argue that he wasn’t in the wrong.

“Are you well? You should still feel a little queasy, but it will pass.”

“I’m alright.”

She didn’t make a move to examine him. She wasn’t here as a doctor.

“Sasuke. Do you know why Naruto wanted to leave?”

Straight to it then. Sasuke looked down for a moment, searching for his words, but he met the woman's eyes when he answered.

“He was… unhappy here. He wanted to be free.”

“And do you agree with him?”

He squirmed under her scrutinizing gaze – the woman was intense, her presence commanding. Fugaku looked like he wanted to intervene, yet he held his tongue, a testimony to the woman’s charisma. This was between her and Sasuke, and she was focused only on him, with no room for outside intervention.

“Be truthful. I want to know.”

Sasuke was thrown off by that line of questioning, though he was pleased by the solemnity, always eager to be treated as an adult. He bit his lips like he did when he was trying to keep in something he knew he shouldn’t tell.

He usually ended up losing this battle, and today was no exception.

“I understand. Or at least I try to. I don’t blame him.”

Mikoto understood she was completely left out of that conversation. Sasuke looked at the Hokage and the Hokage looked back, and something passed between them, an understanding Mikoto had no part in. The woman wasn’t angry or accusing. On the contrary.

“I’ll have to hear a full report on what happened later on, but for now I’ll let you rest,” she concluded, satisfied somehow of what she had just heard, ready to move on.

“Wait!”

Sasuke scrambled out of the covers and Mikoto failed to stop him from getting up. He stood straight despite his wobbling legs and bowed deeply under the Hokage’s surprised gaze.

“Hokage-sama, please take me as your apprentice.”

“Sasuke!” Fugaku exclaimed, outraged. The boy ignored him. He stayed bent in his formal bow despite the sweat pearling on his forehead – he was weak still, and Mikoto tried to pull him back to bed, to no avail.

“You got some nerves kid,” the Hokage said, sounding amused but reproving too. He was going too far.

Which wouldn’t stop him of course.
“I want to learn from you.”

“I don’t need a student.”

“I don’t mean… I mean, I want to learn medical ninjutsu but...”

“Well, there are others who can teach you that.”

“But you’re the Hokage.”

She raised an eyebrow, intrigued.

“That’s… that’s what I want you to teach me.”

He was still bowing, as much a mark of respect as to avoid the woman’s gaze, Mikoto figured.

“I don’t take in clan members,” Tsunade added after a pause. Sasuke tensed, and Fugaku too, but the woman was observing, calculating.

“It will come second,” Sasuke assured.

“Ha! Good luck convincing me of that.”

It was best he kept his head down and eyes fixed on the ground because his expression wouldn’t win him any point at that moment.

“Forget it kid. I’ll see you later.”

He didn’t try to protest but as he watched her leave the room, his face was set in an expression guaranteeing he wasn’t going to, as she had said, “forget it”.

“What is that nonsense about, Sasuke?” Fugaku asked once the Hokage was out of earshot. “I thought you were over this idea.”

“You just want me to be. But I’m not. I’ll be the next Hokage.”

“I forbid it!”

“I don’t need your permission!”

“I’m your father and your clan leader Sasuke, and you will obey me!”

“And what if I don’t?”

“That’s enough,” Mikoto cut in, preventing her husband from answering that questions and make everything worse. Sasuke seemed to remember himself then and his face reddened from shame.

“We will discuss this later. Properly. For now Sasuke needs to rest, and you’re needed back at the police headquarters, Fugaku.”

They held gaze for a moment, defiant, until Fugaku caved, recognizing as he mercifully did these days that he’d better follow her lead when it came to their sons. His eyes fell on Sasuke, purposefully staring out the window, and he made an aborted gesture to come closer and do something. Ruffle his hair, touch his arm, his face, squeeze his hand. Any gesture of connection and comfort he wanted to exert and that they both needed.
His hand fell back to his side, he turned heels and left. Mikoto closed her eyes and breathed through a wave of frustration and weariness, but Sasuke was still there, and she needed to keep it together.

“There’s nothing to discuss,” he said through gritted teeth, stubborn to the end. It was funny really, how alike Sasuke was to a younger Fugaku. She wasn’t about to draw up the comparison now though.

“There is, if you don’t want your father to level you his disapproving look every time he sees you for the years to come.”

The attempt at levity didn’t work. Sasuke’s frown deepened.

“I don’t care what he thinks.”

“I know that’s not true.”

She rested a light hand on his shoulder to draw his attention to her. He looked terribly upset, but there was no telling what took the cake of that pitiful day.

“If Dad doesn’t agree, I’ll just move out of the house. I will.”

“And where will you go?”

“Well Shisui has an extra room now doesn’t he!”

Ah, so there was anger too. A lot of it, though again, it was hard to guess for what, at who.

She feared it was mostly at himself.

“And what makes you think I would want you under my roof little cousin?”

The tone was light, thankfully, but that didn’t prevent Sasuke’s face from scrunching up like he had bitten on a lemon, as he stared at Shisui and Itachi standing at the door.

His eyes immediately started to well up again. Shisui was by his side in the next second.

“Hey, hey, come on, none of that,” he whispered gently, pressing Sasuke’s head against his, forehead to forehead.

“I tried. I tried, I swear. I’m sorry.”

“Stop it. It’s not your fault. It’s not your fault Sasuke.”

Shisui was serene, perfectly calm and collected. He hadn’t looked surprised in the least, not for a second, since waking up to hear that Naruto was missing.

Mikoto couldn’t help but think that he expected it. He knew it would happen, had been preparing for it maybe, had deemed it inevitable. Were Naruto’s struggles so deep, so obvious, that he didn’t see any other way this would go?

When Shisui stood back, they both had a red mark on their forehead for pressing too hard. Itachi stayed away, watching his brother like a hawk but not breaching the distance. Her sons exchanged a long, heavy look she couldn’t hope to decipher, but seemed to satisfy them both.

Sasuke fell back into his pillows, made a show of rubbing his eyes for he would never let them see
how tired he was for real, so they all took the hint and pretended like they would let him rest, even
if he wouldn’t sleep and she dreaded leaving him alone to his own thoughts.

She didn’t need to worry though, because Itachi took the armchair in the corner of the room just
like he had for many hours in Shisui’s, and Sasuke didn’t protest. His brother wouldn’t ask any
question nor get him to talk, and they were fine ignoring each other. So Itachi got to stay. It would
have to be enough.

She followed Shisui out of the room.

“Shouldn’t you still be in bed too?”

“Yeah, yeah, don’t worry, I’m going back. I just wanted to see the urchin.”

Shisui was quite different from most of the other Uchiha. Not physically of course, he looked the
part, but he didn’t use the same methods, didn’t have the same propensity for just burying all his
feelings and never letting anything show. The pain was raw and naked on his face and in his voice
despite his affectionate smile when he mentioned Sasuke.

She wasn’t used to this openness from the members of her family, and she had a harder time
reacting to it.

“Shisui, listen, I…”

“Please, Mikoto. There is… so much blame to go around. I think it’s best if we don’t get started at
all.”

His ire, she could see it too. Guilt also, regrets. Rancor.

But he wanted to work past it, and he was right, what help would it be to pinpoint who was to
blame? They were all at fault, some more than others yes, but in the end, responsible or not, Naruto
was gone, and that wasn’t going to change.

It didn’t help with the hole in her chest, expanding rapidly to fit Naruto’s shape next to Kushina’s.
She had been so good at ignoring it all, at convincing herself that there was nothing more she could
do, that she had time still to fix her mistakes, that it could wait. Just a little longer, just the time for
her to gather the courage, to face Naruto knowing how she had abandoned him to his fate, to face
Kushina’s eyes looking up at her. They all said he looked like his father, but she could only see her
friend in him, his anger her own, his accusation too.

She had to sit down in the nearest chair, as soon as Shisui was out of sight, because it hit her then,
the full force of what had happened. Naruto was gone, a deserter to the village, most likely running
to Orochimaru of all people. Minato and Kushina’s son hated the village so much he couldn’t bear
to live in it anymore. It was…

It was pretty ironic.

“Mikoto? Are you alright?”

Inuzuka Tsume sat down next to her and started rubbing her back while Mikoto tried to pull herself
together.

“Is Sasuke…”

“He’s alright, he’s alright. Well, he’s going to be bitter and mournful for weeks probably, but apart
from that…”

She let out a joyless chuckle. All the worry and stress form the past few days were catching up on her, and even the relief of both Sasuke and Shisui coming out of it unharmed was taking its toll, sapping her strength.

But the worse thing was the guilt.

“You know what’s funny?” she asked. Tsume’s hand was still on her back, soothing. They had seen more of each other since Kamui and Hokuto. Shameful that they needed death and tragedy to get closer.

“What?”

“Kushina and I, we became friends by chance. You know how she was treated, and I… well, it wasn’t for my hair, but us Uchiha weren’t exactly popular back then either.”

She had the misfortune of having very few other Uchiha of her age at the Academy and managed to be shunned even by those. She was deemed too weird as a kid, too quiet and serious, even by their standards.

“There was one day, we were around ten I believe. I had been asked to tutor her by our teacher at the Academy, because she was so behind, you remember? She didn’t manage to catch up to us, as she had been taught different where she was from, and she wasn’t putting much effort into it either… Anyway, I went to her house. I found her packing a bag.”

Kushina lived with her parents and a few other members of the Uzumaki clan in an isolated estate near the northern gate, long abandoned now. Few people went there and she wasn’t even supposed to go either – she should have caught the girl at the Academy after class, but Kushina was always out of there as quickly as possible. The place was kind of scary and Mikoto wasn’t exactly allowed to be there. It was probably the single most rebellious thing she had done in her life up until then.

The house was empty, all the adults at work or on a mission, and she had been bold enough to walk through the open door without being invited in, because Yamanaka Inoichi had mocked her earlier that day, saying that she probably asked for permission even to enter her own house.

And there was Kushina, worked up and wrathful, stuffing her clothes in a backpack.

“She told me she had had enough of this place and all its “stupid people”. That she was going home. That there was no way she would let “them” dictate her future. I learned much later, that she had just been told she was to become the next host of the Nine-Tails. At the time I thought she was just angry at her parents for moving their family to Konoha.”

“You could come with me,” Kushina had said, looking excited at the prospect. They weren’t that close, not yet. But Kushina saw her as a kindred spirit already, another lonely girl who didn’t fit anywhere, with anyone. She got caught up in telling her where they would go, what they would do. She described Uzushio, the white and brown buildings piling up along the canals, the narrow streets, the steep staircases and the numerous bridges, spilling down to the market and the ever-agitated port. The sunlight shining through the water of the fountains, the pirogues gliding over the clear water, the temple overlooking the city, high on the hill, and the many many steps they had to climb to get there.

She got so lost in it that she was still going when her parents came back home, saw the bag, understood what was happening. Another woman, her aunt maybe, escorted Mikoto out of the
estate and back to her district as a fight broke out between Kushina and the rest of her family.

"She never mentioned it again, after that day. Except once. When she came to tell me that she was pregnant. She was so happy you know, but…"

“What did she say?”

Mikoto inhaled sharply, overwhelmed with emotions.

“‘I wish my child would be born far away from here.’”

Only once, twice if she counted that aborted escape when they were kids, only twice had Kushina ever expressed this kind of feeling. Was it only a fluke? Or had she simply kept it all down? Endured, for the sake of the life she had managed to build in Konoha after all, for Minato and the family they dreamed of? Or simply because she, like her son after her, didn’t have any other choice?

She had said something else, talking about her pregnancy. “I didn’t think they would agree.” Because she had had to ask permission.

Kushina had stayed. Despite the antagonism and the suspicion, despite how people looked at her and talked about her, she had stayed, she had made the best of her situation in Konoha. She made friends, married Minato, and yet…

“I wish my child would be born far away from here.”

“It’s funny, isn’t it? Isn’t it?”

Mikoto pinched the bridge of her nose, hard, face creased in an attempt to push the feelings down, to keep control. All the efforts Kushina had made to fit in, to make do with her fate, all up in flame as soon as she was gone, with absolutely none of it protecting her orphaned son from their wrathful world.

Kushina… Maybe she would understand Naruto’s choice. But certainly not Mikoto’s.

“We all failed them,” Tsume said gravely.

It wasn’t comforting in the least, but then again, that wasn’t the point at all.

They deserved no comfort.

.

Sasuke bounced back between impatience and dread, waiting for Sakura to show up in his hospital room.

He didn’t have to wait long, after his mother left, for his friend to visit. Itachi made himself scarce as she sat by his side and started to peel an apple in silence. She hadn’t even say hello.

He didn’t know what to say either, so they stayed quiet for a while, until she had peeled the apple, and sliced it, and arranged it on a plate for them to share, after they had eaten it and it was gone.

“I’m sorry,” Sasuke said then.

She looked so sad, but not angry.
She would be.

“It’s okay. You did your best.”

That wasn’t exactly true.

“We can still track him down. Once things have calmed down a bit… I’m grounded for now, but it won’t last forever,” she said lightly, as if it was that simple. As if they just had to pick up their friend the next town over, as if they would be so easily trusted after what they had done.

As if he would be on board.

“Listen, I…”

“Sai can still help. And if not, we’ll find something else. Ino will keep her ears and eyes open, if there is a lead, we’ll hear about it.”

“Sakura, wait…”

“If we can take missions outside the village…”

“Listen to me!”

She jumped, startled, and he hadn’t noticed she wasn’t looking at him until she did, eyes wide, red-rimmed.

“I don’t think we should,” he said quietly.

He couldn’t not tell her. Well, he could, if he wanted to. He could keep it a secret and take it to his grave, and he would, to anyone else. But not to her. He couldn’t lie to her, he didn’t want to.

He would stick up to his choice.

“What? What are you talking about? Is it because of your parents? Or the Hokage? What did they say? We can… we can be sneaky about this you know. We just have to not get caught again.”

“That’s not what I’m saying, I… I just don’t… I spoke to Naruto, you know. We talked, and… and he, I mean…”

“What?”

Her voice was harsher now, and maybe she had an inkling, maybe she had guessed already. Still, he needed to tell her.

“You know why he left! Don’t you understand?”

“So what? That doesn’t mean it was the right thing to do! Or the smart one!”

“But that’s his choice. He made his decision and we should…”

“No, no! It was a stupid choice! Don’t tell me… we need to protect him, we need to…”

“You can’t protect people against their will!”

She didn’t have an answer to that, although she looked like she wanted to disagree anyway. Her expression closed off as she stared at him, scrutinizing.
"You let him go. Didn’t you?"

It was easier than if he had to spell it out himself, but it was hard still, to nod, to confirm that he had betrayed his words, gone against her. But he didn’t regret it. No matter how much he wished things had gone differently, there was no other choice to make then but to stay silent and let Naruto turn away.

“It was… Sakura, the pain of it, if he’d gone back… it wasn’t worth it.”

Sasuke was ready to pay the price, so that their friend would stay by their side. But he couldn’t ask Naruto to pay for it too. It wasn’t fair on him, on any of them.

It wasn’t worth the hatred it would brew between them.

“I should have gone in your place,” she asserted, vindictive.

“You wouldn’t have convinced him.”

He wouldn’t let her tell him he had just failed where she wouldn’t have. This wasn’t about that. In the end, it wasn’t about them.

“You don’t know that.”

“He was never going to come back, Sakura!”

“And what now!” she screamed, standing up to get in his face. “What now, Sasuke! Are we supposed to just give up? Give up on him? Are we supposed to wait, wait to hear from him someday, wait for a message to announce that he has been found dead somewhere and that we can go and collect his corpse? Or should we just forget about him altogether?”

She was shaking badly, her whole body tense. Anger morphed into anguish as she kept screaming, until she was sobbing around her words.

Sasuke was getting choked up too.

What now indeed? If they weren’t going after him, was there nothing more to do? Was it over?

“Of course we won’t just forget him. We just… He’ll be back. He’ll be back.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I’ll make it so that he does. You’ll see.”

“I can’t just wait and do nothing.”

Sasuke was already redirecting all his thoughts and plans to something else, already forcing his mind away from his friend, since he was powerless in the face of his absence. But Sakura wouldn’t let go so easily.

"I'm sorry," he said again.

She cried.

.

It made sense, not to dedicate too many resources to find Naruto, knowing that he had gone to
Orochimaru and that Orochimaru had managed to hide from all the shinobi villages for a solid
decade. It made so much sense that Tsunade even managed to convince the senior jounin and clan
leaders of it, and have them agree that setting this as their spy network top priority and sending
Jiraiya and just a few other teams on the boy’s tail was enough for now. As long as the news of
Naruto’s departure stayed under wrap, they were safe from an opportunist attack, and from other
parties going after the boy. They would only betray themselves if they launched after him on a
larger scale.

It all made sense, and it worked, even if it wasn’t anywhere close to Tsunade’s reasoning.

It went as such – Naruto was right to want out, and she couldn’t bring herself to try and go against
that.

She had done just that herself, years ago. Simply high tail far away from that place, and it had done
her a world of good, at least for a while. Despite how it weakened Konoha, despite the danger
Naruto was now into, despite her fears of Orochimaru and what he could do to him, she couldn’t
begrudge the boy. They were only reaping what they had sowed, and she had a feeling the other
shinobi knew it too. They had all thought he wouldn’t snap, despite the constant push. They had all
been wrong.

They would deal with the consequences.

One of them being, surprisingly enough, the genin’s mutiny.

This one she had not seen coming. She was used to the bonds between teammates, but she had
never witnessed before those bonds being put over the shinobi discipline and the good of the
village so easily. Be it Haruno Sakura or the small Uchiha, or even that crafty Yamanaka girl and
her adopted brother from Root, there had been no hesitation before the facts, and no remorse after.

Naruto’s teammates knew who he was and about his position in the village, Kakashi had
confirmed. Yet it hadn’t factored at all in their thought process, in their decision to keep his escape
a secret and try to deal with it themselves.

She was supposed to punish them for this, but it would be ineffective or even harmful –
punishment only worked if it was understood, and they wouldn’t understand it because they didn’t
think they had done anything wrong.

And how could she convince them, when she wasn’t herself?

“Yeah, who would have thought they had it in them,” Jiraiya said casually as he followed her down
the corridor of the hospital. He had insisted to come with her to see Sasuke, for some reason.
Curiosity mostly, if she had to bet.

“You say that like you know anything about them.”

“I realize I know even less than I thought I did. Kids these days are… different.”

Jiraiya, Orochimaru and she had been mischievous kids too, but it never spilled over their duty as
shinobi, certainly never led them to disobedience and defiance. War raged most of their lives,
being dissident was never an option. Even Orochimaru had been a traitor in a servile way – by
using orders to his advantage, ignoring the rules he didn’t want to follow but always making sure
someone could back him up on it.

They had let teammates die on the battlefield. They had abandoned fallen friends to their fate. They
had put themselves and others in danger for the good of their mission. It was their duty as shinobi,
as soldiers.

But what were soldiers outside of war? What were those kids they trained to fight and kill but kept questioning everything instead?

She was aware it scared a lot of the older generation. But to her…

That change, she wanted to believe it wasn’t a bad thing.

Such were her reflections when she stepped into Sasuke’s room the second time. Shizune had insisted he stayed in the hospital for another night, but there was nothing to be worried about regarding his health. That wasn’t why she was visiting him.

Sakura was there, looking unhappy and tense. The air was charged between them, the silence thick and heavy. The girl immediately drew closer to her friend when they spotted her though, almost as a shield, as Sasuke sat up straighter, assessing.

A team, no doubt about that, even with the tension between them.

“Hello kids. Everything alright?”

They exchanged a glance and nodded in unison. They were terrible at looking inconspicuous, but it wasn’t that relevant when she knew they would just keep their mouth shut if they didn’t want to talk. It didn’t matter knowing they were hiding something, if there was no way to make them spill.

She hoped they would talk to her though. Hoped Sasuke could tell her the truth.

“Little Sasuke!” Jiraiya exclaimed, claiming their attention. “I have a proposition for you.”

The “little” wasn’t much appreciated but the boy stayed stoic, waiting. Tsunade had been surprised to discover that out of the three Sanin, she was the one the younger generation knew the most about, despite her long absence. Or maybe because of it – there had been plenty of time to embellish her legend, while the two others worked actively to do the opposite.

It was still funny to see how little recognition Jiraiya got. He brought it upon himself really, yet he still played the wounded act every time, as if it was surprising.

The kids’ face right now, full of suspicion and barely disguised contempt – no doubt reminiscing of their first encounter with that idiot – was worth the trip alone.

“I’ll be leaving the village soon, to gather intel, travel the great countries, and I had half a mind of taking in an apprentice. I thought about taking Naruto but…”

They scoffed at that, cutting him off. She didn’t, but it was a close thing.

“What? What did I say?”

“Naruto would have never gone with you,” the girl exacted, forceful.

“Oh come on, you don’t know that.”

“He didn’t trust anyone, especially not adults. He would have ditched you as soon as you stepped out of the village.”

They seemed to be taking great offense at the proposition, displeased that anyone would be so callous to their approach of the boy. Jiraiya really didn’t know them at all.
“Anyway,” he dismissed quickly, “since that’s obviously off the table, I’m extending the offer to you Sasuke.”

“Me? Why?”

“You’re not half bad from what I’ve heard. And we’d be looking for Naruto, among other things. Figured that would interest you.”

Jiraiya thought Sasuke was like him. That their situation was similar, both of them running after their missing teammate.

Except Sasuke was nothing like her old friend. From what she understood of the boy, he had a very strong sense of justice and responsibilities, and if what she suspected was right, about how things had gone down between him and Naruto, then there was no way he would accept this proposition.

And indeed…

“Thank you, but I must decline. I’m not going after him. And I already have a teacher.”

She raised an eyebrow at that, even if he didn’t glance at her saying it.

“No you don’t,” Jiraiya said. “I checked. Come on, come with me! It’ll be fun. And there are many things I can teach you.”

That was about the only argument that could work on the boy, but he had his own plans already, and wouldn’t be swayed. Instead of arguing further though, he looked at Sakura.

“You could go,” he said, voice low to give an illusion of privacy, even if both adults could hear them plain as day.

“What?”

“You would be looking. And training too.”

“But I… I can’t. I…”

“You can. You… You, you don’t have to stay here.”

It could have been dismissive if there wasn’t a form of longing in the boy’s voice. Sakura was free of many burdens befalling the kids from the shinobi clans. Even if he wanted to go, there was little chance Fugaku would agree to it, but Sakura didn’t hold any kind of position that would make her absence an issue.

“Wait a moment, that’s not what I was offering,” Jiraiya said, a little panicked. They ignored him.

“That… could be good,” Sakura admitted, considering.

“I was asking Sasuke!”

“Sasuke already has a teacher,” Tsunade claimed.

They turned to her, puzzled. She held Sasuke’s gaze and found that as impulsive a decision it was, it felt like the right one.

“It won’t be any fun. But I’ll take you, if you’re still up to it,” she told the boy. He nodded seriously.
“I am. Thank you. I won’t disappoint you.”

So serious, that boy, so solemn. It was a bit unsettling, that this wouldn’t even win her a smile, some satisfaction, some pride. But she imagined it was just a small step for him. An important one, but just the one nonetheless. He was already looking ahead.

She was reluctant because he was the son of the Uchiha’s clan head, but it was clear enough that he gave it little importance. It wasn’t about that, for him.

She wanted to see where his will would take him.

“What do I get a say in this?” Jiraiya lamented.

“No. You want a student? Take the girl, if she’s up for it,” Tsunade commanded, voice firm. Sakura wouldn’t have the most pleasant time, traveling with him, but he could teach her things no one else could. She had the potential, Tsunade was sure of it.

She also had the sensation that Sakura would only stew in her own rancor if she stayed here without a clear goal in mind. Sasuke had his. She needed one too.

“You really think it’s a good idea?” Sakura asked her friend, insecurity and doubts piercing through her voice. It was his opinion that mattered to her, not theirs.

“You said it yourself, if we want to know… At least this way, you’ll… you’ll be a little closer, you know. Closer than we are here.”

Tsunade was impressed at their awareness, at how seriously they took those issues, how thoughtful they were of each other. She didn’t remember being that articulated when she was their age.

But wasn’t she, weren’t they? Didn’t they do their best, Jiraiya and she, to keep Orochimaru company and shield him from the derogatory opinions of the villagers, hyper-aware of his grief and feelings of inadequacy? Didn’t she make sure to praise Jiraiya to counter the reproaches and disappointments of their teachers when he failed to keep up with the rest of them? And didn’t they make it a point to treat her with as little deference as possible, countering all the others kissing her feet because she was the princess, the granddaughter of the Hokage, and they knew how much she hated it?

Didn’t they always take care of each other, as kids? When was that lost, when did they stop?

“I’ll have to discuss it with my parents,” she said eventually, looking stunned at her own words, “But I would like to go.”

“Well…”

“Take the girl, Jiraiya,” Tsunade said forcefully, in no mood for her friend’s antics. It was high time he passed down his knowledge, and Sakura would make for a great student, Tsunade was sure of it.

“Fine,” Jiraiya agreed with a sigh, sensing she wasn’t to be trifled with at the moment. It was rude of him to look so annoyed by the idea, but Sakura didn’t seem to care either way. Maybe she was used to this, to being disregarded, overlooked. She had determination though, didn’t seem too attached to what others thought of her, as long as she had the approval of her friends. She would need to keep at it, with all the bullshit this world would throw at her.

The atmosphere had eased, when she stepped out of the room. Their bond was strong – it would
survive this, and the rest too surely.

“They know him well,” Jiraiya said, pensive. “Naruto, I mean.”

“They’re very close.”

“He still left.”

He was thinking about them, she knew. About their own team, their own choices.

“Just like we did.”

Her, running away, Jiraiya, chasing his dream around, Orochimaru, turning his back on it all. Their friendship, their love, it was strong, but not strong enough to go against that.

“Who will you send out? Apart from me.”

She rolled with the change of subject – she wasn’t up for any more introspection either.

“Not sure yet, but I’m on it. I’ll let you know.”

She was on her way to deal with this right then, if her words had been heeded.

They had, for Anko was waiting in her office when she went back to the Hokage Tower, spread out on the couch and ostensibly improper, ferocious scowl on her face.

She had to be wondering what the hell she was doing here. Tsunade wondered too. But she had been turning it over in her head ever since the woman had walked out of her office with poorly disguised rage, and she needed to set this right. She didn’t even know why. But out of the whole village, Anko was the only one, the only one who could understand, and Tsunade needed her to. Jiraiya didn’t count, because Jiraiya didn’t carry the guilt with it, shameless even in this.

She walked to the couch and fell gracelessly at Anko’s side. The woman quickly recovered from her surprise and subconsciously moved away, folding tighter around herself so that they wouldn’t touch.

“I imagine you heard by now, that Naruto left.”

“I heard.”

“It’s more than likely he ran to Orochimaru, wherever he is.”

Tsunade was looking at the ceiling, slumped backward on the couch. She could only see Anko from the corner of her eye, see her stiffen and straighten, angry façade fading to sharp concern.

That at least hadn’t made the round of the shinobi circles then. Tsunade trusted them to be careful with the information, but a little extra threatening wouldn’t hurt, probably. She’d set Shizune on it.

“What?”

“That’s what he hinted at when I met him at the bathhouse. That’s probably why he came, even. To tempt the boy away. Not that he had much work to do.”

From what Sakura had told them, Naruto had had the idea long in his mind. But Orochimaru had a knack for offering opportunity, for dangling promises of exactly what people wanted.
“And?” Anko asked, aggression back, or defensiveness maybe. “Why are you telling me that?”

“Would you know how he could guide him? Lead the boy to him?”

She had been too direct. Anko recoiled.

“Why, because you think I’m in contact with him? I visit every Sunday for lunch? We send each other postcards?”

“Anko…”

“Isn’t that what you think?”

“No it’s not!”

“Then why?”

Tsunade sat up, only to rest her forehead on her hands this time, elbows digging into her laps.

“Do you think I was that out of line? You lied. You hid the truth, a truth that could have had this whole thing turn out much differently, had you disclosed it sooner. You disobeyed. And for what?”

Anko didn’t answer. She had to know she was in the wrong – that’s why she was so angry. It was easier than recognizing her fault, admitting she had made a mistake. Tsunade was familiar with the pattern.

“For what, Anko?” she pressed.

“I have to be the one to kill him. It has to be me.”

“Is that it?”

She knew it was sort of cruel, to try and make her say it. But she couldn’t say it first.

“What did you think I would have done, Anko? Had you reported it to me?”

The woman bit her lips, looked away. She was digging her nails into her palm – Tsunade resisted the urge to reach out and smooth her fingers out, figuring it would be ill-received.

“It has to be me,” she repeated.

"And he has to live if it's not?"

“That’s-!”

Anko glared at her before spinning away again, frustrated at being so transparent. Why couldn’t she understand? If Tsunade knew, if she could see through her, it was because they were the same.

“I wouldn’t have done it. What you think I was going to.”

“And what would that be?” Anko sneered.

“I wouldn’t have ordered his death. Not right away.”

Anko met her eyes again then, puzzled, searching. Tsunade submitted to the scan, wishing for the girl to understand, so that she wouldn’t have to say more. But Anko wasn’t one to trust easily, especially not words unspoken. Tsunade exhaled slowly, looking for strength.
“I don’t… despite everything, despite… I don’t. I don’t wish for his death.”

“I do!” Anko exclaimed, jumping from the couch, agitated. “He deserves to die!”

“I know. That’s not what I said.”

Anko stared down at her, fists tightly wounded, and Tsunade wondered if she would hit her.

“I know it’s the only outcome. For all he’s done, all the people he killed and hurt, and the pain he caused and the laws he broke, he will receive death or life in prison, should we ever manage to catch him. That’s what has to be done, and I will see to it.”

She knew where her duty laid. And yet…

“And yet,” she went on, calm only in appearance as she went for a confession she was deeply ashamed of, hoping Anko could receive it, hoping she would understand. “That’s not what I want.”

Anko dropped to her knees.

She folded over as if all her strings had been cut, hitting the floor with a painful thud she probably didn’t notice. Tsunade received her as she toppled over, rested a hand in her hair as Anko pressed her forehead into her lap, fisting at her haori.

“I’m sorry,” she said, sobbing. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry…”

“It’s okay,” Tsunade countered, matching each and every one. “It’s okay, it’s okay.”

Tsunade didn’t know much of Anko’s childhood, but as far as she could tell, Orochimaru had been the very first person to show any interest in the girl. Had taken her under his wing and taught her, as he very well knew how to do. He was indubitably the best teacher out of the three of them, if he had students willing to learn from him in unconventional ways. She knew he enjoyed it – she knew he suffered from how few those students were.

No wonder why Anko had latched onto the man, no wonder why she had been so devoted to him. No wonder why his betrayal had hurt her so much.

No wonder why it hadn’t been enough to sever the link completely.

And she probably hated herself for it, for missing it still, despite everything, for being unable to let go of those feelings. Sadly it wasn’t so easy as to simply wish for it.

Maybe it hadn’t even been a conscious decision, but she had kept Orochimaru’s intrusion to herself in fear that his fate would escape her, that she would come back to report and learn that he had been taken care of already, without being able to confront him, without being there. Without any form of closure.

That wound hadn’t healed at all. At most scabbed over, torn open again at the first jab. It would never disappear completely, but maybe it would stop hurting her so much, eventually.

“I need you to look for him, Anko. Not for revenge, not out of some misplaced sense of guilt. Look for him so that we know where to find him, so that we’re not so helpless to the threat he represents. And to rescue Naruto, if he can’t escape his clutches.”

“I don’t care about the boy,” Anko mumbled. Tsunade chuckled.

“I know you don’t. I’m not asking you to.”
She didn’t care about Naruto, and she didn’t care about the jinchuuriki either. She had to be of those who didn’t even understand the point, who thought they could very well do without the Tailed Beasts. It was a good thing, in Tsunade’s book.

“Look for him so that you can find peace, Anko.”

The girl looked up then, eyes and face red, looking doubtful. She was resigned to never get over this, but she didn’t have to be.

“Don’t go alone,” Tsunade added after a while. “Take someone you can trust. Someone who can help you.”

“I will, Tsunade-hime.”

It felt like absolution.

““What are you going to do now?”

Tenzo wasn’t one to shy away from the tough questions, to Kakashi’s dismay. He was right to ask though – what would he do? His team was gone, spectacularly so. Sakura soon to be off with Jiraiya, Sasuke under Tsunade’s tutelage, and Naruto…

“Well. I’m still in the roster of the jounin instructors. Aren't some kids graduating soon?”

Tenzo didn’t hide his surprise. Kakashi had made no secret of how little on board he was with the whole training-his-own-team thing. Seeing how it had gone the last time, he could say his instincts had been spot on.

And yet…

“It can only get better from here,” he commented casually.

Maybe it was his masochist tendencies acting up. But he wanted to give it another try. To do better.

Those kids, they needed someone on their side. And Kakashi realized he was, much more than he had thought. Team 7 had blown up in his face, but somehow they had given him hope too.

He would be on the right side this time.

“What about you?”

“Working on it.”

“Does that have to do with the reason why we’ve been lurking around the Hokage Tower for more than an hour?”

Tenzo ignored him and jumped from the bench they had been sprawled on, to walk toward the Tower entrance.

Anko was just getting out, Uchiha Izumi trailing behind them.

Kakashi joined them, although he didn’t know why he was even here. He suspected Tenzo only needed some form of moral support, as he addressed Anko unprompted for the first time in their life.
“I heard about your mission,” he stated, a little too forceful. It wasn’t anything official, but they all knew she was going after Orochimaru.

“So?”

“I was hoping you would agree to me joining you.”

His face stayed impassive, but Anko was plenty expressive for them both, her whole face scrunching up in a complicated mix of incredulity and suspicion. Kakashi wasn’t faring much better, but no one could see his face.

“Seriously?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Tenzo didn’t answer, but Anko didn’t look like she expected him to. She crossed her arms and looked him up and down, assessing.

“If it’s okay with my girl Izumi.”

Izumi flushed and sputtered, surprised to be drawn into it, but managed to convey her agreement. Anko grinned at her, though it grew sharp when she turned back to Tenzo.

“We’re not chasing retribution,” she said, a little threatening.

“That’s not what I’m after.”

What were they after, really? Maybe they didn’t know themselves. Hopefully, they would find out.

And found the rogue Sanin too.

“I’ll think about it,” Anko said. “I’ll let you know.”

They watched the girls go, Anko’s casual voice too loud to be genuine, for she had to be as thrown off by this as Kakashi was.

“Are you sure about this, Tenzo?” he asked, hoping his friend would hear his concern, not his reluctance to see him leave too, though there was a bit of both in his worried tone.

Tenzo nodded firmly.

“We have to move forward.”

They could agree on that.

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The last time Sakura had packed a bag, they were heading to Wave Country for a mundane escort mission.

She had packed with care, anxious to be prepared for anything that could happen. It had been in vain.
Now she faced a much longer journey, and she couldn’t think of a single thing she could put in her bag.

She kept seeing Naruto, in this exact situation a few days ago, except it was much more straightforward for him. Since he wasn’t coming back at all.

What did he take? What was in his bag? Most of his clothes were gone, which wasn’t much. His scrolls and calligraphy set.

His team picture.

She stared at hers, propped on her desk. But she wasn’t running away like he was. Her home was still here. She would be back.

She left it where it was.

“Is that all you’re taking with you?” her mother worried when she saw her coming down from her bedroom with her backpack.

“I don’t know how long I’ll be gone.”

That had been a bitter argument. She didn’t expect them to understand, but at least they had resolved to trust her with her own choices. That didn’t mean they had to like it. Her mother was making an effort to be okay with it, but her father was still angry at her for leaving.

The more she thought about it though, the more she felt it was the right thing to do.

She couldn’t stay idle, stay in the village to train and go on meaningless missions when Naruto was out there with who knew what threat after him. Sasuke was set on his path – she trusted him to keep to it, and she understood even, where he was coming from and where he was going.

But she didn’t have the patience for it. She would leave the inner workings to him.

And beyond this, beyond the need to get stronger and try, in whatever way she could, to close the distance between Naruto and them, she was just plain excited by the journey to come. The new towns and countries, new landscapes and people. She would see it all, learn it all.

“Well. I’m off then.”

It was a bad omen for family members to see shinobi to the gates, so she hugged her mother in the middle of the kitchen and crossed the threshold with decisive steps. His father was tending to the garden. She almost thought he would ignore her, but he rose to hug her too, without a word and despite his disapproval. Her eyes welled a little, from relief mostly – she had feared he would be too angry to say goodbye.

She left the house without looking back.

Ino was waiting for her in the street. They fell into steps as they made their way to the western gate, so many words to be said that stayed stuck at the doors of her lips, clogging her throat.

Just before they reached the main street, Ino tugged at her arm and crushed her in her embrace.

“Stay safe, cherry pie. Don’t be too long.”

Sakura couldn’t get a word out before Ino had disappeared down the street, leaving Sakura alone and little lost.
Ino understood, but she was mad still. Sakura hoped she wouldn’t be too cross with her.

The old man Jiraiya was waiting at the gate already, looking like he was considering leaving without her but held off by Kakashi. The little she had seen of him didn’t make her like him much, but it didn’t matter. He was one of the Sanin, one of the most powerful shinobi of the village, and its best spy. She would learn all she could from him, no matter his faults.

Sasuke was there too.

It was another reason why it was a good thing that she was leaving. Things were awkward between them, and it wasn’t something that would be easily resolved. She couldn’t help but resent him, even if he had done his best, even if he had been right, probably, to make the choices he had. She couldn’t forgive him so easily, but it was something she had to deal with on her own. To try to understand, to make peace with the things they couldn’t change. She didn’t want to be mad at him.

And she only added to his own guilt. It would be better for them both, to be apart for a while, even if she dreaded it. It had been the three of them for years, and now? Now it would be only one, each at one corner of the world, apart, alone.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

She didn’t want them to part on bad terms.

“I’ll write to you.”

He looked surprised, and she berated herself. He thought she was angry with him, but she wasn’t, not really. It wasn’t him, or not just him anyway. She was angry with Naruto too, with herself, with her parents and Sasuke’s parents and the others’, with the Hokage and the jounin, with the whole village really.

How ironic, to start to get what Naruto was feeling only now. But the idea of walking the streets of Konoha, knowing they were so unbearable to him that he had gone despite the friends he had here, and knowing so little cared, that many were probably happy about it, that they had been waiting for it, knowing every single person in the village was to blame, in a way, for all this…

She had to get away.

“I’ll be waiting,” he said, and something eased inside her chest, because they would be waiting for each other. No matter how far apart, no matter how long the time. She would think of her friends and they would think of her. She would never be alone.

They hugged tight, a little too tight maybe, a little desperate. It was stupid to feel so sad, so torn, when this was her choice, this was what she wanted.

“Oi, girl! Let’s go!”

She rolled her eyes and stepped away, glaring at the impatient man already past the gates. She kissed Sasuke’s cheek, smiled even though his face was a little blurred.

“Take care.”

“You too. I’ll be here when you come back.”
That was a promise.

She turned to Kakashi. She bowed to him, a little awkward.

“Thank you for everything, sensei.”

“I leave you in good care, Sakura. I know you’ll do great.”

He ruffled her hair with a gentle smile and she couldn’t resist – she wrapped her arms around his middle, only for a moment, before turning on her heels.

She took a deep breath. One step, too.

She left Konoha. So easily, when it had been such a huge deal for Naruto. Another thing to be angry about. Had it been that easy for him, he wouldn’t have wanted it so badly.

But that would change. Sasuke would see to it, and she would too.

She caught up to Jiraiya, who was much taller and thus walked much faster than her. He rummaged around his pockets before handing her a seal tag without looking back.

“Here, take this.”

“What is it?”

“Tracking seal. In case we lose sight of each other.”

She had a presentiment that he would get lost a lot more than she did. She took the seal, couldn’t help noticing how inelegant it was compared to Naruto’s work, and went to put it in her weapon pouch.

Her fingers brushed against an unfamiliar scroll.

She only had one storage scroll, stashed at the bottom because she rarely used it, and this wasn’t the one. It wasn’t hers at all.

It was Naruto’s.

She unrolled it with trembling fingers and recognized his storage seal. Chakra activated, his favorite – no one could open them but the ones they were designed for.

Could it be…

“Open”, she whispered brushing chakra to the seal. It broke into a ray of light through which grew the handle of a sword. She grabbed it, pulled.

Pulled, pulled, pulled.

The tip was broken flat, but it was still as long as her. Still as deadly looking as when she had last seen it, laying next to Momochi Zabuza’s corpse.

There was no doubt. It was his sword.

She stared at it dumbly. Jiraiya did too, before deciding that he didn’t want to deal with it probably, as he shrugged and resumed walking.
She looked back at the gate. Sasuke and Kakashi were far away already, but not so far that she
couldn’t make out their wide eyes and gaping mouth.

She couldn’t help but laugh.

She touched the tip to the storing seal, and it went dutifully back to it, finding its place in her
weapon pouch where Naruto had undoubtedly slipped it before taking off. The sword was terribly
heavy – she would need a lot of extra muscle strength to wield it.

She couldn’t wait.

Sakura’s silhouette had just disappeared that another team arrived at the gates.

Izumi was leaving on a long mission too, with Mitarashi Anko and that friend of Kakashi, Tenzo.
Sasuke knew it had to be related to Naruto and where he had run off to, but since it was inevitable
that they send someone after him, he figured it could have been worse. Izumi he trusted, at least.

“Good luck,” Kakashi told them, solemn. Anko waved it off, dismissive.

“No time for the sap. We’re off.”

“Take care,” Sasuke said to Izumi, low so that the scary woman wouldn’t hear him. Izumi beamed
at him and smacked a kiss to his forehead. Soon enough they were gone too.

“Aren’t you wanted at the hospital, Sasuke?” Kakashi said, smile franker this time. Sasuke
answered to it, grateful for the levity. With this, their team was officially done for, but the man
didn’t seem bitter about it. It’s not like they wouldn’t see each other again anyway.

The two of them at least would remain in the village.

“You’re right.”

There was no time to waste lamenting and longing, even if he missed his two friends already. He
had a lot of work to do.

It made sense to learn medical ninjutsu, if he wanted to get as close to the Hokage as possible, but
beyond that, he could hardly think of a skill that mattered more, despite his father’s opinion. He
knew plenty of fighting already and would learn plenty more, but this was what could make the
difference. Healing, keeping life going. So that they were a little less scared of death.

He went to the Godaime’s office, mostly occupied by Shizune, he would learn, as her mentor was
kept busy by her responsibilities as Hokage. Shizune wasn’t in this time though, nor was the
Godaime. Instead there was a dark-skinned man in the medic-nin coat rearranging papers around
the office, who jumped when Sasuke cleared his throat to make his presence known.

“Oh, hello! You must be Sasuke, right? Starting today on the medic-nin training?”

Sasuke nodded, a little shy suddenly in the face of the first life choice he was making on his own,
the first step in this path of his own making.

“I’m Marco. Tsunade asked me to show you around today.”

Dumbly enough, Sasuke didn’t get immediately that the “Tsunade” he was mentioning was the
Godaime. That man had to be important despite his young age, to refer to her so casually.
“We’re just waiting for the other one.”

“Other one?”

“Yes. The other one starting today. Ah, that must be him.”

It was either a sixth sense or simply the results of years upon years of leaving under the same roof, but Sasuke knew who it was before turning around to see him.

“Itachi?”

Sage gave him strength.

Itachi bowed lightly to the other man who blushed a little, embarrassed at the display – they were about the same age.

“Is there a problem?” he asked, sensing the tension. Itachi turned to Sasuke, face open, questioning.

“Sasuke?”

The question was for him, he realized, and Itachi was seriously asking. Was there a problem? There shouldn’t have been. If he was honest, it made sense for Itachi to turn to medical ninjutsu, he who didn’t want to fight anymore, he who wanted to make amends for… whatever it was he felt guilty about.

It wasn’t a problem. They could train in the same field. It didn’t matter. Sasuke was past all this. Wasn’t he?

“No. No problem.”

If he wasn’t, he would have to be soon.

“Alright,” Marco said, not overly involved in the question anyway. “Follow me then.”

. 

The fox popped in quietly, in a secluded part of the garden invisible from the rest of the Hyuuga Estate.

“That’s for you,” it said, handing Neji a paper seal marked with an ink snake. Neji smeared a few drops of blood on it, just to make sure it would work. It did.

"Naruto will keep his word," the fox said fiercely, as if offended that Neji could think otherwise.

But despite what common sense would dictate, Neji didn’t. He knew next to nothing of Naruto, and the leverage granted by the seal in his hands was tenuous, yet he didn’t doubt. When Naruto had offered that time, had talked about freedom during the Chunin exam, it wasn’t to gain anything from it, it wasn’t empty words either.

“He just needs some time.”

Neji nodded. He had waited years, all his life really. He could wait a little more.

Even if it was much harder, now that he knew freedom was within reach.

. 
He ran for two more days before they came to meet him.

“I thought you would have come sooner,” Kabuto said, same pleasant voice and same grating smile. “I lost my bet.”

“You’re obnoxious,” the red-haired girl shot back. “Follow us,” she urged next, turning around without caring if he did indeed.

There was no doubt he would.

They crossed a maze of canyons and a thick forest that explained why this place was so hard to find, until they reached a shrine, engraved with snakes and framing a flight of stairs sinking into the forest ground.

“Welcome to Otogakure, Naruto,” Kabuto said with a smile, gesturing at the gates.

Naruto followed them down.

Chapter End Notes

Rideau!

Well, that's all I have for you now. Don't forget to subscribe to the series if you want to be updated on Part 2. I'm excited to jump in time and have you discover what happened during those two years. I hope you'll stay tuned and you're all ready for another 300k of this nonsense lmao.

I hope you're all taking care in those trying times. See you soon!

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