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Damaetas

by dikeieris
Chapter 1

The Yondaime Hokage had a small shrine in the woods north of Konoha. Jiraiya took Naruto there and sat with him for a long time, both of them silent as they stared up at his picture overlaid on a hanging tapestry woven into the Konoha leaf symbol. The shrine was in a natural grove, with a burbling stream running nearby; it smelled of sweet spring water and the sandalwood incense that visitors lit and left behind.

Engraved on a small rock, in front of the tapestry, were the hand seals that had quieted the kyuubi and killed the Yondaime.

"Orochimaru and I used to come here," Jiraiya said suddenly, "before this was ever a shrine."

He didn't say what they came for. Naruto didn't ask.

He came a few times with Jiraiya, and ran his fingers down the Yondaime's picture. His mirror image smiled back at him from the past.

He sat in front of the rock and memorized the seals.

It was springtime in Konoha, and that meant a new batch of genins had just graduated from the Academy.

And that meant that Tsunade, the fifth Hokage, had to go through every single genin file and decide which jounin teacher would be best suited to which genin.

"I don't even like children," Tsunade said, bending over one file and running her eyes through the statistics: date of birth, height, personal notes, clan allegiance. She sighed, dug her fingers into the spot in her temple that was threatening to throb its way into the next village. "Tell me, why can't I get someone else to do this for me?"

Shizune, not even looking up from cleaning Miss Tonton's hooves, said, "Tsunade-sama, we go over this every year and every year the answer is the same: no one else wants to do it, either."

"But I have assistants!" Tsunade hit the desk for emphasis. "Actually, Shizune, why don't you...."

"I don't want to," said Shizune, "and Naruto's not really suited to this. He always manages to get sent away on missions right around academy graduation, anyway."

"He's gotten smarter," Tsunade sighed. She massaged the ache, using her other hand to spread out the files so she could see all the genin at once. There was a minor Aburame, a Hyuga from the Branch House, an Inuzuka and many more from smaller clans.

"By the way, Tsunade-sama, were you going to give him some genin students this year?"

"Eh?" Tsunade paused, one file in hand. "A genin team? For Naruto?"

"He's twenty," said Shizune, lifting up Miss Tonton and perking her ears. "He's been old enough for a team for two years now."

Tsunade turned back to the files and frowned. "I've never considered him ready." But maybe, she admitted, that was unfair; Uzumaki Naruto was one of Konoha's elite, and he'd come a long way
from his bumbling twelve-year-old antics. "I'll consider it, certainly. If he could manage to keep himself interested, he has some valuable insights and moves to pass down."

Shizune laughed, Miss Tonton snorting right along with her. "What, like the Sexy no Jutsu? Ahhh, that one gets Jiraiya-sama every time!"

"Yes, well." Tsunade marked six files: For Consideration. "It's not hard to get that man's attention."

"What?"

The young man leaning over the Hokage's desk didn't look remarkable. He showed no obvious clan affiliation, and his coloring was wrong as well: most of the major clans in Konoha produced dark-haired, pale-skinned children, and this man sported a dark tan and sun-bleached yellow hair. His chuunin uniform was unkept, scratched and spotted with different stains. His most noticeable trait was that he couldn't seem to keep still: he kept moving around, tapping his feet, running his hands across the desk or folding them, then dropping them to his sides.

"Listen, old hag," and that was another mark of distinction: there was a total lack of reverence towards the number one ninja in the country, the physical and spiritual leader of his village. "You can't stick me with a group of little kids! I told you when I got old enough, I didn't want one! Do you know how much this is going to cut back on my mission eligibility?"

"Naruto," said Tsunade, folding her hands on her desk, "every jounin must train at least one genin team, you know that. What makes you think you're exempt?"

"Your promise," Naruto shot back, folding his arms, tapping his foot and then dropping his hands to the desk. "You said I didn't have to train a team if I didn't want to."

"I said that when you were eighteen. You're twenty now and more than ready to take on the responsibility."

"I don't want it! I ain't a good teacher anyway." Naruto tossed his head, the thin braid spouting from his hair hitting his back with the movement. "I'd probably just get them killed."

"Well, being a genin is dangerous business." Tsunade pursed her lips, obviously unwilling to give in. She opened a drawer and pulled out three thin files, handing them to Naruto with little fanfare. "Tomorrow is the jounin teachers' meeting--nine in the morning, *sharp,* Naruto. You get your assignments, I tell you the protocol, you study them for the rest of the day and make preparations and do what I tell you. And then, they're all yours." She sat back in her seat and raised her eyebrows. "Any questions?"

"Yeah. When can I get rid of them?"

"Goodbye, Naruto," said Tsunade, giving him a push towards the door.

A genin team. Naruto checked his watch: it was already well into the evening, which meant he'd gotten back later than he'd thought he would. It had been a run-of-the-mill, mediocre B mission, but at the last moment the client had fussed about the fees and they'd spent nearly an hour wrangling prices with him. He sighed and turned, resting his back against the railing of the bridge. The sun was setting-- Jeez. The Ichiraku would be closing soon.
Sticking his hands in his pockets, Naruto pushed himself off the bridge and started jogging in the direction of the ramen shop. A genin team, he thought, and twisted his nose at the idea. Three snotty-nosed little brats to take care of. He knew he'd been that age once, but he'd gotten over it; he'd kind of had to, what with everything that had been going on when he was still a genin.

A lot of responsibility had been entrusted to him. Naruto ducked his head down and laughed at himself. Lighten up, Uzumaki; not like you ever took it seriously. He still tried not to. Take things too seriously, and you go fucking crazy, end up in some white-walled madhouse somewhere.

"Ah, Naruto-kun!" said the Ichikaru's owner, beaming at him as he slid into his normal seat. "Let me guess–miso ramen, right?"

Naruto flashed him two thumbs up, and grinned. "You've got me pegged, boss."

His food was ready in minutes, and Ayame, the ramen girl, leaned over the counter as he dug in, clicking his chopsticks noisily. "So how was your mission, Naruto? Did you beat up any bad guys? Save the village from evildoers?"

"Oh, yeah," he said around a mouthful. "I did some really important stuff. The world will never know how dangerous and hectic it was."

She clapped her hands together and smiled at him. "Boss! I think Naruto here deserves another bowl of ramen, just for keeping us safe in our beds at night." She winked at him.

"Huh!" the boss snorted, turning his back on them and, very surreptitiously, sliding another bowl over to Ayame. She set it in front of him and grinned broadly.

"There you go. Now I can sleep comfortably. It's an important job we do, keeping Naruto fed, right?"

"I'd die without Ichiraku ramen," Naruto agreed, digging in with a warm feeling of bliss in his stomach. Either that or he was full.

"Ah ha! Let me clue you in on a little secret, Naruto." Ayame leaned in close, dark eyes sparkling in the light and teeth shining in a good-humored smile. "Truth is, I think this shop would die without your patronage!"

"Ayame!" the owner growled, tossing something in her direction; she dodged and twirled around, laughing, to throw her arm over his wide shoulders. "Get back to work, you. Naruto-kun, don't listen to this girl, she'll be the death of me."

After two more bowls and a drink warm in his stomach - the boss had started slipping him some sake when he was still sixteen, winking and saying something about the true way of the ninja - Naruto slid his backpack back on, waved goodbye to Ayame and the owner, and started walking through the streets back to his apartment. The sun had set while he'd been cleaning his teeth with his chopsticks, and the light from the torches waved and danced on the ground; every now and then morphing into people who stretched out their arms, or twisted and turned away, and Naruto started stepping carefully around them to keep the shadows whole. It was a game he'd started playing when he was a kid, dodging the shadows; came from one too many sparring matches with Shikamaru, and turned into a healthy respect for the shadows, which were longer and taller than he could ever be. Tricky things they were; if you stepped the wrong way, even to avoid them, they could end up stretching out their long fingers and snatching you.

Sometimes he thought about getting a new apartment, but he'd had this one - dank and dirty as it was
becoming - for years, and it was kind of habit now to jiggle his key extra hard in the lock and jam his foot under the door so it would open; habit to wait until the mold in his bathroom was taking over the floor before he started attacking it with some strong-smelling shit Sakura gave him every Christmas. Naruto didn't like change. He didn't want to switch apartments, he didn't want all the extra responsibility that came with being jounin, and he most definitely did not want genin to train and trip over.

Flipping on the lights, he slid off his backpack and toed off his shoes, inhaling deeply - the whole place smelled like lemon-scented cleaning solvent, a smell he'd gotten used to over the years. A bit further into the place, towards the bedroom, and he tripped on a pile of clothes and nearly fell into another. It was delicate business, walking through his apartment; trip on the wrong pile and you could send everything crashing down. Tonight, though, he was lucky; the two piles only wavered a little, looked like they were thinking about falling and then stayed where they were. Naruto let out a breath, and walked more carefully into his bedroom.

He stopped in front of the mirror, leaned so he could see his reflection by the moonlight and grimaced at himself, showing his teeth in a wide-mouthed 'ahhhhh.' Thoughtfully, he ran a finger over his canines and lifted it up to look at the little cut: it opened, bled a little and then, before the blood began to run down his knuckle, the slit in his skin closed and disappeared as if it'd never been there.

"You, Naruto," he said to his reflection, "are a dirty, dirty guy." He frowned at himself, sniffed under his armpits. Not too bad. Probably couldn't pass in polite company, but enough to make it through the night without grossing himself out. He peeled off the padded chuunin-issue jacket, noting the wears and tears he'd have to fix soon, and hooked his fingers on the hem of the black shirt underneath, mussing his hair and throwing it into the pile of dirty clothes in the corner. He'd been cut, stabbed, and burned on this mission - mostly by an angry kid with a kitchen knife, long story he didn't want anyone hearing - but his skin was smooth, unmarked. He was getting tanner with the summer heat.

Chest bare to the cool breeze from the window, Naruto rolled up his pants until his shins were bare, slid off his socks and, snagging a bag of instant ramen, walked back into the entry way, throwing himself down onto the threadbare couch. The TV was in front of him, looking black and listless and like it wanted to be turned on, but he was out of bad movies and the news wasn't interesting, so he closed his eyes instead.

God damn, it'd been a long day. Suffering through that damn mission, with that stupid rich bitch and her stupid spoiled spawn, and then coming home and having the hag everyone called the Hokage tell him he had to spend the rest of his summer babysitting three kids who probably couldn't tell their asses from their toes. Naruto lifted his hand and started chewing on his nails, tearing off a week's worth of growth as he thought the situation through in his mind.

Okay, Naruto. Focus. It can't be that bad, right? You teach the kids how to throw a knife, how to kill a man, maybe turn them on each other and start some rivalries while you're at it; house train them, make sure they wiped off their dingleberries and unleash them on the world. Hey, it might even be fun! Not for the kids, that was for damn sure, because Naruto himself had gone through all that - A Thousand Years of Pain, a kunai up his ass and a really fuckin' insufferable teammate - and he was damned if he didn't pass on the torture he'd been subjected to. It was kinda like a circle jerk, if you think about it; the old pervert hermit had passed his dirty secrets onto the Yondaime, and the Yondaime had taught Kakashi, and Kakashi had unleashed it all on his unsuspecting genin; and now it was Naruto's turn, and maybe when he was through with them the kids would know a little more about life as a ninja, and someday they'd even surpass him, little doubt. Kids were monsters these days, they really were.
He started on the other hand, a grin lifting up the corners of his mouth. There ya go, Naruto. You're a fun guy, and you can make any bad situation funny. Hey, is that a knife stuck in your thigh or are you just happy to see me? Man, look how many parts that guy exploded into! It's a little like confetti, except pretty much one color instead of, you know, green and purple and blue and orange.

Oh, yeah. Uzumaki Naruto was a resourceful man, and resourceful men thrived in the ninja world. These kids didn't even know what was gonna hit them.

Crossing his ankles and hiking them up on the couch arm, Naruto closed his eyes and grinned to himself. Maybe someday, he'd even thank the old hag for this opportunity.

It was nine o'clock on the dot. Some of the most elite jounin in Konoha - hell, in the whole country - were gathered in Tsunade's office, exchanging gossip about the new genin like a ladies' sewing circle. And one Uzumaki Naruto, chuunin at thirteen, jounin at fifteen, ANBU member for three years, was nowhere to be found.

Tsunade's nails were click-clacking across her table, face smooth, lips pressed together as she presented her best show of patience. Naruto wasn't the only one late; two other jounin were absent, and that was just too many - out of ten teachers - to begin without them.

Sometimes she wondered if the occasional lapse of respect was because she was a woman, or because she was a very attractive woman. And sometimes she just wanted to stick her hand through someone's face or shove their spine to meet their knees. Click, clack; she began drumming harder.

"Suzumu," she said, tone clipped, to a jounin who was taking in breath for another round of gossip. "Would you happen to know why three of your colleagues are missing?"

Suzumu didn't even take time to think. "Well," she said, "Hayashi's alarm never goes off when he sets it to, Rikimaru likes to eat a long breakfast and Naruto is a bit of a dunce?"

Now Tsunade scraped her nails, digging them into the table. She gave Suzumu a tight-lipped smile. "Thank you, Amano-san."

She was beginning to leave gouges in the table when the door banged, and three jounin trooped into the room, the tall, dark Hayashi in front and Naruto heading up from the rear. Only Rikimaru looked remotely remorseful, and none of them looked worried. They merged into the group like they'd done nothing wrong, Naruto's braid swinging merrily as he began to talk to his jounin friend, Jinirou.

Tsunade cleared her throat loudly, and all noise in the room stopped in a single silent. Even the steady hum of thought in the air ceased; the jounin all looked at her, some with raised eyebrows and others with 'What?' written on their faces instead of coming out of their mouths. The three late jounin just stared at her with stone faces.

"Next time," said Tsunade, smiling with her lips closed, "when I say 'sharp,' I mean it in terms of punctuality. I could fry all your balls if I wanted to, and I just might. Now.

"I have given it some time and consideration - it has been three days since the genin graduated - and I have matched each jounin up with three genin. Whether or not you go on to complete their training is mostly up to you, although I would suggest that you train your team if the only reason you wouldn't is because you would rather not." She focused on Naruto for a bare second. "The files are on my desk. Please, come and get them. If you have any questions, ask - I've spent several days with these
genin while they were still in the academy, and I feel I know them fairly well."

The low murmur of voices resumed as the jounin grouped around her desk, searching through the files for their names. Sliding her nails across one, Tsunade handed one folder to Naruto. "Naruto-kun," she said as Naruto slid it under his arm. He turned back to her, head tilted, and she smiled and finished, "Good luck."

"I don't even like kids," Naruto said as they walked out of the building. The sunlight pierced right into the headache he'd sported since this morning, and he rubbed his eye with a grumble. The files were tucked securely under his arm, and the suspense was killing him but damned if he'd open it right now. The cool thing to do was act completely casual.

"Me, either," said Jinirou, who was thumbing through his folder. "Let's see... ah, I got the Hyuga. The one from the Branch House? I'm flattered, honestly."

"Heh!" Naruto snorted and elbowed his ribs. "I hear he's a lost case. Completely suited for the Branch House."

"You heard that from Neji," his friend said mildly. "And that cold bastard thinks if you can't pull off a Kaiten when you're five, you're no good."

"Pshaw. Neji's not really like that anymore. He's mellowed waaaaay the hell out. Turning twenty'll do that to ya."

Junirou, who was thirty, just shook his head. "Hey, look, I'm gonna head over to my place to sort through training regimes, maybe stop by my team's parents' houses. You want to stop over?"

"Nah." Naruto flashed him a smile and held up his hands. "It's off to make me some instant ramen. And then it's time for my afternoon nap."

"Man," Junirou said with a laugh, turning to leave, "I feel sorry for the poor genin on your team. Later."

Naruto looked up at the sky briefly - it was probably eleven or so by now - and thought, for a second, about going to see Sakura, who had had two genin teams in the last two years. She'd bowed out this year to focus more on her studies. Sakura was a good teacher, no doubt about that; she got just the right amount of softness when the kids were down, and knew just when to start the hardass speech. All her genin were very good, on their way to becoming chuunin; 'a little mediocre,' according to Jiraiya, but they'd be decent ninja all the same.

He sighed, pulling on his bangs. Eh, nothin' could be done just standing out here and thinking about it. He might as well just go home and think of something to start their training with a bang.

Maybe literally, he thought with a gleeful smile.

It was early morning - *very* early morning - and Yamanaka Kaiki was not pleased. First of all, he was cold. Second of all, he was wet. Third, he was naked.

"Hey!" he hollered, wading through the lake with what felt like legs of mush in a futile chase after his faster and smaller opponent. "You asshole, get back here with my clothes! Bastard!"
"Come and get them," his opponent sang back, and Kaiki decided right then and there that he hated everyone in the world and wanted them to die. Brutally.

So, just because he was wet, naked, and feeling really frustrated, he tossed a kunai. He didn't *know* it would hit, he hadn't even been looking. He thought the stupid bastard would dodge. But the stupid bastard was, after all, well - stupid - and he hadn't dodged anything Kaiki had thrown at him since they were in kindergarten together. Kaiki should have kept that in mind.

"OW!" Anshirou Nagi hollered. "Son of a bitch, you stuck a kunai in my ass!"

Kaiki finally waded his way out of the lake and stood on the bank, pressing his hands over his privates so the girl standing a few feet away wouldn't be able to see - well, dammit, it was cold and he was wet and now was not the best time his manly equipment had ever seen. Hunching down, he craned his neck around so he could see: yup. He really had stuck a kunai in Nagi's ass.

And he was still naked, dammit. "Give me my clothes," Kaiki demanded, holding out a hand.

"Get this out of my ass first, dimwit!" Nagi said through gritted teeth. He looked like a cornered porcupine, all flashing teeth and prickly hair.

"You get it out yourself, I ain't touchin' it. Now give me my fuckin' clothes!"

Nagi threw them in his face, and Kaiki pulled his shorts and shirt on with shivering fingers. Tying his forehead protector tight, he said, "You dummy, you deserved this, you really did."

"What the *hell* is this?"

Kaiki didn't really want to turn and look, but he prided himself on being marginally intelligent at times - intelligent enough to know to cheat off tests in academy, for one. The voice was male. Okay. Bad timing. The voice wasn't the deepest he'd heard - his cousin Ino's father had a deeper voice - but it had a ring of authority to it, like the man was expecting an answer, like he hadn't even fathomed they wouldn't want to answer. It was also familiar. That was probably because a lot of jounin hung out at his dad's coffee shop after missions, all bleeding still and sweaty and grumbly.

So. He was a male jounin. Not an old one, from the sound of it; mid-twenties, perhaps, still a little growing up to do but pretty much on his way. Kaiki figured it was probably their instructor. And this was not the impression he'd been planning to make, if he'd been planning to make one at all.

"Who are you?" Nagi sniped right back. He was feeling around his backside for the kunai, and Kaiki had to wince at his expression when he touched it. With a sure grip and the most godawful look on his face, he pulled it out and threw it at Kaiki, who caught it by its handle. A trickle of blood ran down his pants.

"That's none of your business," said the jounin (Kaiki was still trying not to turn around and look). "It looks to me, kid, like you just got a kunai stuck in your ass, am I wrong?"

He was laughing, Kaiki realized. Well. Scratch the mid-twenties thing, he might even still be a teenager. Jounins could, theoretically, begin instruction at eighteen.

"Shut up!" Nagi's voice cracked on the upward spiral. "This bastard stuck me with it, it's not like I sat on it or anything!"

"Yeah, okay, sure." The jounin caught himself, cleared his throat. "Look, kid, you better bandage that up. Please tell me you got some in your pack?"
While Nagi cursed and grumbled and fished around in the pack on his leg, Kaiki turned around to see who their instructor was. He blinked: no one was on the ground, just him and Nagi and their teammate some distance away - then looked up and saw, hanging upside down from a tree with arms crossed and lips spread in a wide grin, the one instructor he hadn't wanted.

"Oh, shit," he sighed, sitting down in the sand. "My parents say you're no good."

Unwrapping a bandage roll with jerky, frustrated motions, Nagi said, "My parents, too. They said you're a dropout, Uzumaki Naruto."

Uzumaki Naruto scowled, then caught himself and turned the expression into a nonchalant grin.

Kaiki tilted his head, studying him. Here was one jounin he hadn't seen much. He had worked with his cousin, Ino, and if you read between the lines (below all the bitching about how lazy and ugly he was), she had nothing but praise for him. But Uzumaki Naruto was not one to spend much ime in Kaiki's father's coffee shop. Kaiki'd only caught glimpses of him, walking the street or buying things in market, and his parents had always quickly caught his hand and led him away if he ever happened to turn their way.

"Deliquency," his father always said, "is contagious."

Kaiki himself was considered a bit of a delinquent, but he was nowhere near the level of the almost legendarily dimwitted Uzumaki Naruto. Failed the final test at academy seven times, or so the story went. Always endangered his teammates because he wanted to show off. Refused missions that were too boring, or too trivial, and talked back to the Hokage - which had to take some guts, in Kaiki's opinion. He was a pervert, a fickle, shiftless burden on the shoulders of every upright Konoha citizen. His parents could never talk enough about how worthless Uzumaki Naruto was.

"Impressed, Kaiki?" said Uzumaki Naruto, hanging upside down on his tree. He was still smiling. He probably knew everything that was going through Kaiki's head, and he was smiling anyway.

"My parents will flip the roof!" Nagi had finished bandaging his ass and was sitting gingerly on the sand, bottom lifted away from his wound. He rested back on his hands and looked up at Naruto.

"What do you have to teach us, anyway? You're a dropout, aren't you?"

Naruto just shrugged. I admire that, Kaiki thought. You have to give a shit - no one can take this much abuse and not be mad about it, but you're still hanging there, trying to look cool. Point, Sensei. Point.

He wasn't too shabby-looking, anyway; his chuunin uniform was a bit worn, but clean, and his scratched forehead protector was polished proudly. He had six marks on his face, three on each cheek, sort of like an Inuzuka except they were obviously not painted on - looked like he'd been ripped a new one by a lion or something. His hair was like a big, bushy, blond forest fire, out of control and raging so wildly no one even bothered to mess with it anymore; the only attempt Uzumaki had made to control it was the single braid, thin and long, that hung down into the air with him. He was, if Kaiki judged correctly, small (horizontally and vertically) - smaller than most men and even some women, probably.

Their third teammate had wondered over, looking highly disinterested. Sunglasses did that, though; she could be wide-eyed and bushy-tailed, for all Kaiki knew.

Huffing slightly, a sound they heard even from here, their instructor walked down the tree and over to them, affording them their first glance of Uzumaki Naruto upright. Kaiki was right about the height, he was really pretty short. He had muscles, though, and his hands twitched restlessly, slim-boned and powerful. Kaiki kept an eye on them, wary.
"Well." Their instructor nodded, braid bouncing with his head. "Look. I didn't want to teach brats anyway. If you don't want me for your instructor, no one else's teaching, and I encourage you to go out and die any time you want. We cool?"

Nagi glanced at him, question clear: Are we? Kaiki shrugged, hesitant to say anything himself.

When no one said a word, Uzumaki just lifted his shoulders and said, "Then I guess, for today, we're cool. You are-" He pointed at Kaiki.

"Yamanaka Kaiki."

"Anshirou Nagi."

"Aburame Hikaru," said their teammate in cool tones.

Uzumaki nodded, clapped his hands. "All right. I'm Uzumaki Naruto. I only know you three through your files; I don't care about your family, your friends, or your dreams. They mean less to me than the shit I leave in the toilet, okay?" They stared at him. "And you don't care about me. I'm the dropout, dead last Uzumaki Naruto and if you ever want to know anything about me - you don't ask me. And I'm not even gonna ask if that's cool, because that's the way it is."

Again, no one said anything. Even Hikaru looked a bit rattled.

"And now," Uzumaki said with a bit too much teeth showing, "you're going to fight me."

They glanced at each other. Nagi shrugged. Kaiki said, "All of us, you mean? Against you?"

"Hey, wow. You're kinda smart, kid. Yeah, that's right. Bug girl-" Naruto pointed a long-fingered nail at Hikaru. "I got your number. I know all your tricks, little boys. I'm the dropout, so let's see how you do against me when I know all your tricks and hold all the cards." He raised a hand, third finger and thumb poised against each other. "When I snap, the battle begins. Just like that. I snap - you go for me. Ready?"

"I don't know why," Nagi muttered, "but I'm not so sure about this."

Uzumaki snapped.

The three teammates leaped.

Yamanaka Kaiki was a person who had not felt much pain in his life. His father had knocked him one or two times when he was being a smartass, his mother would smack the back of his head whenever he cursed in front of his younger siblings, he'd grown up tousling and sparring with Nagi - and that was it.

So when he leapt at Uzumaki, and Uzumaki just smiled, moved his head a little and caught Kaiki's wrist with two fingers - just two fingers, pinching down between his tendons and the bones in his arm - he wasn't even sure at all if the pain was real, or if he was just having a freakout moment.

But when he sidestepped Nagi's clumsy dive, tripped him and stood on his back, caught Hikaru's kunai and then caught her, too - when Kaiki heard his teammates whimpering - that was when he knew it was real, and boy, it really fucking hurt.

Just when his eyes were beginning to water and he thought he might even say something, Uzumaki let go of his wrist, stepped off Nagi and shoved Hikaru away. Kaiki hopped to a safer distance,
holding his wrist gingerly with his other hand. *Damn,* that was going to bruise. Beside him, Nagi rubbed his back with a look of agony on his face; Hikaru, crouched a little ways away, had a single cut on her cheek, with two drops of blood running down her neck. Kaiki didn't even remember Uzumaki cutting her.

"Wow," said their instructor, running a hand through his hair. "Not bad, you guys!"

"Not too bad?" Kaiki blurted, incredulous. "Are you kidding? I-" he cut himself off, bit his tongue and glared at Uzumaki. Him standing there without a hair out of place....

"Yup. You underestimated me-" Uzumaki held up two fingers and pressed them together -"just a little bit."

"You're supposed to be a dropout!" Nagi rubbed his back one more time, then rubbed his ass and crossed his arms. "That was a freakin' dirty trick."

"And now you know," said Uzumaki, "what a really, really bad idea it is to underestimate your opponents in battle. Well!!" He smiled suddenly, eyes slitting, whole face lighting up in a happy expression. "That was kind of fun! And you even learned a lesson now. Say 'goodbye, Naruto-sensei,' and then I'll be leaving. Back here in the morning, eight o'clock sharp?"

"Goodbye, Naruto-sensei," said Hikaru, and Kaiki and Nagi reluctantly echoed her.

"Hell," Nagi said when he was gone. "If that's a dropout, maybe I shouldn't have worried so much about my grades."

His forehead protector had slipped a little; Kaiki adjusted it, tied it more tightly. "That's no dropout," he said. He touched his wrist again, wincing at even the slight pressure. "That's not even a jounin. Did you see how fast he moved? My eyes couldn't even follow."

"All jounin are like that," Nagi said, dismissive.

"No, they're not. Ino told me, a few times... what Naruto-sensei's like... guess I should have listened." Kaiki cradled his wrist against his chest. "Look, I'm going home, I'm going to get a hot shower and then I'm gonna ask around town about this Uzumaki Naruto guy. Anyone want to meet me for lunch?"

"Sure," said Nagi when Hikaru was silent. "Nothin' to find out, I'll bet, but hey, my afternoon's free."

"Maybe we'll find out more than you think." Kaiki shrugged one shoulder. "Or maybe not. Maybe he just likes being showy. Who knows?"
"So, how are your genin?"

Naruto shrugged and spoke around the sherbert in his mouth. "Ehhhmmm. They're not too bad, I guess. I thought the-"

"Naruto, ugh," said Sakura, lifting her nose. "Swallow first."

"Sorry," Naruto said, catching a mouthful threatening to dribble down his chin. "Mm. Heh. Anyway, I thought the Aburame in the group would be the best, but I don't think so. She's fast, and single-minded I think, but there's another one who doesn't look half bad."

"Who?" Sakura widened her eyes, spoon halfway to her mouth.

"Ino's cousin, you know? Kaiki." Naruto tapped the counter with his spoon, resting his chin in his hand. "I dunno... he just looks like he's got potential."

"Hmm." Sakura shrugged and finished the bite, closing her eyes briefly. "This is good. What do they think about having someone like you for their teacher?"

"Whaddaya mean by that?"

"I mean-" She raised her eyebrows at him. "You're lazy, Naruto. And uneducated. You like to sleep in the sun all day, when you're not practicing. You don't know the theoretical, just the practical. Did I mention that you're lazy?"

"Saaakura-chaaaaan!" Naruto protested. "You're gonna make me cry."

"You know you're lazy, Naruto."

"Nyeh heh." Naruto flashed her his teeth. "Well, I learned a bunch of stuff already. I trained so hard for years, now I'm takin' a break! And I get a suntan when I sleep in my window, see, see?"

"Naruto." She lowered her voice, leaned in. "Look, you're the best jounin in the village, even though no one will come out and say it. Except me, of course. And Shikamaru, but no one listens to us. What I'm saying is... look, Naruto, if you actually try, really try, you could teach a lot to these kids."

Naruto dug his spoon deep into his sherbert and pulled it out with a huge hunk. "Hey, Sakura-chan," he said, sucking on the spoon. "You ever think maybe I don't want to teach these kids? It's competition, right? Maybe I like being the best for once in my life."

"No one in this village is going to get better than you." Sakura looked like it was hurting her to say these things; she sucked on her spoon quickly. "Now you're just being irritating."

Naruto leaned back in his seat and sighed. The booth was busy, crowded full with people; they were lucky they were being ignored, for the most part, by civilized society. He reached up, picking absently at a loose thread in one of the banners. "Sakura-chan, I don't have time for this crap. I've gotta..."

"Oh, bullshit."

"Sakura-chan!" Naruto pulled a miserable face. "Sakura-chan hates me."
"A year. That's the most you're going to be training these kids," Sakura said, leaning close again. "Just take a year off, Naruto. And focus on something that will actually last."

Naruto leaned back in his seat and regarded her. She'd grown up, had Sakura-chan; gone was the little girl in red and pink, frilly and impeccable. She'd kept the short hair, barely even bothered to maintain it now; just hacked it short enough to pin behind her ears and go. Gone was the red dress, replaced by a black shirt and black pants; but she was still beautiful to him, in that vague, wistful, unattainable way. He admired her spark melded into resolve, the way she tried to take care of everyone, even her dropout, delinquent, hated ex-teammate. He dropped his eyes to the wedding band on her finger; leaned forward, rested his chin on the counter and sighed. "I'll try for you, Sakura-chan. But soon I'll be leaving again. Tsunade-sama gave me permission."

"I'm coming," said Sakura, but Naruto straightened and shook his head.

"No," he said firmly. "I go alone. That's how I work now anyway." Foxes don't travel in pairs, and those were in the know in Konoha understood that about Naruto. Sakura still didn't.

She pursed her lips, gave her head a little toss and reached for her drink. "Fine, be selfish like that. ... Are you good for dinner tonight? You have food?"

"Yup, yup. Ramen all the way. I just got paid, so it's Ichiraku tonight!"

"Don't stay up too late tonight. And don't drink! Your genin *would* beat you if you had a hangover."

"Right, right, Sakura-chan," he grinned.

She smiled and plucked his braid out of his lap, giving it a tweak. "Just," she said, eyes and mouth becoming serious, "be careful, okay, Naruto? I hate what you're doing."

Smiling, Naruto hailed the owner and asked for the check. "Me too, Sakura-chan. Me, too."

Naruto started leaving the village when he was fifteen. Still an ANBU member at the time, the tattoo fresh on his arm, he'd taken every holiday and every day off as a chance to hop from town to town, sometimes disguised, sometimes not, milking information from the townspeople. He went through forests, checking for familiar scents. He stopped where it looked most promising, and moved on when it proved his prey had escaped again.

Once he had come close. He was sixteen, on vacation in a gambling town; it was festival time and somebody had decked him out in a fancy robe and a fox mask. He hadn't even been looking for information, had just been messing around - winning prizes for girls, blowing his money - when he smelled it on the wind, a hint of something dark and cold. He had followed it to the lake, where in the moonlight somebody was walking into the water, bare skin lit by and shining in the silvery light.

He crouched in a tree, watching the roll and dip of muscles as the person bathed, bending his neck back and forward and to the side, rolling his shoulders, cupping his hands and pouring water on his head to trickle down his spine and linger on his skin. Where the water touched black, dark marks, it evaporated instantly, leaving a sheen of steam enveloping the silver-touched body.

Then they turned, and it was - funny, really, how peaceful his face was. He'd never looked like that as a child, always malcontent and brooding and unhappy. Even in the sunshine, even after a joke, a day of tussling and good-natured insults, that face never stopped looking a bit hunted, never turned its eyes from the focus. Now... now Naruto wondered if that was the face of someone finally at
peace.

He'd stepped out then and made his way to the shore; and stood there, no weapons or anything, to stare at the boy in the water. The face was startled, at first, but had caught itself and a small smile lifted its lips.

"My my, Naruto-kun, it's been so long."

That was the worst thing about it, Naruto decided, and nothing would ever change his mind. It wasn't that Orochimaru walked in Sasuke's body, used his mannerisms, even; it was that he used his voice, and even though Naruto knew it wasn't true - sometimes he wondered, even when he knew it was Orochimaru saying these cruel and strange things, whether Sasuke was saying them, too.

"Orochimaru," he said back.

Sasuke's eyes skimmed him up and down, as if Naruto were the one naked in the lake. "And we've grown, haven't we? Still so little - so little for such huge chakra - but I am surprised to see it, Naruto-kun. You're almost a man." He smiled, slowly, and stretched out his tongue to run over his lips.

Naruto said nothing, and Sasuke's smile grew wider. "Do you want me to say what he would, Naruto-kun? Do you want me to call you an idiot, a no-good loser? Do you want me to tell you to shove off and die? I can, you know, and it would be just like Sasuke-kun is here with you. Perhaps he is; how would you know?"

"What I want," Naruto said, voice tightening along with his body, "is for you to leave him."

Sasuke chuckled. "You want that, Naruto-kun. You want that, and the girl, and everyone in Konoha because you all want his charm, his beauty, his talent - these eyes...." A blink, and his irises were red, three Sharingan pupils wheeling slowly as those eyes studied Naruto. "But that's not what Sasuke-kun wants. Ah, it's so wonderful," he sighed; "it's even better than having this body sexually... *being* in this body." He ran his hands over his shoulders, then smiled again and dipped one hand into the water. "Do you want to see me jerk off, Naruto-kun? Did you and Sasuke ever do this together, as boy friends do when they're young?"

"Fuck off!" Naruto clenched his fists, put all his anger at Orochimaru into his glare, into his words. "Fuck off... don't do that to him. Sasuke would hate me seeing him like this. You're disgusting, you gross pervert."

"Ah, Naruto-kun, you're so funny." Smile spreading, Sasuke lifted his other hand to tap his lips. "How would you know how Sasuke wants you to see him? Perhaps Sasuke just wants you dead. Don't worry - I'm not going to tell you that he's trapped in here, that he wants out and that he wants you to save him. Quite the opposite, actually."

He hated this - the word games. The mind games. You know I can't keep thinking straight, you bastard.

"But I will tell you that he wants to fuck you," said Sasuke, as if they were talking about the weather; "and you wouldn't know if I was lying or if I wasn't. Although... I wouldn't be lying if I said, *I* would like to fuck you, Naruto-kun. It would be quite exciting to taste all that power." His lips curved, tongue flicked out; then he began walking out of the water, a naked silver body coming towards Naruto, who suddenly wanted to run away but wasn't quite sure if he could.

"Ah-h," Sasuke breathed when they were close together, close enough to touch. There was no heat coming from him, not like Naruto was used to; he was cold, like his voice and eyes. "You're like a
rabbit, Naruto-kun. The rabbit knows it should run before the snake eats it, but it's always too damned frightened to move. A wise choice, in this case, because if I were to eat you it wouldn't be so bad."

He reached out a hand and let it linger, lightly, almost but not quite touching Naruto's cheek. Naruto could almost feel the cold touch, felt it send a cold spike down his spine.

"Don't worry," said Sasuke, "it's just play between boys. Things happen when you're young... confused... it's natural to have strong feelings for a friend. Do you have strong feelings for Sasuke, Naruto-kun?"

His fingers were almost touching now, and Naruto wished he'd stopped. "Yeah, I do," he said, trying to keep his voice from shaking, even his voice seemed cold. "I really strongly wanna rip you out of this body so I can take Sasuke home and beat the shit out of him."

Sasuke chuckled against his cheek, cool breath gusting over his skin. His other hand came up, settled on the back of Naruto's neck, sifted through the soft hair there. "Well, Naruto-kun, I'm sure that would be quite erotic, but it's not what I have in mind." His lips ghosted over his face, from his cheekbone to just next to his lips; that tongue flicked out, touched his bottom lip, and then his lips were fastened over Naruto's. Still chaste, just a brushing of mouth over mouth. "This... is Sasuke-kun, Naruto-kun. This is Sasuke-kun touching your body. This is Sasuke-kun kissing you."

Naruto hissed and started to struggle when a cool, dry tongue touched the line of his lips, but Sasuke's hand on his neck suddenly had an iron grip; he couldn't move away with snapping his spine. He pressed his lips together, but Sasuke chuckled at his efforts and just slipped his tongue in, effortless, to taste his mouth. That tongue touched his teeth, then touched his own tongue, and Naruto trembled in fear.

Fear. This isn't Sasuke. I know this isn't Sasuke, touching me like this. He'd rip my dick off first.

A few moments inside his mouth and Sasuke was warm now, sucking at his tongue almost gently; his hand pressed Naruto closer so their jaws bumped together. He pressed his eyes shut and tried to keep his tongue from moving, but it was hard... Sasuke's tongue had a strange metallic taste to it, like the first time Naruto had tasted his own blood. That tongue was wrapping around his, probing his mouth to his tonsils, teasing and dancing deep inside of him.

Then Sasuke pulled back, lips leaving his with a wet sound, and the smile on his face was pure Orochimaru. "Next time you spy on me, Naruto-kun, you can be sure that will happen."

He left, and Naruto found that even if he had wanted to, he couldn't move. Every hair on his body was standing up, and he was colder than he had ever been, even colder than in winter with no family.

"You'll always wonder," Orochimaru had said before he'd left, "what is me and what is Sasuke."

That was why Naruto left the village whenever he could. He wasn't a fox, but there was a large personality skulking in his belly that was, and it had found prey.

The next morning Naruto-sensei was late again, but only by fifteen minutes or so; it gave the team time to eat breakfast, sharing their food with another. Even Hikaru let them each have a roll, and accepted their food in a grudging sort of way. When Naruto-sensei appeared in front of them, they were just finished eating their fruit pastries.
Kaiki narrowed his eyes. "He look a little sick to you?" he muttered into Nagi's ear.

Nagi, disinterested, said, "I think he's as nasty-looking today as he was yesterday."

While Naruto-sensei was rummaging in his pack for something, Kaiki spoke up. "I asked around about you, you know," he said.

Sensei's hands didn't pause; he seemed completely unconcerned as he said, "Yeah?"

"Turns out you *are* a dropout. You failed four final exams - four years of ninja school - and only got promoted to ninja because you beat up some teacher or other."

"Mm-hm," said Naruto-sensei. "Anyone have a kunai handy? I left mine at home." After a pause, Hikaru tossed him one, which he caught by the tip. "Thanks."

Kaiki continued now out of pure principle; even if the bastard ignored him, he'd still have his say. "Your instructor was Hatake Kakashi. Didn't know the name, so I looked it up. Turns out he was killed about five years ago." He still didn't know how old Naruto-sensei was; he could have been as young as thirteen. "I found out about one of your teammates - Haruno Sakura, she's a med-nin here in Konoha, and she's also a friend of my family. I didn't know she was your teammate. Anyways, it was harder finding out about the second one 'cause no one wants to talk about him. I guess it's hard to admit that a kid from our village went traitor, huh? That was--"

Naruto-sensei threw the knife, and Kaiki almost didn't catch it. That would have taken out his eye. He breathed out deeply, holding it in front of him.

"You're a kid, so you wouldn't know," said Naruto-sensei with a sunny smile. "So I'll tell you. Do me a favor, and don't say the name around me. Is that cool?"

They nodded their heads, murmured Yes, sensei. Naruto-sensei smiled again, gave them the slightest of bows, and turned around.

His teammates looked at him. "What's the name, so I don't say it," Nagi muttered.

"Uchiha," he whispered back. "Uchiha Sasuke." It sounded normal to him, a typical kind of guy name; funny the things that could set people off. He reminded himself to never, never say that name again anytime soon - he'd like to remain unmaimed at least until he became a chuunin.

"Now," said Naruto-sensei, turning back around and holding up one hand. He'd gashed his thumb; blood pooled from it and glinted on the kunai Hikaru had given him. "This is my test. If you pass this, you become genin and you receive my instruction. Ready?" He grabbed his wrist and made to touch his bloody hand to the ground.

"Wait!" Nagi said. "Shit! You didn't tell us there was a *test*!"

"Of course there is. What, ya think I'd let you waste all my time right away? You could all be a waste of body space, for all I know." Naruto's teeth glinted brightly. "If you die - not my fault. So do whatever you can to stay alive. Here's my test: If you stay alive on the back of this frog for two hours, you are my genin team. Here we go--" His fingers flashed together and he slammed his hand onto the ground, shouted: "Summoning no Jutsu!"

Oh, shit, Kaiki thought as his summoned creature appeared. I didn't want to die this fucking young.

There was a huge frog looming over them, and he did not look happy. Naruto waved to it, then disappeared faster than Kaiki could see; and he didn't re-appear anywhere. He had left them.
"Hey, brats!" the frog thundered.

Kaiki dared a look at his teammates. Nagi looked like he felt - wide-mouthed and wide-eyed - but Hikaru looked calculating, like she was sizing that monster up. She felt his gaze, and looked up. "It's Gama Bunta," she told them. "The Frog King. This isn't going to be easy." Sunlight glinted off her shades as she adjusted them. "This isn't a normal fight. My insects won't help; your mind control techniques won't work, Kaiki. The name of this game is that we work together to stay on that frog."

Gama Bunta laughed, and it was like thunder rumbling. Even when he bent down, a posture of servitude, Kaiki had a feeling that he was the bug, Gama Bunta the kind foot that shied away from squashing him. Hikaru nodded at them, and was the first one to dash up his back. Nagi followed, Kaiki on his heels.

They were on his back, and Gama Bunta reared up and tossed his head, laughing again.

"Are you ready, brats? I once had a boy stay on my back for a whole day, but I have a feeling you runts are going to have trouble for two hours."

"I already can't stay on!" Nagi moaned, clutching Kaiki's shoulder.

"Don't freak out," Hikaru said. "That's what Gama Bunta and Naruto-sensei are expecting. The moment we all get afraid, that's the moment we're all off his back and we're back to the academy. I don't know about you, but I want to be a ninja."

"Stand up, Nagi." Kaiki let him catch his balance before shrugging of his hand. "Hey," he said, catching Nagi's eyes. "Look, we gotta work together. If one of us is falling off, the others have to catch him."

"Nagi knows Kage Bunshin, and he can separate into a lot of clones," said Hikaru, stumbling as Gama Bunta stretched. "Five or ten is enough if we're all falling; they can catch us and pull us back up. It's enough if we're all up in the air - they can be a ladder to bring us back down."

"Nagi," said Kaiki. "Looks like this is your show."

"Ready or not, brats," Gama Bunta thundered, a thread of laughter in his booming voice. "We're running!"

Kaiki fell straight away. It was a long plunge down, he realized, when you were dangling off the edge with only your teammate's hand keeping you from taking that trip down. If he fell, he was going to die - Naruto-sensei had been right about that, and unapologetic. This wasn't just about receiving his tutelage. This was about dying or living.

Nagi yanked him back up and they all huddled together, hands linked, feet wide apart and digging into the Frog King's back. And then Gama Bunta leaped; they were in the air, free-floating, and Kaiki looked down and knew that if they fell now, they would not land on his back.

Nagi put his fingers together, shouted: "Kage Bunshin!" His clones extended all the way down to Gama Bunta's back, all linked together by grabbing each other's hands. Kaiki grabbed a clone's hand, Nagi grabbed his, and they both reached out and grabbed Hikaru. Gama Bunta hit the earth and they fell, landing against his side hard enough to jolt Kaiki's spine. The clones pulled them back up.

"Here," Hikaru said, scrabbling backwards. "I'll at least try to hang on to his shirt. It probably won't do much good, though." Kaiki saw that she had a death grip on the cloth, white-knuckled. It sank his heart a little more: as cold as she was, as unemotional, even Aburame Hikaru was scared.
"How the hell can we do this for two hours?" Nagi shouted, a vein in his forehead standing out. "It's only been ten minutes and we've almost fallen three times! I can't use Kage Bunshin for two more hours, it's impossible."

"We'll think of something else then." They had to raise their voices against the rushing wind. Kaiki wiped some sweat off his face, adding, "We'll burn the damn bridges when we get to them - Shit!" Gama Bunta leapt again, and they fell down his back until a bridge of clones caught them.

Again, and again, and again; each time Kaiki saw the ground rushing up to meet him, he thought he was dead, until Hikaru or Nagi caught him or a chain of clones pulled him back up. Each time he rose into the air, higher than he'd ever thought possible, he thought about dying and death and his cousin who had died, what it meant to die - and then he was caught, and back on Gama Bunta's back, and he was really freaking tired.

"I can't do much more." Nagi was panting, face white with blotchy spots of purple. Kaiki knew that face. He had enough chakra for maybe one more Kage Bunshin - maybe not even that. Kaiki swore. "Shit, why don't we just go down to his mouth and sit on his tongue or something? It'd be hard to get thrown out of that."

"But Naruto-sensei we had to stay on his back."

"Naruto-sensei," said Hikaru, "also doesn't care whether we live or die. He said it himself. *I* care whether we live or die. I'd rather live and go back to the academy than die here."

"Screw that!" Nagi ran a hand through his hair, more blotches appearing on his face. "I don't care about that shit of a teacher, but I'm not going to let him sit back and laugh at me for being a coward!"

"Then what, Nagi?" Even Hikaru was losing her patience; even she was sweating. "Then we die here?" She half-stood, still holding onto Nagi's hand and Gama Bunta's shirt.

"I'm not going," said Nagi. He looked at Hikaru, then at Kaiki. "No way in hell."

"Shit-" Kaiki closed his eyes. Just a few seconds, Kai, that's all you've got and then you're off his back - "Hikaru," he said, "I can't leave Nagi."

There came a long pause - Kaiki counted and knew it was only five seconds, but it seemed that Hikaru stood there for a full minute, just staring at the both of them. Her eyes and thoughts were encased in a wall of black, behind her sunglasses.

Then she sat down. "I can't leave either of you," she said. "I know what it means to be a ninja, even if I do die here."

Gama Bunta stopped.

They were thrown forward, a little, but Hikaru quickly dug her heels in and pulled them all to a stop. "Hey!" Nagi shouted down at him, a little hysterically. "What the hell'd you stop for, frog? It's only been thirty minutes!"

"I told him to stop."

Nagi nearly fell, and Kaiki slipped in startlement to see Naruto-sensei next to them on Gama Bunta's back. Arms crossed, braid lifting in the breeze, he was smiling. "Frogs are my summon," he said, "have been since I was twelve, and I'm the servant of this Frog King. Still, he does do what I want occasionally. And this time, I asked him to stop when you all had come to a conclusion."
"A conclusion?" They all said it, but it was Hikaru who said, "We'd come to a conclusion even before we got on. That we had to be a team, and work together. That was our conclusion."

"True," Naruto-sensei allowed, "but you made that before the heat of the moment. And promises - things you'd thought were sacred - are almost always easy to break in the heat of the moment. When you're seconds away from death and all you wanna do is live, that's when people run away. You almost ran away. But you didn't. And you stuck to it - that you were a team. You stayed with them, Hikaru, even when you thought you were going to die."

His face was more solemn than Kaiki ever thought it could be, and his eyes pinned them heavily. This guy, Kaiki realized, knew what he was talking about. He wondered briefly if Naruto-sensei had ever run away.

"That's what being a ninja is. That is your ninja way, and you kept it. You stayed strong. And you passed my test."

Kaiki closed his eyes. He felt Nagi relax next to him, adrenaline, terror going out of his body. Kaiki couldn't relax quite like that now, but he still felt a sort of giddy joy building in his head.

"Naruto-sensei?" Hikaru said suddenly. "Would you have failed us if we'd gone into Gama Bunta's mouth?"

Naruto-sensei grinned. "Actually, I wasn't planning to fail you at all. I was gonna stop this when it got too serious. And I wouldn't have let any of you die! Jeez, how cold do you think I am?"

Dammit. He knew he'd hated this bastard for a reason.

"But you did really well," Naruto-sensei said, laughter in his voice. "Better than I thought you would. So! Congrats! Real training starts tomorrow. Let's all get off Gama Bunta now - he needs a drink. Thanks, Boss."

"Shut up," the Frog King grumbled. "You impertinent brat." When they were all on the ground, shaking out their legs, Gama Bunta reared up, bowed his head to Naruto, and disappeared in a huge puff of smoke.

"Ahh-hhh," Naruto-sensei sighed, stretching out his arms across his neck. "It's been a long day, we're all tired - and we're probably a bit cranky too, huh?" He put his hands on his hips and smiled widely. "Well! See you here tomorrow morning, eight o'clock! We'll officially start the training."

"I hate that disappearing thing he does," Kaiki said.

"I think I need some udon," Nagi said.

"I agree, I think we should all go thirds on some food."

"I like chocolate," Hikaru said. "I think we should get some chocolate."

"All right, all right, chocolate too."
Chapter 3

Naruto's summer days settled into a lazy pattern. He woke up to train his genin, putting them through fire and water, making them camp and survive on their own in the forest, teaching them chakra control and any jutsus they were focused enough to learn, and refining the jutsus they already knew. He always asked them to fight him, giving them time to think up strategies, and admitted that they'd pulled some pretty good ideas out of their hats even when he beat them every single time. Halfway through the first month, they began taking missions. At the end of the second month, Naruto's tan was darker and bronzer and all of his genin had new scars.

June came and went, and Kaiki learned how to walk on water; Nagi hung upside down from a tree branch. Hikaru beat them all and was able to create a tiny Rasengan in her hand. He taught them the seals for the summoning jutsu, promising he would teach them how to summon frogs when they were stronger. He thought, briefly, about trying to teach them the Chidori, but he'd never been very good at the move anyway and with good reason - only two people in this world knew how to really use the Chidori to its full potential.

The end of July creeped up, slow and hot. Naruto's genin had tried to beat him, and failed again. Now they lay spread out in the clearing, panting and sweat-soaked, eyes glazed with heat more than the sting of failure. Naruto checked to make sure they were all still breathing, then walked up the trunk of a tree, hung from a branch and retrieved a bag of chocolates from his leg pouch.

"Naruto-sensei," Kaiki said suddenly, pitching his voice for Naruto to hear. "When are you going to teach us how to summon the frogs?"

Naruto unwrapped a chocolate and gnawed on its tip, tasting: it was good stuff, all the way from the Rain Country where they made the best and sweetest chocolate. "When you're ready," he replied, sliding his tongue further down the chocolate. "And not if you keep bugging me."

He turned his head and saw Nagi roll over, so the kid could see him. "Who taught you how to summon, Naruto-sensei?"

Against the chocolate Naruto smiled, paused to consider his answer. "A very nasty, haughty, impatient guy."

"Oh, like you," Kaiki shouted, laughing.

"Ha ha." Naruto aimed a kunai, and it landed spare inches from Nagi's and Kaiki's faces. "You can keep your thoughts on that to yourself. Jeez, you're brats."

"Only a few steps from brat to jounin, just like you!"
"I bet the summoning jutsu is easy, anyway," Nagi said. "We could probably figure it ourselves, without your help."

"Oh?" Naruto lifted his eyebrows. "Is that a dare, Nagi-*kun*?"

"If it is, I ain't takin' it," said Kaiki. "You're on your own, Nagi."

"Well - maybe it is." Nagi leaned forward on his elbows, frowning up at Naruto. "What could be so hard about it? We already know the seals. You just do them and call forth the frog, right? Put a little chakra into it and how hard can it be?"

"Okay. Okay," Naruto said, swinging himself upright and dropping to a lower branch, closer to the
"Cripes, fine, I will." Nagi sat cross-legged, shook out his hands, popped his knuckles; keeping one wary eye on Naruto, he formed the hand seals - slowly, Naruto noted, so slowly he'd get his ass killed in combat before he could squeeze out one 'horse' - then raised his four fingers and pressed them together, eyes sliding shut as he called up chakra. Naruto wasn't Neji, he didn't have a Byakugan and he couldn't see anyone's chakra system, but he could tell from the sweat on Nagi's forehead and the shaking in his fingers that he was calling forth a good deal, maybe enough to do maybe three fair-sized Kage Bunshins. "Summoning no Jutsu!" he said, fingers pressing tight together, so tight all the blood drained out of them.

A short pause, and then Kaiki said, "Ah, it didn't work."

"Correct," Naruto said, standing as Nagi collapsed on his back, face white with effort. "And I'll tell ya why. First of all, all summoning jutsus need the ninja to make a blood deal with whatever animal he wants to summon. I cut my thumb, I let it bleed like crazy and then I make the deal in blood, and now I'm the master of the frog summons. With me so far?"

"You could have *told* me it wouldn't work without this frickin' blood thing!" Nagi yelled at him. He could barely sit up, but he lifted his finger middle up at Naruto anyway. "Fuck, that was a waste of chakra, you bastard."

"Oh, please. Writing your name in blood doesn't mean you can summon creatures." Naruto sighed and rubbed at his headache again, the spot right above his eye these brats always seemed to make throb. "That puny amount of chakra you just summoned wouldn't get you anywhere. Maybe a tadpole, but I wouldn't bet on it. Depends on how your luck is, I guess."

"A summoning jutsu," said Hikaru, "requires a huge amount of controlled chakra expenditure, plus the blood contract. That's why most people who summon creatures are jounin masters, thirty or forty years old."

"Bingo!" Naruto raised a finger. "Chakra none of you have, right now. Or, maybe you have it, but you sure as hell ain't calling it up. So that, my young ninja friends, is why I haven't taught you the summoning jutsu yet. Are we all clear?"

Kaiki raised a thumb, Nagi his middle finger. Naruto rolled his eyes and reached in his pouch for another piece of chocolate. God, kids did him in.

"So you're the frog master," Kaiki finally said, after a long pause. "Then we can't summon frogs while you're - you know, ehh - still alive, right?"

"Nope." Naruto almost dribbled out a mouthful and caught it just in time, then licked his fingers clean. "You can summon them, you just aren't their master. Which means," and he snorted here, remembering, "you'll have a damned time trying to get them to do what you want. You're pretty much screwed if one of them doesn't take a liking to you."

"Why even bother, then?"

"Because," Naruto said, patience beginning to stretch, "one of them *might* take a liking to one of you. What, would you rather *not* learn the jutsu? You don't wanna be able to call up huge amounts of chakra? You want to stay a genin all your life?"

Kaiki sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose in a weirdly adult way. "No, Naruto-sensei. You're right."
Orochimaru took control of Sasuke's body on his fifteenth birthday - gave him enough time to grow properly, to mature into the type of body Orochimaru wanted. Naruto met him in a bar the night before, in a hot, sweltering gambling town, and by silent agreement they didn't fight as they usually would but sat in a booth, drinking sake and sampling the bar's ramen.

Sasuke never got to be too tall - his body had been used too hard - but he was tall enough that Naruto had to look up at him, and that always irritated him. Sitting down, though, the difference wasn't so obvious, except that Sasuke's fingers were longer than this and his legs, cramped in the small booth, brushed against Naruto's every so often. Neither said anything, but a bit of heat would touch Sasuke's neck and he would sit up straighter. They were both keenly aware that any wrong move could trigger a fight, end up in broken noses and bloody hands for the both of them.

Sasuke asked how Sakura was doing; Naruto told him about Lee, and after that Sasuke didn't ask about anyone else. They kept delicately away from the topic of Kakashi. Once the conversation strayed to Jiraiya, and Sasuke unbent long enough to ask who Naruto thought was stronger, Orochimaru or Jiraiya.

"Dunno," Naruto had replied, running his finger over his sake cup. "It's different, fighting a friend. I don't know who'd win."

A sardonic smile lifted Sasuke's lips and twisted them to one side. "You never have trouble fighting me."

"'Cause you're a dick," Naruto said, but he didn't say Sasuke wasn't his friend. Sasuke's twisted smile stayed in place, but he reached over and poured Naruto another cup and slid it across the table to him.

The bar closed, and the owner leaned over their table and told them, apologetically, that they had to clear out; looked at their flushed cheeks and heavy eyes, and asked them if they could get home all right. Sasuke stood, slinging Naruto's arm over his shoulders, and dropped some money into the owner's hands and told him they'd be perfectly fine.

They stumbled, cursing and tripping over each other's feet, into Sasuke's hotel room; Sasuke dumped him on the bed and fell on it beside him, and the room was heavy and moist with the sounds of their breathing. Naruto turned his head, pillowed it on his wrist and stared at the good side of Sasuke's face, the one with pale unmarked skin and a heavy-lidded eye, pupil clear and iris coal-black. Then he closed his eyes, concentrating on breathing.

Something cool touched his neck, at his jugular, and his eyes came open again to find Sasuke's face crowding his, eyes lit with moonlight. Silver shafts of light played over the curse marks on the side of his face; they twisted flaming fingers down his neck and Naruto could almost feel the heat of them. He looked down at the knife pressed to his neck and, in a few seconds, felt the warm heat of blood gathering on his skin.

"I could kill you now," Sasuke whispered, warm breath raising the hairs on Naruto's arms. "I should. And then you'd be gone... stop bothering me, forever. Dead last. Useless. Stupid. I'd never see you again...."

He moved the knife to the side, and the blood ran down Naruto's neck to his chest. Naruto kept his breathing even and his eyes open, staring up at the black-and-white boy in his face, straddling his waist. His arms had gotten twisted together behind his back, somehow, with Sasuke's hands holding his wrists together in an iron grip.
He was very uncomfortable, but also very drunk, so the blade pressed tight against his skin - a little
tighter and it'd be goodbye, kyubi - didn't bother him too bad. Hell, Naruto thought fuzzily,
wouldn't be too sad if he did it - if he killed him - he'd only be doing what everyone had been afraid
to do when he was a baby, and were even more afraid to do know that his and the kyubi's chakra
had all but fused.

"Orochimaru would thank me," Sasuke said, this time against Naruto's neck where the knife had left
a long, thin red mark. Breath against that mark made Naruto jerk a little, not quite from pain but -
"And then I could do what I have to do and you'd have nothing to say about it, you wouldn't be
looking at me like I'm something disgusting - fuck you, Naruto, I'm only doing what I have to do."
He pressed his open mouth to the cut and his tongue flicked out, touched and tasted blood as he
spoke: "And I'd finally be better than you, like I was in the first place, like I should be.... damn you,
damn you, damn you to hell...."

Naruto swallowed, skin jumping against Sasuke's mouth. "Fuck you," he said dizzily, "it's my turn to
be good at everything."

Sasuke's mouth on his neck, Sasuke's hand holding his tightly together and the other hand sliding up
his waist - Sasuke slithered up Naruto's chest, mouth sliding from his neck to his jaw and then to his
mouth, brushing open-mouthed against Naruto's lips. His hand released Naruto's, and Naruto raised
his hip off them and lifted them to Sasuke's shoulders, then slid them into Sasuke's hair as Sasuke's
tongue pried his lips open and dipped into his mouth. He pressed Sasuke's face closer, forcing his
tongue deeper into his mouth.

He'd only kissed someone two times - first Hinata, and that had been her initiative, shy as she was. It
was nice and all, but a little clumsy because they didn't really know how to use their tongues. Second
had been Shikamaru, because they were drunk and good friends. That was better because damn, did
Shikamaru know how to use his tongue.

But this kiss was different, because they were really drunk and Sasuke's hips were already starting to
move against his. He'd never had someone on top of him like this and he'd never heard these noises,
these soft wet sucking noises as Sasuke touched his tongue, tangled with it, forced their jaws together
because he was going so far into Naruto's mouth. And he'd never had someone touch him like
Sasuke did now, sliding a hand down his back, under his shirt, and then slipping under Naruto's
pants and touching - Naruto jerked up, moaning into Sasuke's mouth, and felt Sasuke's lips spreading
into a smile.

"Don't smirk at me, motherfucker-" he said, and Sasuke kissed him again, hard and deep. His hand
tried to move, but Naruto reached down and grabbed his wrist, held him where he was. Sasuke
smiled again, let go of his lips and touched his tongue to the strand of saliva connecting their mouths.

"I've never," he said, muffled against Naruto's neck, "done this before."

He was moving his hand and Naruto's eyes were rolling back in pleasure, hips seeming to move
without his control, but he looked up at Sasuke anyway, seeing his rival hazily through a film of
desire. "Doesn't he-?" he started to say, then his words turned into moans again and he couldn't
finish.

"He doesn't count."

Sasuke. Sasuke. Sasuke. Naruto moaned his name as Sasuke fastened his mouth over his erection;
lifted his lips up helplessly, jerking before Sasuke threw his hands over them and forced them back to
the bed. Sasuke sucked him hard, sucked him fast and Naruto closed his eyes against a spinning world, feeling heat hotter than the sweltering fire of the kyuubi's chakra pooling in his spine, rushing down to his toes, centering overwhelmingly in the spot between his legs and where Sasuke's fingers rested on his hips.

And then the heat was cut off, abruptly, left hanging as Sasuke let go of him, slid up his body again. "Fuck!" Naruto spat at him, jerking his mouth away when Sasuke tried to kiss him. "What the fuck are you - bastard, you -"

"Shut up." Sasuke ran his tongue over his lips, pushed it in briefly and then licked his jaw and the cut on his neck, which was beginning to seal over. "There are better things to do, you dumbass." He touched a finger to Naruto's neck, which burned slightly as the skin finally rebuilt itself, and said, "I could cut you all over and watch that, all day."

"Do me a favor and don't."

"What, Naruto?" Sasuke flashed him a sharp grin and scraped a long fingernail across his cheek, not hard enough to cut. "I would have figured you for the kinky type, you weirdo."

"Sounds like something he would do," Naruto said distastefully.

Sasuke snorted, and flipped his finger over so it was smooth skin running over his cheek. "Yeah," he said. "It does."

They kissed, warm and soft this time, with Sasuke's hands running underneath his shirt and feeling over his skin, then sliding down to his hips. He slipped out of Naruto's mouth and reached across him, grabbing something - Naruto twisted his head and saw his white fingers on a yellow-tinted pillow. "What's that for?"

"To prop you up."

"Eh?" Naruto licked his lips, running his tongue over his teeth; trying to figure out which taste was him and which was Sasuke. His lips felt funny, his whole body did, actually. "Why?"

"God!" Sasuke rolled his eyes. "Lift your hips," he instructed, and shoved it under Naruto's hips when he obeyed. "You're such a freakin' virgin."

A finger strayed near his mouth; Naruto bit it with his canines, eyes narrowing when Sasuke cursed. "Don't call me a virgin, you shithead."

"Well you are, aren't you?" Sasuke slipped his pants off, leaving his shirt on, and settled himself on Naruto again, nuzzling under his jaw as he said, "The more you talk, the less I want to fuck you."

"Who says I want *you* to fuck *me*?" Naruto said indignantly, slapping Sasuke's hands away when they touched his pants.

"Holy shit, Naruto!" Sasuke moved off him, sitting cross-legged on the bed. His snake eye flashed. "You don't get anything at all, do you."

"Oh, fuck you." Naruto desperately wanted to reach down and jerk off, but he had a feeling Sasuke would get up and leave if he did. And - much as he hated the snake bastard, much as he wanted to kill him sometimes... this was the last night Sasuke would be Sasuke. He turned over on his stomach, gingerly, and stared up at Sasuke, who was looking not at him but out the window now. "Hey," he said, catching Sasuke's eyes. "What are you waiting for? Ain't your ass getting cold sitting over there?"
Sasuke tilted his head, frowned.

"Doesn't mean I like you or anything," Naruto continued, "but... you know. Whatever. I'm drunk, okay?"

There was that smirk again, that snakey smile; it stretched against his lips, not as cold as it looked when Sasuke kissed him again, feeling through his mouth like there was something in there, riches or maybe... just something he'd been looking for, for a long time. Naruto wrapped his arms around Sasuke's shoulders and fell onto his back, taking Sasuke with him and ending up with his legs splayed and Sasuke on his hips, sliding his pants down till they bunched around his ankles. Another kiss, another stroke against his tongue; then Sasuke slipped down, moving his hand toward...

.... Christ. Naruto tensed against the finger slipping through his muscle, into a place tight and hot that he'd thought no one would ever want to touch, much less... His cheeks burned; the pain wasn't too bad - he was a ninja, after all, and it beat having your arm bent at five different angles - but it was... pretty embarrassing, having Sasuke touch him this way. He tried to remember if he'd showered this morning.

"Naruto," Sasuke mumbled against his chest, looking up at him with slitted eyes. "You okay?"

The finger was going still deeper, and another was joining it, stretching and stretching. Naruto squirmed, trying to make it more comfortable. "Yeah," he said, and cleared his throat because it'd come out funny; repeated it. "Yeah, it's just... weird, ya know?"

Sasuke's smile showed teeth. "It gets better. Trust me."

Trust him? Trust Sasuke, his rival in early years, his enemy in later ones? The kid he'd thought was sort of kind of maybe his friend had turned out not to be after all, had actually turned out to hate him a little, to envy him. And yet... still... childhood memories were hard to let go of, and Naruto did trust Sasuke. He trusted him not to snap his neck when they were both tired from a fight and lying on the ground next to each other; so many times, it seemed, Sasuke could have killed him easily. After so many lost chances, Naruto started to figure out that maybe Sasuke couldn't do it; and then he started to figure, maybe he didn't want to.

He'd never thought about what Sasuke did want.

And what he wanted, now he was getting: Naruto was on bottom and Sasuke was the one with his fingers up him, stretching him, adding yet another one and Naruto was finding that yeah... this actually felt... not too bad at all. He was being conquered.

And yet... sometimes, when the heat died down - like now - Sasuke kissed him almost gently, almost like it was less of a battle and more a kind of mutual thing, just making him feel good. Times like these had always endeared Sasuke to Naruto, when they weren't fighting and were just hanging out; even if Sasuke teased him, it seemed a little like it was more because that was the only way Sasuke could express himself, not that he actually meant the insult or wanted Naruto to be hurt by it.

"You think too much," Sasuke said into his mouth. "I never thought I'd say that."

"Mmmm...." Naruto shifted, moving Sasuke's fingers with him, and tilted his neck back and stretched a little. "Sasuke...."

"Okay," Sasuke whispered. "Get ready." He laid his hands on Naruto's hips, moved his legs apart, and settled in between them. And then he pushed, and Naruto reared up because shit, now it did hurt, maybe worse than that arm bent at five different angles. He squeezed his eyes shut and cursed under his breath when he found that tears were gathering under his closed lids. He was Uzumaki
Naruto, dammit, and he was not going to cry.

"Okay. Okay." Sasuke's voice sounded different, deeper and hoarser, strained. Naruto opened his eyes a little and saw Sasuke's face over his, looking weird, not all that different from his pained expression. Well, shit, was this going to be good for either of them? "Relax... you're too tense."

"That's because you've got your dick up my ass, stupid," Naruto bit out.

Sasuke snorted. Naruto opened his eyes all the way, watching him: Sasuke's face was changing, even as the pain was getting less. He bit his lip, then bent his head, and Naruto ran his eyes over the arch of his spine and the heaving of his back. Sasuke breathed deeply, once, twice, then lifted his head again and nuzzled against Naruto's neck again. "Relax," he repeated. "Relax."

He did, biting his lip, and thought that the pain was getting better. Chewing on his lip, Naruto moved his hips, experimentally, and heard Sasuke moan, long and heartfelt. "You can move," he told Sasuke, knotting his hands in the bedsheets. "You're supposed to, right?"

Sasuke nodded, then propped himself up on one arm and reached with his other to move Naruto's leg; then he leaned down, bent his head and thrusted. Naruto jerked and moaned, himself, without meaning to. Sasuke thrust again, his eyes getting heavy, mouth going lax with pleasure, and then he was moving into a steady rhythm and the hot-pleasure feeling spread through Naruto's body, in his dick, at his spine, radiating in spikes all throughout his body. Sasuke whispered something, muffled in his neck; might've been his name. He leaned down and kissed Naruto, lips and tongue working frantically, thrusting in time with his hips. The pleasure was almost painful, now, he was rock hard; Naruto clutched frantically at the sheets, digging his fingers and his heels into the bed, then reached up to wrap his arms around Sasuke's neck, pushing himself closer. Sasuke groaned, cursed, propped himself on one arm again and used the other to lift up Naruto's leg and settle it over his shoulder, then did the same with the other leg. Then he let go, and they fell onto the bed together.

And that was it, that was perfect. Naruto bit into Sasuke's shoulder, groaning as he thrust harder and faster. Sasuke was pressing kisses against his face, wet and messy, whispering and moaning against his mouth; he thrust once more, groaned heavily, thrust again and came, deep and hot in Naruto.

And he went still, breathing hot against Naruto's neck, one arm tucked under Naruto's back and the other flung across the bed. Biting his lip, Naruto freed one hand from beneath his stomach and grabbed his dick, bringing himself to a fast and messy climax. Then, hesitantly, he wrapped his arms around Sasuke's heaving back. He stared up at the ceiling, at the colored lights on the ceiling from the gambling houses and brothels outside. Eventually, while he stroked his back, Sasuke's breathing evened out and he fell asleep; Naruto stayed awake and spent the night running a hand over the curse seal, again and again and again.

In the morning Sasuke was gone, and the next time Naruto saw him the body, face and voice were Sasuke's, but it was Orochimaru smiling behind Sasuke's mask.

He went home and began dating women.
Chapter 4

"What time is it?" Nagi asked, lifting his head from his arm for a moment.

Kaiki glanced at his watch. "Almost nine."

"Shit! He's really late this morning."

Kaiki sighed and shifted his butt on the rail, trying to find a more comfortable position. "We should start bringing fishing poles," he said, looking out across the lake. "And then we can have free lunch."

"Huh!" Nagi put his head back on his arm and closed his eyes. "If we catch anything. Which we won't."

Naruto-sensei was usually late, but only by five or ten minutes - he wasn't like some instructors Kaiki had heard about, who made their students wait two or three hours just to see if they'd give up and go home. Today, though, Kaiki had arrived early, like he always did; Hikaru had arrived on the dot; and Nagi had stumbled up, yawning, two minutes late and they'd all sat down together to wait like they always did. And they'd waited, and waited.

Kaiki would worry if Naruto-sensei wasn't a jounin and all. Still.... He lifted his thumb to his lips and bent his head to gnaw at a hangnail, frowning up at the sky and the sun that was lifting higher, getting brighter. "Jeez. What do you think he's doing?"

"Jerking off," Hikaru muttered.

"Gross!" Nagi shuddered. "Oh, man, now I'm *seeing* it! Thanks a lot. Man, girls aren't supposed to be that pervy."

Their teammate had spread her jacket out on the bridge and was sitting on it, drinking coolly from her water canteen. She finished her sip, capped the bottle, and tucked it back into her pouch, wiping her mouth. "I'm not pervy. He's really the type of guy to do something like that."

"I dunno," Kaiki said, watching a trout glide through the river. "Aren't all jounin like that? They're all a little nuts. He seems kind of on the sane side, even. Some of the jounin I know, they're really paranoid or they've got weird patterns or... I dunno. Stuff. I guess it gets to you, in the end."

"I guess." Nagi moved his head so he was looking at them. "I've never really thought about it, you know? What it's like to kill somebody and stuff like that."

"Or to have a friend die," said Hikaru.

"Your teammate even."

"Okay, okay," said Kaiki. "God. You're going to make me cry."

Hikaru almost smiled; Kaiki could see her mouth shift under the rim of her jacket, but she quenched the expression. She said, "Naruto-sensei's not bad, but we're not learning as much as the other genin teams. And we've only completed one mission."

"They're slow because of the wars," Nagi said. "With Sand working against us behind our backs, they take a lot of our missions away."

"It's still funny, though," Kaiki said slowly. "I hadn't thought about it, but Naruto-sensei's really
respected. Not here in Konoha - all the adults here think he's a jerkoff - but I know he's always being called away on missions. Way more than a jounin usually is. You'd think clients would be all over us - we're his first genin team ever."

"Maybe," Hikaru said, "he's turning missions down."

Nagi sat straight up, eyes burning with fire. ":*What*? Oh, shit, if he is I am going to be so pissed! We could be famous by now! We could be almost ready to take the chuunin exams!"

"I think...." Kaiki swiveled to face his teammates, knocking the backs of his legs against the railing thoughtfully. "It seems like he's teaching us really slowly. You know? Feeling us out, sort of. Do you think his teammate died? That Uchiha Sasuke."

Hikaru shrugged. "No way to know. No one will talk about him. I even asked my father." This was the first time she'd mentioned anyone in her family. "He told me he was a traitor, and he wouldn't say anything else."

"That's what my dad said," Nagi agreed.

"It just sounds like he's been burned, is all. So he's going slow. Still, give me a break. We can handle a few C missions." Kaiki sighed, slipping his finger under his forehead protector to scratch an itch.

An hour and thirty minutes had passed. Hikaru said, "I don't think he's coming."

"We should wait, though...."

"Kaiki, I don't think he is either," said Nagi, looking up at him.

Kaiki hesitated. "Me either," he finally said. "Maybe we should go into town and ask around. See what's up."

"Shit, I say we get breakfast!" Nagi hopped to his feet and smacked his hands together. "I'm starving."

Hikaru stood, folding her arms. "I'm hungry, too."

"Well.... okay, let's get breakfast, but we can still ask around on the way."

He hopped off the railing and joined his teammates, and they walked down the bridge towards the center of town, where the market and food stalls were. The market was bustling with people - housewives buying food for that night's meal, children buying candy, ninja grabbing a bite to eat before heading off for missions. Kaiki waved at the ninja he recognized; a lot were friends of his father who frequented their shop. A group of Aburames were huddled on the side of the street; Hikaru nodded to them, bowing her head respectfully. "Our clan head is officially choosing his successor tomorrow," she explained. "Not everyone is pleased with his choice."

Nagi's family weren't part of a huge clan, but he still knew quite a few people, and he shouted their names out cheerfully; one stall owner, who recognized him, tossed him a bright red apple. Nagi bit into it, offered a bite to Kaiki, who accepted.

They settled into seats at a sushi bar and ordered. Kaiki had taken to crab sushi and asked for that, while Nagi and Hikaru ordered more mundane varieties.

"Excuse me, master," Kaiki said as he was handed his dish. "Can I ask you something?"
The master paused and leaned on the counter, wiping away some sweat on his forehead with a nod. "I'll see if I can answer your question, sure."

"Our instructor is Uzumaki Naruto, and he's missing this morning... do you know where he is? Is he on a mission or something?"

The master turned his head to the side and spat on the floor. "Dunno where that one is," he said, turning away. "Don't care."

They looked at each other, and Kaiki sighed. "Okay," he said, picking up his chopsticks. "I guess we can try someone else."

"If we want to get the same responses," Nagi chortled. "Sensei ain't popular."

"You won't find your instructor around anytime soon. He's gone."

A woman had sat close by them - at least, Kaiki was fairly sure she hadn't been there when they'd sat down - taking her seat with all the stealth that the forehead protector tied around her bright hair suggested she should have. She looked around the same age as Naruto-sensei, if a little more tired around the eyes; but her smile was friendly as she looked over at them.

"Oh!" Kaiki said, setting down his chopsticks and blushing. "I'm sorry, I didn't recognize you, Sakura-san."

"It's all right. Kaiki, right?" She nodded to him. "We've only met a few times."

"This is Haruno Sakura-san," Kaiki said to his teammates. "She's a med-nin, friends with one of my cousins. These are my teammates, Nagi and Hikaru."

"You know our dropout instructor?" Nagi asked, setting his chin in one hand.

Haruno-san smiled wryly. "Naruto's more infamous than I am, but we were teammates. We still work together occasionally, actually." She paused briefly to order from the owner, then turned back to them wearing a thoughtful expression on her face. "So he didn't tell you he was leaving... not surprised. That's Naruto. He's always been inconsiderate - but he usually doesn't mean to be. It probably didn't even occur to him to tell you."

"Are you kidding? We were up at eight waiting for him," said Nagi.

"I'm sure. Like I said, he usually doesn't mean it. He'll be baffled when he gets back and hears that you were waiting for him."

Kaiki had been digging around his sushi, eating the last bits, but he looked over at Haruno-san. She had received her sushi, as well, but hadn't started eating yet; she was still turned to them. He had first met her a long time ago - he'd been little - but he'd been noticing the look on her face ever since; she always looked a little sad, like she had been expecting things to go a certain way and they'd ended up going down a different path. "Can I ask?" he said, and Haruno-san fixed her eyes on him. "Where did he go, I mean?"

"Ah. Well." She looked at her sushi, poked it half-heartedly. "I can't tell you because I don't really know. It's... someone's birthday today. He always leaves."

"Is he visiting them?" Hikaru looked like the answer should be obvious.

Haruno-san smiled. "You could say that."
"Who is it?" Nagi asked through a mouthful of food.

"Nagi!" Kaiki elbowed him. "Jeez. She doesn't want to say."

"No, that's all right. It's our teammate, Uchiha Sasuke. Today is his birthday."

Silence fell, very uncomfortably, in the tiny stall; even the master in the back stopped moving around. Kaiki glanced at his teammates, who gazed back looking how he felt: she'd given a simple answer, but there were unspoken things lurking in her words, things they wanted to know but couldn't ask politely. Finally, Kaiki said, "Oh."

"Well," Nagi said, "how come you're not visiting him, too?"

Her smile flickered. She looked down at her sushi. "I'm sure I could, if I wanted to, but the truth is... he probably wouldn't want me to, and it's a little dangerous besides."

So Uchiha Sasuke, their instructor's teammate, was a traitor like they'd said.

"I've been telling Naruto for years he shouldn't chase after him, but he insists. So. That's where your instructor is. He won't be back for a few days, and..." Haruno-san looked up from her sushi, and looked out into the market for a long time. "He won't want to see anyone, after he gets back, for a while, either. I'll speak with Tsunade-sama and see if it's all right if I train you until he's ready."

They murmured their thanks, and she smiled, told them it was nothing. And then, because the pause was very uncomfortable, and because Haruno-san looked like she would rather be alone - they left.

The walk back to the bridge was silent. Kaiki wanted to break it, but both his teammates looked like they were thinking on what Haruno-san had said; so he gazed up at the sky and wondered what to make of all this. It sounded simple enough to him. Uchiha Sasuke had probably defected to the Sound side back in the beginning of the long wars; Naruto-sensei was chasing him, trying to capture him or maybe kill him, because that's what Kaiki would do if Nagi did something like that. But... he had a feeling he was missing something. There was so much she hadn't said, that was obvious enough. It made him itch, knowing he was missing something.

"Let's go after him," Nagi said suddenly, loud in the silence. He stopped, and Kaiki and Hikaru stopped with him, looked at him skeptically. "Really. That jerk up and leaves us, the most we can do is go after him, right? He's our damn instructor! Besides, we might get in a little training on the way."

"We have no idea where he is," Hikaru said, eyebrows rising into her hairline.

"Sure we do," said Nagi. "He's gotta be around here somewhere, or else Naruto-sensei wouldn't be going after him. There're tons of gambling towns in this country; they're probably there. We can just go from town to town and we'll probably find them! Hell, maybe we can help Naruto-sensei take him down!"

Kaiki glanced at Hikaru, who saw the question in his eyes and shrugged. He hesitated, hands going into his pockets. "Well... I guess that doesn't sound too bad...."

"That's what ninja do, right? We chase and we train and we capture the bad guys. I mean," Nagi threw up his hands, "if Naruto-sensei isn't going to take us on missions and he isn't going to train us, what else can we do?"

Hikaru said, "If worse comes to worst, I'm sure we can take of ourselves. We can handle the average thug. And if we happen onto this Uchiha Sasuke...."
"If we can't manage him, Naruto-sensei can for sure," Kaiki said. He sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. "Okay. If Hikaru's okay, I'm game."

"I'm okay," Hikaru said after a pause.

Nagi grinned and settled his hands on their shoulders. "Then let's hunt Sensei."

Naruto was packing his things when a knock came at his door. Cursing under his breath, he dropped a shirt into his bag and kicked it under his bed before heading to the door. He looked out the peephole but couldn't see anyone; but the chakra in the hall was warm, friendly and familiar, so he opened the door.

"Oh," he said to the woman standing in front of him. "Hey, Hinata. It's been a while."

Hinata smiled her shy smile, nodding. "Hi, Naruto." She looked around him into his apartment, then back up at him and said cautiously, "Is it all right if I come in?"

"Oh, yeah," Naruto said, laughing a little and stepping out of the entryway. "Sorry, Hinata, it's really early." He closed the door behind her, and leaned his hip on it, crossing his arms. "So, can I do something for you?"

Hinata clasped her hands together and looked at the floor. "Not really... I just thought I would..." She hesitated, then burst out, "You're leaving, aren't you, Naruto? Sakura told me... that you leave every year. I didn't know. I'm sorry...."

"Yeah," Naruto said, uncomfortably. "Yeah, I am leaving."

She nodded, casting her eyes down again. Hinata was twenty now, same as him, but she still had some of the qualities of her old twelve-year-old self: that long, long temper, patient through all the games Naruto played; a bit of stubbornness; and her painful awkwardness around people she cared for deeply. She still stuttered around Neji sometimes.

"Here." Naruto grasped her elbow, gently, and led her to the kitchen. "You want some coffee? I woulda made some breakfast if I'd known you were coming, but all I've got's coffee."

"Coffee's fine," she said, sitting down carefully in one of his rickety old chairs and folding her hands on the table. "Black, please."

"Yeah," Naruto said, pouring two cups. "I remember how you take it." He sat down across from her, handing her a cup, and they sipped at their drinks in silence for a moment. Morning light was spilling through in bars through the window, bathing Hinata and softening her face. Naruto cleared his throat and dropped his eyes, stirring his coffee.

"Hinata!" He didn't feel like smiling but he did it anyway. "Sure, I'm coming back. I mean," he shrugged, "no one in Konoha likes havin' me around, but where else would I go?"

"Don't say that," she said, putting her hand on his. "You know it isn't true."
"It's almost true." She had nice hands, always had, small and white with straight-cut nails. The thing he'd always liked best about them was that they were always warm. "You know, Hinata... you know where I'm going, right?"

Hinata nodded, the sad look seeping into her eyes. She looked down and squeezed his hand.

"Then I guess... when I said I was coming back, I was sort of lying. I mean, he could always kill me. Funny thing is, I wonder sometimes why he hasn't."

"Maybe," Hinata said softly, "that means Sasuke is still in there somewhere. You hope that, don't you?"

Naruto smiled, letting go of her hand to rub at his wrist. "You know... Hinata..." She tilted her head at him. "I dunno," he said, sighing. "I don't know what I was gonna say."

They sipped their coffee for a moment. Naruto looked out the window, at the streets of Konoha with the children playing, tugging on their parents' wrists and tussling with each other. He set his cheek in one hand and watched two boys wrestle around on the ground, saw them roll and finally come to a stop with one on top of the other, lifting his hands into the air triumphantly.

"Naruto. You don't chase after him to kill Orochimaru, do you?" She smiled. "I didn't think so. You're such a kind person. That's what I liked about you, all those years ago. Everyone was so cruel to you, but you were never cruel back."

"Aw, come on," Naruto said, flashing her his canines. "That isn't true. Sasuke and I fought all the time, and I gave as good as I got."

"That's different. That's how you and Sasuke talked to each other." Hinata set down her empty cup and stood, walking over to the sink and turning on the water to rinse it clean. She said over her shoulder, "If you do what you're leaving to do... and you don't come back... is it all right if I train your genin?"

Naruto looked at his coffee, then lifted it to his lips, draining his cup down to the dregs. "I'd like that," he said quietly, standing and dropping his cup into the sink. The water sprayed off it. He stood close to Hinata, and she looked up at him with her blank, sad eyes; then she wrapped her arms around his waist, dropped her head onto his shoulder, and Naruto embraced her, touched her skin, wrapped his fingers in her silky hair.

"And I'll tell Sakura," Hinata murmured into his skin, "I'll tell her what you've really been doing, all these years. She won't be surprised...."

Naruto lifted her chin with his fingers, dropped his head down to meet hers; he loved kissing Hinata, always had, because she was as soft and gentle kissing as she was in everyday life. He pulled her closer, crushing her breasts flat against his chest, and tangled his tongue around hers lazily. Her face was wet - tears on her cheeks, he realized, and closed his eyes.

She pulled her mouth away from his, settling her face back onto his shoulder. "Goodbye, Naruto," Hinata said quietly; then she was gone, stepping away from him and walking out of the kitchen, and the door banged behind her.

Naruto leaned against the kitchen counter. He moved his tongue in his mouth, tasting bits of Hinata - she'd had something sweet for breakfast, and eaten a mint before coming here. He looked back out the window, but the sparring boys were gone. He pushed himself off the counter and went back into his room, and finished packing.
When he had zipped his bag, he sat on his bed and looked around his apartment. He was twenty now, not a kid anymore, but the walls still held his old posters from years ago: his ramen poster was beginning to yellow, and the old tapestry with the Konoha leaf symbol stirred with the breeze. He ran his finger over its soft threads.

His old pictures were still on his dresser - him and Team 7, Kakashi leaning over them while they smiled all their goofy kid smiles, except for Sasuke who just glared at the camera. Another picture was with all nine rookies; Sasuke and Neji stared with twin sullen expressions at him, and there was Hinata looking as shy as ever, Chouji and Shikamaru with their arms around each other and Shikamaru's arms around him; the girls standing together, Ino and Tenten and Sakura, Sakura with a jubilantly grinning Lee next to her.

Taped to the wall was a picture of him and Jiraiya; Naruto remembered the day Tsunade had taken that picture, with him on top of the old perv's shoulders while Jiraiya smiled his wolfish smile. And, next to that one, his most recent photograph of him and his genin, those three weird kids. Naruto smiled at the deerish look on the boys' faces. They weren't bad kids. If he didn't come back home, Hinata would take good care of them.

And that was it; this was his life, bundled into this tiny shack of an apartment, all of it beginning to crack and fade with age while he left the new things to chase after the past. Naruto fingered his forehead protector, running his nails over old gouges and chinks in the metal. He stared at Sasuke's face looking at him from eight years ago, and wondered what he'd been thinking. He always wondered what Sasuke was thinking, if he even thought at all anymore.

Naruto stood, plucking the picture of Team 7 off the dresser and digging the photograph out from its frame. He stuck it in his pocket, then reached for his jacket and shrugged into it, lifting the hood to hide his face. Then he grabbed his bag, slung it over his shoulder and left the apartment. He didn't bother to lock it.

He'd long ago learned the scent of Orochimaru's chakra mixing with Sasuke's. This time, the trail stopped in a little tourist town south of Konoha, one full of casinos and brothels and packed with petty criminals. Naruto rented a room in a moldy hotel, paid in cash and noticed eyes on him as he went to his room, smelling the stench of greed. He locked the door and threw himself on the bed.

Orochimaru had a sense of humor, at least; this was the same town Sasuke had spent his last night in six years ago.
Chapter 5

Tsunade steepled her fingers. "So Orochimaru is within a hundred miles of Konoha, and Naruto and his team are gone."

"That would be the situation," Jiraiya drawled, stretching out further on her couch. He had tried wiggling his fingers at Shizune earlier to get her attention, but she had ignored him staunchly and Tsunade wasn't in the mood for games, either. He sighed, scratching his nose idly.

"And you're telling me this why?"

"You're not planning to do anything?" returned Jiraiya, eyes narrowing.

His old teammate frowned, digging her thumb into her temple. "I'm always at a loss to do when Orochimaru is involved, to be honest. Besides, Naruto's been chasing him for years and he's always returned safely. His strength alone is equal to about four jounins - why should I send out a team when he's proven he can take care of himself?"

"It's Sasuke's twenty-first birthday."

Frowning, Tsunade turned in her seat to look at her calendar. "All right, so it is, but what does that have to do with anything?"

"Naruto's mind works in weird ways," Jiraiya said, pointing a finger at his temple and making a 'crazy' motion. "Orochimaru once promised him he'd let Sasuke's body go on this day. Yada yada yada, if you defeat me, yada yada - a bunch of bullshit that only Orochimaru can pull off with a straight face."

"Oh, please. Surely Naruto knows he didn't mean that."

Jiraiya shrugged. "The kid's not smart, you know that. Besides, he's always had a problem with separating Orochimaru from his host body. When Orochimaru says something, all he sees is Sasuke saying it."

"His host body," Tsunade repeated, and sighed. "That's all Uchiha Sasuke is anymore. But Naruto can't see it. Still... he's been going out on Sasuke's birthday for years, this is nothing new. Why should I be concerned?"

"Aside from the fact that Naruto's your most valuable jounin, and that there's evidence he's left Konoha for good?" Jiraiya said with raised eyebrows.

Tsunade leaned forward. "What evidence? I saw him just two days ago, he was acting perfectly naturally. He was asking about a mission he was interested in, that starts in a week."

"All the valuables from his apartment are gone, and it's been left unlocked. He spoke to Sakura yesterday, and the Hyuga heir this morning. All that seems normal," Jiraiya said, shrugging and leaning back against the couch, "but when it's the Uchiha's twenty-first birthday and Naruto is gone, you start to get a little suspicious."

"And his genin team? Why did he take them with him?"

"Looks like he didn't. I saw them at the bridge this morning, waiting for him - they must have taken off after him. Dumbasses."
"All right. All right," said Tsunade, and spread her hands. "I believe you, Jiraiya. He's probably haring off to do something stupid. But what can I do about it? He's defended himself from Orochimaru - hell, from the Akatsuki organization - for eight years. I've only got a limited number of jounin in this village, and theoretically if I send a team after him, that's going to be eight jounin lost. Orochimaru could smash them like bugs."

"Well," said Jiraiya, "then we've got ourselves a problem, don't we." He sat up and folded his arms, his face taking on the expression so few saw - eyes narrowing, mouth straightening. Tsunade was still surprised when she saw Jiraiya so serious. "Tsunade. Naruto has played this game with Orochimaru for years. He's not going to kill him. Ever."

"We don't know that. His strength might not be at its peak yet... Naruto's good, but Orochimaru is legendary for a reason, you know, Jiraiya." Privately, she thought that Jiraiya still felt the old spark of their rivalry, insisted on underestimating him because of it.

"Don't kid yourself, Tsunade," Jiraiya said, curling his lip. "You've never seen Naruto lose it. I have. My student put the kyubi inside him for a reason - he wanted him to be unbeatable. And he *is.*"

"He doesn't know half the jutsus Orochimaru does," Tsunade snorted. "And he's not nearly as clever as even Sasuke was."

"He's not, but the kyuuubi is. It won't allow its host body to be killed."

Tsunade unfolded her fingers and said, quietly, "Like Orochimaru?"

Jiraiya smiled slightly. "Don't think, Tsunade," he said in just as muted a tone, "that because he's my student I've got any delusions about what's inside him. I love the kid, you know I do, but in the grand scheme of things - when he's in the heat of battle - he's not much more than a shell for a murderer."

"So." Tsunade leaned back in her seat, glancing again at the calendar. She'd started putting marking this date many years back, when Naruto had first begun sneaking out of the village. "Even if what you're saying is true - and I think you're grossly simplifying the situation - then it's in the kyuuubi's best interest to kill Orochimaru. He's a threat."

"He's not much of one alive," Jiraiya shrugged. "Hunt him, though, and that's when the problem arises. Orochimaru's a canny bastard and he's got jutsus out the wazoo - I'm sure the kyuuubi is wary. So, on an instinctual level-" he held up a finger- "you have the kyuuubi not wanting to fight Orochimaru. And whatever's going on in that kid's brain, it's pretty clear Naruto doesn't want to kill Orochimaru." He held up another finger. "It isn't three strikes, but it's close enough."

"Well," Tsunade muttered, pinching the bridge of her nose, "I'm so glad you decided to share your thoughts with me, five years after the fact, Jiraiya."

"I wasn't really thinking clearly," Jiraiya admitted. "I guess I was thinking like you - that Naruto would be ready to wring Orochimaru's neck. And finally... I just got apathetic."

"What should I do?" Tsunade leaned forward, looking into Jiraiya's pensive eyes, trying to unravel his thoughts. Don't hide from me, you big kid.

"Well, that," said her old friend, putting his hands behind his head, "is the jackpot question, Tsunade-hime."

Hikaru stopped in the middle of a river, jerking Kaiki and Nagi to a stop as well, and looked around.
"There's someone following us," she said.

"Oh, shit." Nagi let go of Kaiki's hand and almost fell into the rushing water. "Who the fuck is it?"

"I can't tell." She tilted her head. "It sounds like... an adult male. Jounin level. I almost couldn't tell he was there."

"Shit," Kaiki said under his breath. "We should move to the trees."

"Negative," said Hikaru. "The footing is less secure in the trees. Normally, this would be an advantage, but this time it's his because he has more experience. He'll eat us alive if we move to the trees." Uncharacteristically sharply, she added, "Can't you two *think*?"

"Oh, screw you. Let's hide, then."

She disappeared in a puff of smoke; Kaiki swore and grabbed Nagi's wrist, leaping out of the river with him and jumping onto solid ground. He looked around and said, "Over here," and dragged Nagi with him into some nearby brush. They crouched down, crowding each other; Kaiki clamped a hand over his mouth, and Nagi quickly emulated him.

Silence filled the clearing; only the birds were chirping. Kaiki tried to control his breathing, but it was getting faster, he was close to hyperventilating; he'd never done anything like this, he'd barely been on any missions. The brush rustled as Nagi felt for and grabbed his hand. They looked at each other, Nagi's eyes wide and green and flecked with fear, and Kaiki dredged up a reassuring smile. "It'll be fine," he mouthed. He wrapped his free arm around Nagi's shoulders, and they huddled closer together.

A frog waddled into the clearing.

Kaiki dropped his hand from his mouth, narrowing his eyes as he blinked and looked again. He wasn't going crazy: a frog had really walked into the clearing, a frog wearing a shirt, holding a sake battle and looking around.

"What the fuck," Nagi said, and the frog turned around and looked straight at them.

Kaiki smacked him. "What the hell, Nagi-"

"Boss!" the frog squeaked, leaping into the air and disappearing from their sight. "They're over here!"

Kaiki exploded out of the clearing, Nagi close behind him. "Good job, idiot," he said over his shoulder. "And don't give me that look, you just gave us away big time. Fuck! You use Kage Bunshin to distract them and then I'll use my mind techniques - *Ow*!"

"Kaiki!" his friend yelled, and was blindsided by the same invisible hand; it knocked him off his feet and he fell onto his back on the ground, blinking up dazedly at the sky.

Kaiki had gone to his knees; he clutched his head, groaning and feeling for blood at the back. There wasn't any, but *shit* someone had hit him so hard his vision was blurring. So much for a coordinated attack - you couldn't use the Yamanaka mind attacks if you couldn't see your goddamned opponent.

Then a long shadow fell on him, blocking his view of Nagi. Fuzzily, Kaiki looked up into a very unimpressed face: it was an older man, intimidating with a long prickly mane of hair and blood-red marks running down weathered cheeks. The man raised one hand, and blue chakra began to glow in
it, chakra so powerful Kaiki could feel the heat of it from where he stood -
- and Yamanaka Kaiki finally knew what it was to fear death.

The man's chakra dissipated and he dropped his hand. "Yamanaka Kaiki," he said; "Anshirou Nagi. You're the students of Uzumaki Naruto?"

Kaiki couldn't move, much less speak; from behind him he heard Nagi say, in petrified tones, "Who the hell are you?"

The man scowled, setting his hands on his hips. "A very disappointed teacher," he said. "I teach that brat everything he needs to know, and he turns out students like this? When I see him, I'm going to kick his ass so hard he feels it every time he walks." He sighed and bent down into a crouch, eye-level with Kaiki. "Well," he said, "Kaiki, Nagi. I take it you're trying to find your teacher?"

Kaiki wet his lips and swallowed experimentally. Quietly, he said, "That's right."

"You can't be Naruto-sensei's teacher," Nagi said, managing to argue even in a life-or-death situation. "His teacher's dead."

The man snorted, then lifted his arms and sniffed himself. "Well, I say I seem pretty alive. And since I smacked the shit out of you two, you probably think so too. My name ain't Kakashi, if that's what you're wondering. It's Jiraiya."

"Jiraiya?" Kaiki stared at him. "Jiraiya - one of the legendary - you're one of the Sannin? *That* Jiraiya?"

The man grinned, lips pulling back in a feral twist, and lifted two thumbs up. "You're damn right I'm one of the Sannin. And you two," he said, on an afterthought, "are two of the most pathetic ninja I've ever seen in my entire life."

"Here." Jiraiya tossed him the bedrolls, and Kaiki caught them without speaking and spread them out on the ground across from the fire. Hikaru glanced up briefly from poking the logs feeding the flames, then looked back down.

He and Nagi settled onto the bedrolls, pulling up the blankets to cover their feet. Kaiki had never been in the forest and hadn't known how cold it got at night; he hadn't even thought to bring bed supplies, he thought they'd hit a town by this time. He was glad they'd been found... even if it was by someone more arrogant and annoying than Naruto-sensei.

"I'm hungry again," Nagi whispered to him as he settled his head on the pillow.

"We just ate an hour ago."

"I know, man." Nagi looked shamefaced. "But I get hungry when I'm nervous, and this dude makes me really nervous."

"I heard that," said Jiraiya, crouching down to check the fire. The red light lit the somber lines of his face, very different from the cheerful face he'd shown them a few hours ago. At night, he looked tired and worn. He stood, pulling his cloak tighter around his shoulders, and walked over to his own bedroll.

There was a rustling noise as Hikaru settled onto her pallet and pulled up her blanket. Kaiki looked
over at the old ninja, who was facing away from him, then reached into his pouch and pulled out some jerky. He handed it to Nagi.

"Jiraiya-san," he said quietly, "can I ask you something?"

"Hrmph." Jiraiya pulled his blanket around his ears, but said, "Sure, whatever. Shoot. Make it quick."

"What happened to Uchiha Sasuke?"

Jiraiya was silent, leaving Kaiki to listen uncomfortably to the sounds of the forest at night: the crackle of their fire, rustling from the woods beyond, the cries of birds hunting down food for their children. Then Jiraiya turned, pushed down his blanket and sat up, regarding them.

"Uchiha Sasuke," he said, rubbing his face. "Uchiha Sasuke was... well. Surely you know what happened to his family?"

"All the Uchihas are dead," said Hikaru, propping herself up on her elbows. "At least, that's what I thought until I heard that Uchiha Sasuke was alive."

"Yes, the Uchihas are dead. Sasuke is searching for their murderer, a man named Itachi." Jiraiya ran his eyes over Kaiki and Nagi, then looked off into the fire and paused for a long moment. "He and Naruto had a strange relationship. They were rivals - friends in their own way. So it was difficult for Naruto when Sasuke defected and joined Orochimaru, a snakey bastard that, trust me on this one, kids, you don't wanna get to know. Orochimaru is a parasite: he has perfected the technique of slipping from body to body."

Kaiki's eyes widened. "That's one of the most forbidden techniques."

"Yeah, it is." Jiraiya chuckled a little. "For good reason. Well, Sasuke joined Orochimaru in order to gain more power. The way Orochimaru planned to give him power was to take over his body."

"So he lied to Uchiha?" Nagi asked, sounding horrified. "He told him he'd give him power, but he really wanted to take his body?"

"Oh, no," said Jiraiya, letting out a small laugh. "Sasuke knew this. He knew it, and he joined Orochimaru, and in due time Orochimaru took his body. He's in it now. That's why your teacher - my silly pupil - is after Orochimaru."

"To kill him?" Kaiki murmured.

"Who knows?" Jiraiya shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know what's going through Naruto's mind. He's hunted Orochimaru for years but he hasn't killed him yet. This time might be different, or it might not."

"I don't understand," Hikaru said. "Is Sasuke... is Uchiha Sasuke alive? I mean, he may have gained Orochimaru's power in a way, but isn't he... I mean, two minds can't exist in one body, can they?"

"Again. That's something no one knows, not even Naruto." Jiraiya looked away from them again, eyes narrowing at some private thought. "If Sasuke is dead, I'm sure Orochimaru has strung Naruto along and let him think that he's still alive, and can be rescued. That's the sort of person Orochimaru is. Which is why I've come after you three - no need for you to be mixed up in this."

"But you're letting us go to the town anyway," Kaiki said, and then wasn't sure. "Right?"
"I'll keep an eye on you there. I'd lose too much time if I took you back."

Kaiki glanced over at Nagi, seeing the smile in his friend's eyes. He breathed a sigh of relief. At least they weren't going to be led home by their hands, like children.

Hikaru rested her chin on her knees, looked over at Jiraiya. "It must be hard for Naruto-sensei," she said, "not knowing whether Uchiha is dead or alive."

Jiraiya shrugged. "It makes him weak, and that's all that matters. His enemy plays on his vulnerability. The stupid kid's lucky he's kept his head until this point." He turned and lay back down, signaling the end of conversation.

Breathing out carefully, Kaiki lay down, too. Beside him, Nagi rustled around for a few minutes before settling, and soon his breathing - along with the old man's beside him - soon evened out into the slow rhythms of sleep.

"Kaiki?" Hikaru whispered.

He looked over and saw her sitting up; without her jacket collar obscuring it, he could see her face, with a round kid's jaw like his and big cheeks that almost made him smile. He didn't know what he'd been expecting - maybe a miniature adult, for her to look like she sounded. But she had the same baby fat and big eyes as he did, and here out in the woods, at night, the only light the flickering one from the fire, she looked subdued, almost scared. Kaiki sat up, too, and said, "What's up, Hikaru?"

"I don't know." The fire illuminated, for a second, her hands clasped together and fingers circling each other, over and over again, in a nervous tic. "I just... my family doesn't talk about this a lot, you know? I grew up thinking that being a ninja would be... different."

Different... yeah, he had, too. Thought it would be all glory and power and beating down the bad guys, and here they were chasing after their teacher, who wasn't chasing after a bad guy at all but a teammate. A friend. Kaiki thought about Naruto-sensei's smiles and his joking voice, never taking anything seriously at all; him telling them, 'I don't want to know you.'

In his place, Kaiki wouldn't want to get to know anyone, either.

"I know," he settled for saying.

In the morning they all packed their things in silence, watching Jiraiya's back as he gave out orders without ever turning around - officially, in a tone that brooked no objections or even any small talk. Kaiki hefted his backpack onto his shoulders and, seeing his friend struggle with his share of the pots and pans, took some of his burdens without saying a word. Nagi smiled, looking a little embarrassed, and Kaiki punched his shoulder before turning around and following Jiraiya. They started walking through the forest in a line, like ducklings following their mother.

Kaiki no longer thought this was cool. He didn't even feel glad anymore that they weren't being sent back to the village. He had a feeling they would be unwelcome burdens, if they ended up finding Naruto-sensei at all.

Into the heavy silence of the morning, Jiraiya turned his face to look at the veil of leaves obscuring the sky and said, "It'd be faster to travel by tree."

Kaiki and Nagi glanced at each other, then at Hikaru, who raised her shoulders in a shrug. "All right," Kaiki said quietly - Jiraiya had a funny expression on his face. He looked like he wanted to
hurry - he looked like he was worried about Naruto-sensei. That made Kaiki feel even weirder.

Jiraiya nodded, still looking up at the trees. Then he looked back down, and - breaking the deafening silence - let out a huge guffaw and slapped his hands down on Kaiki and Nagi's heads. "Hey, you brats! Don't look so worried. Your teacher's tougher than he acts, you know."

He pinched their cheeks, pulled them out of shape, and let them go to slap back against their faces. Kaiki rubbed his cheek and swore under his breath. Did *all* adults get like this when they reached this age?

Jiraiya placed one foot on the base of a tree, looked over his shoulder. "Hey. Come on, good-for-nothings," he said. "Come on, bug-girl." He ran up the tree, almost too fast for them to follow, and they heard the branches crack as he jumped to another tree.

"Hey - hey - wait up!" Nagi protested, falling in behind Kaiki as he hopped up the tree. "You old freak -! You're going to leave us behind, bastard!"

Jiraiya laughed from some distance away and yelled at them, voice echoing through the forest, "This is survival training, kiddies. You get left behind, I ain't comin' back for you!"

Ugh, Kaiki thought. This guy is like some freaky older version of Naruto-sensei. And pretty soon, they'd be *together*... he shuddered and sped up his pace - he was a weird guy, but Kaiki definitely didn't want to get left behind to be eaten by a bear. Or worse.

It was going to be a long damned day.

"And then-" Naruto slammed down his glass -"they told me that their brother had Henge'd himself into a chicken, and I needed to transform him back!"

The men at the bar broke into guffaws, and someone appreciatively poured him another drink. Naruto lifted it up in a toast and glasses clinked; a little ways across from him, someone toppled off their seat and onto the ground, prompting another uproar and more drinks all around.

It took a lot of drinks to sink past the kyuubi's stamina, but Naruto's new friends appreciated him enough that they were getting him there.

"So, kid," said the man next to him, who was sober enough not to mix up his words and thus was prompting most of the stories, "what dragged you into town? Lookin' for some ladies for a good night?" The men roared in agreement. "Or tryin' your luck a' the new casino?"

"I already did that," Naruto grinned, jiggling his wallet. "Back home, they call me Lucky." This was true: Jiraiya had been very drunk when he gave him this nickname, and he never remembered it until they were back in a gambling town, but it was true. "And they call my old master, Unlucky. 'Cause whenever he gambles he empties out his wallet and never gets any money for himself."

"That's a good arrangement, right there," someone said, pounding their glass on the table.

The bartender snorted. "Ha! They called my master Keep Away, 'cause whenever he got enough drink in 'im, didn't matter if you was a man or a broad - you better keep away from his hands!"

Everyone guffawed again, the old man near the back breaking into an asthmatic wheeze at the end. Naruto grinned, smacked the bartender on the back and said, "Shit, I'd like to meet your master - I could toss mine to him and maybe that'd keep him occupied for a while."
Someone re-filled his drink at that, and Naruto waited until the laughter had died down again to say, "But seriously, I am in town looking for someone. Any of you men see him - he's kinda hard to miss, wears all black and he's paler than milk, got some funky tattoos on his...." He gestured vaguely at his face. "He wears a hat, but maybe you saw his eyes? They're red."

The room quieted, and the bartender said, "Yeah, we seen that one. He came here. Kept to himself, but he came here. Creepy guy. I didn't like him." The men murmured in agreement. "Dunno where he's staying, but he's in here - oh, yesterday morning, it musta been."

"Great. Thanks." Naruto drained the rest of his glass and slid it over to the bartender. "If any of you see him," he said, looking out at the sea of faces suddenly gone solemn, "that's a guy who really deserves the name Keep Away. He's a missing-nin and I'm hunting him. If you see him, do me a favor and keep to yourselves." He stood, digging some money out of his wallet and tossing it onto the counter. "Thanks, old man."

Back out on the streets of the town, Naruto put his hat back on and tipped it down to cover his face. So. Sasuke was here, but where?

Where would he be?

A loud titter, clear even in the low drone of the crowd, caught his attention, and Naruto glanced behind him. He pursed his lips at the flashy signs and at the women lounging on the open porch, awfully scantily-clad for a town that purported to police itself. One woman - a girl, really, probably been down on her luck when the lady of the establishment promised her a well-paying job - caught him looking and flashed him a curving smile.

Well. It was the last place he wanted to be, which meant that Sasuke was probably there. Naruto turned and headed against the flow of the crowd, stepped unwillingly onto the porch and approached a tiny, pale girl with scared dark eyes. "Excuse me," he said, trying to sound lecherous - they couldn't see his face, for all they knew he was some perverted old man. "Is the lady of the place around?"

She looked at him with a frozen face and rose, taking his elbow in her hand, said: "Of course, honored customer."

She drew him behind a curtain and into a hot, barely-lit building. Naruto shifted uncomfortably at the sounds that seemed to pervade it, leaking out of closed doors: moans and muted yells and the wet, slippery sounds of sex. The girl let go of his arm and went over to a couch, leaning over it; then a woman rose from it, smoothly adjusting the neck of her shirt as she walked over to him.

At least she looked a bit suspicious, trying to see under the brim of his hat even as she said, "Yes, sir, were you looking for a specific kind of woman?"

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Naruto had heard kunai talked about more personally. He cleared his throat, moved carefully away from the scrape of long nails on the crook of his arm. "Yeah," he said, checking the urge to pull down his hat again. "I'm looking for... any kind, really... dark-haired, maybe. Pale." Yeah, and not too dirty, if you would.

"I see." Her long, slanted eyes narrowed. "Would Hokuto - the young lady who escorted you in- please you today, sir?"

Surreptitiously, Naruto glanced over to the couch where - Hokuto - had taken a seat. She was probably new, he thought, hunched up tight and uncomfortable on the corner of the couch like she was; but pretty, in a plain paper-and-ink sort of way. "Yeah. She's fine."
"It's a hundred ryou," said the proprietess, holding out a hand.

Naruto nodded and reached for his wallet, handing a bill to her and trying hard not to brush against her fingers - but she moved them and they touched his as she took the bill. Her skin was hot and dry, like she'd been fevered for a long time. She smiled, a glistening stretch of the lips, then turned and gestured for Hokuto; the girl rose, wiping her face of any emotion as she walked over to them.

"Hokuto-chan, take him into the back room, it's the only one free," the older woman said as she bunched the bill up in her hand. She smiled one last time at Naruto and then left on smooth gliding legs, leaving them alone together.

"Please come with me, sir," said Hokuto. She didn't take his arm as the proprietress had, just began walking without even looking back; expecting him to follow. Naruto chucked his hat down again and did, feeling as nervous as if he were the lamb and she the executioner leading him to the slaughter.

The back room proved to be a tiny room with a heavy door, lit only by a few candles stretching across the floor. It looked a little like the prisons that Naruto, as an ANBU member, had often led wayward ninjo into; it only had a small couch in it and a bed - of course - a simple one with a gauzy material cloaking it. As Hokuto closed the door and went to busy herself with the candles, Naruto spread the gauze back and touched his fingers to the bed. The sheets were clean, he decided. He hoped he burned the bedstuff whenever they were finished with a... customer.

He turned, and his breath caught in his throat as he saw Hokuto - still with cold eyes, not even having said a word - shrugging her thin yukata off her shoulders. "Whoa, whoa, whoa," Naruto said, holding up his hands. "Slow down a minute here, kid. I didn't-"

"What?" Hokuto said, hands stilling on the cloth. She raised her eyebrows. "You want to do a little cuddling first? I'm not one of the girls who will give you a fake smile." She ran her eyes over him, as calculating as a missing-nin looking for the best escape route. "You didn't look like the sort of customer to need smiles and big kitten eyes."

Ouch. This girl was harsh. Naruto sat on the bed and folded his arms, feeling - absurdly - insulted. Well, what did he look like, then? "Look, I didn't come here for - for that." Bad maneuvering, Uzumaki. What *did* you bother with getting a girl for? You could have just searched all the rooms; you're a jounin of Konoha, you have more oomph than the regular police. But... make an uproar, and the prey might startle. Best to do it this way.

"Are you having second thoughts?" asked Hokuto, tone making it an insult.

Naruto just snorted, lifting off his hat and setting it on the bed so she could see the forehead protector. Then he tugged down the neckline of his shirt to reveal the ANBU tattoo, a little bit of a lie - since he had left the ANBU two years ago - but not one he was going to be reprimanded for any time soon. "I'm looking for a missing-nin," he said, "an S-class criminal who's hiding out in this town. I need to know if he's in this... place." He touched the sheets again and lifted his fingers, disdainfully.

Her doe-black eyes had widened. She shrugged her yukata back up and re-tied her sash with quick motions, a light flush spreading up her neck.

(Sasuke's blushes had always showed up easily, too.)

"But-" Hokuto's teeth showed, worrying her bottom lip. "The mistress here - she wouldn't let me do that. It would give this place a bad name."
"Hokuto," Naruto said quietly. "This guy - he's a monster. Aren't the girls here your friends? He isn't the type of guy you want touching your friends, trust me."

"Dammit." She looked down, then back up: "All right," she said. "These rooms are all connected. I'll come with you and try to keep everyone quiet." She lit some more candles quickly and nodded for him to follow, going to the back of the room and shoving away a tapestry on the wall to reveal a door. Then she glanced at him, and said, "This missing-nin... what's he done that's so bad, anyway?"

It was clueless enough to be funny, but Naruto couldn't bring himself to smile. He was keyed up with nerves, now, even his hands tense as they held kunai against his wrists. "Worse things than murder," he murmured. "Things I have nightmares about. Open the door, okay?"

She nodded, eyes wide like a scared deer, and threw it open. Naruto stepped into the dark room quietly, blended into the shadows and felt, carefully, for the telltale black-and-red curl of Sasuke's chakra, even a little of it. He felt none, and gestured for Hokuto to come in.

"Next room," he whispered, and they stepped through the room - it was blessedly silent - and to another tapestry, another door.

It felt weird, to be stalking Sasuke so closely like this: the heat was making him sweat, little droplets running down his neck to his back, making his shirt cling to his skin. He re-gripped his kunai: nothing in this room but moans, the shifting of bodies against each other. Hokuto held his arm this time as she opened the next door.

There - a hint of red, the smell of blood. This room was silent, too. He caught Hokuto's arm and nodded to her, gestured to the room they'd just come from. "Go back," he mouthed.

She hesitated, eyes shifting to the dark bed; looked at him and, nodding with a raw, frightened look on her face, slipped back through the open door. He heard the click of the lock and turned back to the bed, fingers shifting against the sharp blades whispering against his wrist.

"I'm surprised you didn't sleep with that one, Naruto-kun. She looked so much like this body, I almost thought about taking her - but I knew you'd enjoy her more." Sasuke rose from the bed; his eyes glowed red in the darkness, Sharingan pupils turning slowly. He slid to the edge of the bed and sat still, naked except for a sheet thrown about his waist.

"Sorry. I didn't know where she's been," Naruto said. Sasuke chuckled deeply; a strange sound, always rattling him when he heard it. It sounded like... something wet slithering on the ground. "But they're so much fun to play with." He twisted his hands back behind him and grabbed something, pulling it next to his legs so Naruto could see: an arm, drained completely white except for the bright red slash down the wrist.

Naruto closed his eyes and shook his head. "Bastard," he whispered. "Fucker."

"Ah-ah, Naruto-kun. No name calling, or you won't get a treat." Sasuke waved the arm a little, his lips twisting into a gleeful smile. "Here, you can pretend she's still alive." He moved the arm between his legs, rubbing it up and down and tilting his head back, mouth opening on a sigh then curving back into a smile as Naruto shuddered. "No? You don't like that. Well, that's not very nice - I went to all the trouble of killing her and you're going and getting so squeamish."

He dropped the arm to the side and put his own hand between his legs instead, now watching Naruto with a face completely devoid of humor. "Well," he said quietly. "It's Sasuke-kun's twenty-first birthday. What did I tell you would happen on this day?"
"You said-" His fingers were trembling. Naruto clenched them against each other, biting the kunai into his skin. It didn't matter, the cuts would heal in a matter of seconds, anyway. "You said you'd let him go. But you were lying then and you were lying now, so why are you still *fucking* with me?"

"Because, Naruto-kun. It makes this body so happy when I do."

Naruto exploded into movement at that, leaping forward onto the bed and pinning Sasuke's hands beneath his, holding his wrists between one hand while the other pressed five kunai to his neck. He breathed heavily against Sasuke's face as it stared up at him, eyes blank, mouth slack. Then it lifted into a smirk.

"Oh, Naruto-kun," whispered Sasuke. "You have no idea how happy it makes this body. Its blood rushes, it perspires, it's almost - arousing, in a sense. It's a strange fact about humans, that we so hurt those closest to us - and that so often, we hate them in a way. Why is that, do you think?"

"I don't hate anyone," Naruto gritted, "but you."

"Ah, but who is the 'you' you speak of? Is it Orochimaru? Or...." Sasuke's fingers twitched against his. "Is it Sasuke-kun?"

Naruto's whole body was trembling - his fingers wrapped around Sasuke's wrist, his legs on Sasuke's legs, his lips. He took in a rasping breath, said, "I never hated Sasuke. Never!"

"Don't lie, Naruto-kun. It's very unbecoming of you."

He shuddered, cold all over. "Don't play with me... just let him go, let Sasuke go... please...."

Sasuke chuckled again, this time hot and dry against his cheek. "It's funny the things you believe, Naruto-kun. You believed Sasuke-kun when he told you he hated you... and you believed me when I said I'd let go of this beautiful body." His hand was freeing itself from Naruto's grip and sliding down Naruto's face, down his neck and under his shirt to the skin of his back. "Here's the truth," he said, pressing his lips to Naruto's; "I'm going to have you both."

And Sasuke turned him over, lips sliding down to rest at his throat, and his hands grasped Naruto's waist and pulled down his pants: efficient, clean, cold movements. Naruto scrabbled at the headboard, twisting up and away as Sasuke pressed into him, fast and hard and tearing, fingers pressing his skin hard enough to draw blood. He dipped his head down, breathing harshly through his mouth as Sasuke thrusted, once, twice, hard; and the third time he felt the slickness of blood.

Sasuke's lips dipped down to feed at his mouth, slowly, gently, counterpoint to the hard thrust of his hips. Sasuke pressed his waist and turned him so Naruto was pressed into the bed; then he wrapped his hand around Naruto's erection and pulled at it as he thrust. Naruto bit his lip, but a moan slipped out anyway. Then Sasuke crushed him against the bed, harsh breathing filling his ears. He was still, and Naruto reached up with shaking fingers to jerk his pants back around his waist.

"And now, Naruto-kun-" whispered into his ear, cold and slithery laughter wrapping around him - "now you know I will never let go of this body."

Orochimaru stroked his hair, fingers sliding down to press his face; then Naruto arched up as fire exploded in his stomach, hot and wet and burning, engulfing his whole being. He choked, looking down in shock at the kunai protruding from his stomach.

Orochimaru kissed him, tongue reveling in the blood gushing up from his throat. "I'll say goodbye to Sasuke-kun for you," he said, sitting up and flicking out his bloody tongue. He slid his finger into his mouth, then bent down and pressed it into Naruto's, running it across and cutting it against Naruto's
canines. "Goodbye, Naruto-kun."

His blood tasted like fire. Naruto craned his neck back, hands twisting in the sheets, breath bubbling and choking in his throat, and watched Orochimaru leave the room, watched him take Sasuke's body with him in blood-soaked flash-frame stills.

His eyes fell closed, hands stilling in the staining sheets.
Chapter 6

"Hell-o," Jiraiya drawled, drudging up his most charming smile for the stone face across from him. He held up the picture and tapped his finger on it: "Sorry to bother you, master, but you seen this boy, by any chance?"

The old bartender nodded, eyes losing a little of their suspicion. "Yeah," he said, setting down the cup he was cleaning. "He went that way." He pointed.

Jiraiya turned, and raised his eyebrows. "That way?" he repeated, just to make sure. The bartender nodded and Jiraiya shrugged, turning to the three genin and gesturing for them go on ahead. "Ah, thank you, master." He turned.

"Hey!" the bartender called. "Are you Unlucky?"

Jiraiya paused in the rush of the crowd, looking over his shoulder at the man. "Am I unlucky?" He turned back around and smiled, murmuring, "Let's hope not."

"Jiraiya-sama," Nagi said doubtfully, looking over to where the bartender had pointed. "Are you sure he said *here*?"

"Pretty sure." Jiraiya flicked the photograph of Naruto against his cheek, knocking a bug out of the way. Nagi and Kaiki looked doubtful, and even Hikaru's eyebrows were raised; Jiraiya grinned and turned to the building. "Ah, Naruto," he said, shaking his head. "I'm so proud you ended up taking after your old master after all!"

Kaiki and Nagi bent their heads together. "*Ew,*" he heard Nagi whispering, "I don't wanna go in here; what if they're - *diseased* or something?"

Kids, Jiraiya thought as he stepped up to some of the girls on the porch. He grinned as they looked up at him, and dropped his arms around their shoulders. Life, for the moment, was looking up - oh, Naruto, you crazy kid, for once you've done me some good! He bent close to their ears, purred, "Hello, lovely ladies. How are you this fine evening?"

They giggled and flushed, hands going up to cover their mouths - heh heh, he loved it when girls played demure.

Jiraiya held up the photograph. "I'm looking for this kid," he told them. "He's my stupid student, you see - oh, man, what an idiot he is, you have no idea! But, what can you do?" He let out an exaggerated sigh, and they giggled again. "Anyways, you seen him?"

"I dunno," said one of the girls. "I don't think so. He's pretty cute - I would've remembered someone that cute."

Jiraiya wrinkled his nose. Cute? Dirty, loud, disrespectful - he glanced at the photograph. Well. It was true. Naruto'd grown up a little, he guessed.

"Well," said the other, lips puckering in thought. "There was some guy who came in here about - it must have been two hours ago. He was wearing a big hat and a long cloak. It could have been him, I guess. He go around in disguise a lot?"

"We're ninja!" Nagi piped in from behind them. "That's what we *do.*"
"Ooh," the girls said in unison. "You're a *ninja*?"

Jiraiya curved his lips in a slow smile. "Why, yes. Have a thing for ninja?"

While they were giggling, something tugged at the edge of his senses. While he leaned over one of the girls and demonstrated how he could pull out a shuriken and then slip it back inside his sleeve without her even seeing it, he opened his senses a little bit, probing into the back of the building. Yes, there it was - Naruto hardly ever leaked his chakra anymore, but he did do it sometimes. He was either in danger or having himself a real good time. Jiraiya let go of their arms and leaned back, frowning.

"He's in here," he said. "Do you mind if I go in and find him?"

They looked at each other, uncertain. "Are - are you sure?" one said. "That it's him, I mean?"

"I'm sure." Naruto's genin stepped closer to him, looking up with worried faces.

"Well - I mean, we don't know what room-"

"That's okay," said Jiraiya, taking a handful of kunai out of his pouch and tucking them into his sleeve. "I'll be able to tell once I'm closer." He flashed his teeth. "I can do that, I'm a ninja."

"Well, okay." The light-haired one stood, taking his arm in hers. "I'll take you inside. You might have to pay, though-"

"It's okay," Jiraiya cut her off and started walking, forcing her to walk, too. He gestured behind him for the kids to follow him. "I'll pay whatever I have to."

Inside, the mistress came up to them, and listened with a frowning face to her girl's explanation. "Well," she said, "yes, a cloaked man did come in here. But it's highly irregular to take you back there - let you storm into his room - how do I know you're not trying to kill him?"

"He's not trying to kill him!" Kaiki burst out, sounding frustrated with all the delay. He and Nagi stepped up to her, looking up with twin pleading expressions. "He's our teacher. He was on a dangerous mission, and we really need to find him."

"If you would, please, it would be so helpful," Hikaru added, stepping up with her teammates.

The mistress hesitated, then sighed and nodded for them to follow. "If you kill him, though," she tossed over her shoulder, giving him a hard-eyed look, "I insist that you pay me."

"Fine. Fine."

She led them down a dark hallway - looks like a dungeon, Jiraiya thought darkly - heading towards the end of the hall. "He was in here," she said, stopping at the last door at the end of the hallway; but Jiraiya shook his head, and took a few steps down to another door.

"He's in here," he said, feeling bare tendrils of Naruto's chakra in the room.

"I'm afraid not, master," said the mistress. "A dark-haired man with a strange tattoo is in this room, unless he's left."

Jiraiya ducked his head down, smiled darkly. "He's in here," he repeated strongly. "Open it."

Huffing a little, she stepped past him, jiggling her keys as she searched for the proper lock. She pressed it into the door, then threw it open and gestured for Jiraiya to go in, stepping to the side with
a dignified expression lifting her eyebrows.

"Come on," Jiraiya said to the genin, and they followed him into the room, almost stepping on his heels. He heard them whispering to each other - you're stepping on me, get off me, something's not right - and ignored them, walking to the bed. He stepped closer and caught his breath as he saw the familiar spill of blond hair, and - closer - a white arm, not Naruto's, hanging off the edge of the bed. He stepped closer and saw the prostitute lying sprawled at the corner of the bed, eyes closed, face lax in an almost peaceful expression.

Jiraiya gestured for the genin to stop where they were, and they stood still, three sets of eyes fixed on the dead body. Someone - Nagi, probably - was beginning to hyperventilate. Jiraiya walked around to the other side of the bed and closed his eyes, briefly, when he saw the sprawl of Naruto's body, blood-soaked, lying twisted in the crimson sheets.

He pressed a finger under Naruto's jaw, feeling for the pulse, and let out a slow sigh when he felt it weak and thready. Jiraiya braced himself against the bed and carefully pulled out the three kunai, half-expecting Naruto to jerk awake and shout at him for being so rough; but Naruto stayed still where he was, skin blue-white, eyes closed. Blood gushed weakly out of his wounds, and Jiraiya frowned.

"He's still bleeding," he murmured. The wounds were still open. Not healing.

"Of course he's still bleeding!" Kaiki shrilled, voice cracking. "You just pulled a bunch of kunai out of his fucking - his fucking-"

Jiraiya brought one of the kunai blades to his nose and inhaled. His eyes narrowed. "Good one, Orochimaru," he said, pressing his bloody hands to his face. A curse on the blades - a messy one. He must have done it quickly. Probably right under Naruto's nose.

"Get that woman," he told the genin. "Quickly, go on, bring her in here."

Nagi stayed where he was, still and shaking; Kaiki and Hikaru dragged her in, every bit as frightened and ill-looking as the three children. "W-w-what is this?" she said on a half-scream, taking in the body and the blood on and surrounding one of her customers. "Did he- did he- who did this-?"

"Irrelevant right now," Jiraiya said shortly. "My student's dying, and if you don't help me, I'm going to be very angry, okay?" She did scream this time, then clasped her hand against her mouth quickly. "I need you to prepare a room for him. Clear out the main room, I don't care, just get me a space where I can put him and take care of him. Got that?"

She nodded, fast and hard, and cleared out of the room quickly. He heard her stomp back down the hall and begin screaming at her employees, even at the customers, telling everyone to clear the room. Jiraiya looked back at the genin. "All of you, just stay calm," he said. "Okay? Do that for me. Go follow her and make sure she's got the place cleared out." They nodded and ran to the door in a tumble of bodies, and he called after them, "And take a few moments to calm down. I'm not going to let him die."

Jiraiya sighed, raking a hand through his hair. He looked down at Naruto's lax white face for a moment; then, shaking himself, shrugged out of his shirt, tore it into three and pressed them to the wounds. "Don't worry, brat," he muttered, slipping an arm under Naruto's back and legs and heaving him up, grimacing - shit, getting old sucked. He caught himself, corrected his balance, and shifted Naruto into a more comfortable position before heading down the hall.

The whore on the bed was left forgotten.
Kaiki pulled his jacket tighter, peering out at the gambling city through the haze of morning fog that settled over the roofs, crept through the alleyways. He breathed out lightly, reached up a finger to touch the puff of white that trailed from his mouth.

The door opened and closed; Kaiki turned and, smiling, held out his hand to knock against Nagi's. "You just wake up?" he asked, looking back to the huts and the fog.

"Mmmreh." Nagi was not, never had been, a morning person. He leaned against one of the porch chairs, then pulled it out and sank into it. "How long've you been up, weirdo?"

"Shut up." Kaiki nudged his foot. "An hour, something like that."

"Did you see Naruto-sensei?" Nagi said, quietly.

Kaiki scratched his arm and, after a pause, nodded. "Yeah."

"Does he look better? I mean, you know." Nagi let out a bark of laughter. "Less dead?"

"He's looking better." At least his stomach didn't look like a flood of red anymore; the medic had come and stitched him up, and now the mistress of the place had him on the couch, as comfortable as she could make it. "Jiraiya-sama said he should wake up sometime today."

"Do you think he will?" Nagi whispered.

Kaiki looked over at him, huddled in the chair, arms wrapped around his knees. "Of course," he said, and ruffled Nagi's hair, tangling his fingers through the light strands. "Don't be stupid, it was just a few kunai."

Nagi said nothing. Kaiki hiked his leg up against the side of the building, folded his arms across his chest. The town was quiet, everyone was still asleep. He wondered, with a spike of panic and something like anger, if that Uchiha Sasuke were still here. He dropped his leg and said, "I smell breakfast. I'm going inside."

"Okay." He felt Nagi's eyes on him, following him inside. Kaiki stuck his cold hands in his pockets and nodded to the girls who were up, cleaning and making breakfast.

In the kitchen, the mistress eyed him warily and only let him have a little bit of bread before chasing him out. He found Jiraiya asleep on another couch in front of the fire, looking like he was getting the restful sleep Kaiki hadn't - he'd laid awake all night staring at the ceiling, wondering if his teacher was going to be alive in the morning and fearing, irrationally, that the sea of blood would creep over to him in the middle of the night.

Biting into his bread, Kaiki looked over at the other couch, at the braid hanging over the couch's arm and a bit of yellow skin poking out from the blankets. Naruto-sensei looked like he hadn't moved at all during the night.

Of course, if Kaiki were in his place, he wouldn't want to wake up at all. Kaiki walked over to the other side of the couch and sat down on the floor, shifting so he could watch Naruto-sensei comfortably. What if Nagi had done something like that to him - he wouldn't ever want to wake up, because waking up would mean he'd have to do something about it. Chase him again, maybe this time kill him. Kaiki rubbed his stomach hard.

There was a rustle of cloth next to him; Kaiki turned his head to see Hikaru settling next to him. She
looked better-composed than anyone in this place, with her sunglasses hiding her eyes, the jacket hiding her mouth. "Hey," Kaiki muttered, and shifted back in Naruto-sensei's direction.

"Good morning." She had a cup of something steaming in her hands, but didn't look like she was going to drink it anytime soon. Some of the girls - sensing a kindred spirit in the way that girls always did - had probably pushed it on her.

"So." He lifted another crumb to his mouth, glancing at her quickly. "What do you think we're gonna do after this? Go back to the village?"

Her eyebrows slanted down, thoughtfully; she shook her head. "I don't know."

"Oh," Kaiki said.

"Maybe Naruto-sensei will want to go after Uchiha straight away. Maybe he'll want to go back to Konoha. I don't know what he's going to do."

"Yeah." Kaiki ate the last bit of his bread and pulled up his knees, setting his chin on them and wrapping his arms around them. "We never do."

Hikaru said nothing: a silent agreement.

"What would you do?" Kaiki asked, picking at a hangnail on his thumb. "If someone in your family, or a friend did that? Would you kill them?"

In front of them, Naruto-sensei took in a deep breath and his fingers twitched on the coverlets; but he didn't wake up, and after a few minutes the brief flush that had appeared on his face faded away.

"I wouldn't, no," said Hikaru. "But I'm not everybody."

"Why wouldn't you?" The hangnail was stubborn, clung to his cuticle for dear life. "I'd stick a knife in them as soon as I could."

"I think we'd all like to think that." Hikaru tipped down her sunglasses, just enough so he could see the deep-dark color of her eyes over the rims, and regarded him in that weird adult way she had. "But I just know what I feel... and how I've seen Naruto-sensei act. He hasn't killed Uchiha, Kaiki. He hasn't killed him for six years. I don't think it's that he won't. I think he can't."

He ripped the hangnail off, gritting his teeth at the tearing sting. "Then I think Ino and Sakura-san and Jiraiya-sama are wrong when they say Naruto-sensei's strong. Maybe everybody back home is right, after all."

"Maybe," said Hikaru. She shoved her sunglasses back up, and shrugged. "I guess you could be right. I guess that's why I'm not the clan heir."

"I guess so," Kaiki muttered.

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"Hey. Open your eyes."

I don't want to.

"Your stomach's stitched up. You got your ass kicked fair and well. Whatcha think?"

I think you're a bastard.
"Can't lie there forever, you know."

Yeah, I know.

"I know it would be nice, but you've got to be a man and pick yourself up."

FUCK being a man. I'm barely even human.

"You're a Konoha-style ninja. You lying there looking like the most pathetic bone the dog ever dragged in? That ain't gonna work for too much longer. You're making babies cry, you're so sad."

It's worked pretty good so far.

"You've got students. You've got responsibilities. And you ain't the type to lie down and take this shit. That's always been the most annoying thing about you.

He curled in on himself, around the pain in his middle. Why can't it work forever? he thought.

"You can't just leave your messes for someone else to clean up. You just going to leave this shit someone else to take care of? You gonna leave it for your Sakura-chan's kids to clean up? Your friends' children? You want more little kids to go through that? You're self-absorbed, but you're not that bad."

Sakura-chan. Her children would be light-haired and bright-eyed like she was, and he didn't want to see their eyes turn dark because Sasuke-kun had left. Because Sasuke-kun was destroying their village. Because Orochimaru was hunting them down and putting his poison their skin.

"Wake up, Naruto."

Yeah, that's my name; and I had a friend called Uchiha Sasuke once. Now I'm left here, and no one knows who Sasuke is. All they see is Orochimaru's evil, because Sasuke is buried deep beneath his sickness - or he's not even there at all.

I don't want kids to have to see evil on their friends' skin anymore.
Chapter 7

His stomach was still sore, the stitches red and tender. Naruto held his arms up while Jiraiya changed the bandage; "This isn't something I'm gonna do for you every day," Jiraiya said under his breath. His tone was smooth and patient; the real reproach, when he stepped back to survey the wrapping, was in his eyes.

"Thanks," Naruto said, reaching for his shirt and pulling it over his head, tugging it gently over the bandage. "Is my jacket clean?"

"The lady of this establishment has it waiting." Jiraiya leaned his hip against the couch and took out his pipe, slipping it between his lips, filling it with a pinch, and lighting it. The next moment, a cloud of smoke spilled out to wrap like a halo around his head. Lifting his eyebrows, he offered it to Naruto, who took a puff.

"Ugh. What are you smoking, dirt?"

"Herbs," Jiraiya said with dignity. "They speed the healing process, actually. You should smoke some more tonight."

"No thanks." His forehead protector had been laid out with his clothes; Naruto lifted it on two fingers, carefully, and sat looking at it for a moment before tying it around his forehead. The familiar weight was soothing, somehow; it welcomed him back to the real world.

Jiraiya was acting dumb, he thought with a small sigh, like he always did. They'd been skirting around everything since he'd woken up, and Jiraiya was perfectly polite in a way he'd never been to Naruto, even clipping his words into a precise, distant tone. They hadn't talked about what had happened. They hadn't talked about what they were going to do. Naruto had tried it - asking angrily why Jiraiya had brought the kids along with him, when they were supposed to be safely back in Konoha - and Jiraiya had just stared him down, never replying.

"Your sandals are by the door," Jiraiya said, "with your pack."

"Yeah," Naruto said, absently. "Okay."

His genin were practically shaking in their feet, they were so eager to get home. They looked at Naruto funny, now, in the same way the villagers did; like they weren't sure what he was going to do. Kaiki, in particular, had a weird air about him; one that, absurdly, reminded Naruto of Kakashi-sensei and how he used to get whenever Naruto had been an ass. When he had gotten scared on missions, say, or hadn't tried his best, or was rude to the clients. Kakashi-sensei had been the first person to ever expect something different from him - even Iruka-sensei had always acted like he didn't expect Naruto to ever grow up and make something out of himself - and the look he got when Naruto was stupid, it could have made a dog cower. He wasn't mad, or even disappointed, really. His look just said, I figured you'd act this way, but I hoped you wouldn't. Kaiki looked like he felt that way.

Naruto wasn't really bothered by it. He'd spent his whole life having people who were expecting, even *counting* on him to mess up. Eventually he'd learned not to care; to do what he wanted, the way he wanted, because that was the only way he was going to get anywhere.

He couldn't help himself. He reached for Jiraiya's pipe, plucking it out of his hands; took a hard drag, and said around the plume of sweet-smelling smoke, "I'm going after Orochimaru."
Jiraiya raised his eyebrows. He didn't take the pipe back. "Hmm," he said.

"Can you take my genin back to Konoha for me? Hinata...." Naruto paused, closing his mouth around the truth, and said instead, "Hinata said she'd train them for me while I was gone."

"That won't be necessary."

Naruto stilled, pipe halfway to his lips. "What do you mean?"

Jiraiya reached inside his overcoat and pulled out a stained and frayed piece of paper. He turned it, letting Naruto see the unmistakable handwriting curving wildly across its front. "The Hokage has ordered you back to Konoha," said Jiraiya, in that clipped, unfamiliar tone. "She forbids you to go after Orochimaru. Another team will be sent out to do what you couldn't."

"What the fuck?" Naruto snatched the letter out of his hand and scanned it. Unbelievably, Tsunade's directions were exactly as Jiraiya had said. "But... she's sent out teams before... they've all been killed. It's not going to be any different this time!"

"It wasn't different with you." Jiraiya reached out and took back the letter and the pipe. "Why should we continue to rely on you to complete the mission?" He slid off the couch and, geta click-clicking across the wood floors, walked toward the exit. He paused in the doorway, a thick cloud of smoke trailing lazily in the space between them as Naruto stood frozen, staring after him. "We're leaving in an hour," Jiraiya said quietly. "Once in Konoha, you'll train your genin team to participate in the chuunin exam. If you leave to hunt Orochimaru, Naruto, you'll be declared a missing-nin - and I will hunt you."

He sucked some of the smoke back into his mouth, tucked the paper into his jacket, and walked away.

Naruto sat back against the couch. Shakily, he reached up to touch his forehead protector, digging his fingernails into its familiar cracks and chinks and the deep lines of the Konoha leaf. Konoha. His home despite what anyone said, even if no one wanted him.

His and Sasuke's home, both. And now that bastard pervert - and that flat-chested bitch who called herself Hokage - they wanted to tell him that as long as he called Konoha home, Sasuke couldn't? And if he tried to take Sasuke back home, to their home, neither of them would be able to call it home anymore?

And then he thought: No, Uzumaki, you idiot. That's not what they're trying to tell you.

They're trying to tell you there is no Sasuke.

And if you weren't a fool, Uzumaki Naruto - if you hadn't always been one - you'd believe them.

But what they didn't understand, what no one understood, was: Konoha was no home without Sakura-chan. Without that crazy Lee, and that always-frowning Neji and sweet Hinata; without Iruka-sensei and his smiles, and Konohamaru with his goggles pushed up over his forehead protector. Without Sasuke, that jerk Sasuke, his first real friend.

The lines of the leaf were cold on his fingers. Naruto pressed his fingers harder, then ducked his head down, rested it against his legs and closed his eyes.

----

The long walk back to Konoha was completely silent, Jiraiya-sama and Naruto-sensei staring at each
other with ice in their eyes, Kaiki and Nagi afraid to speak lest one of the two jounin turn around and kill them, and Hikaru probably enjoying the quiet, for once. When they arrived back in Konoha, more dirty and a good deal smarter than when they'd left - Kaiki still had blood under his fingernails that wouldn't wash out, from changing Naruto-sensei's bandages - Naruto-sensei silently turned his back on them and walked away. Jiraiya-sama wasn't much better; told them to go home and then report to Tsunade-sama for a reprimand the next day, then left as well. The teammates looked at each other for a long time; Kaiki felt that, for once, they all understood each other perfectly. They parted ways without ever having spoken a word.

His father screamed, knocked him over the head and banished him to his room, and his mother didn't come up with dinner. He ate some sweets he had stashed under his mattress and went to bed early, to stare up at the ceiling and recall the blood all over Naruto-sensei, the weird blank stare he'd had the last couple of days; the dead whore, the whiteness of Naruto-sensei's skin, the pinched tightness to Jiraiya-sama's mouth that had been friendly and smiling and sardonic a few days earlier.

He didn't understand adults, he decided, and rolled over and tried to fall asleep. But he couldn't, and only managed to doze a little after dawn. When the horn blew that signaled the start of the day, he got up and dressed, mind in a daze - almost better than all the thinking he'd been doing - and splashed his face with cold water. At the breakfast table, his parents ignored him as Jiraiya-sama and Naruto-sensei had ignored each other. Kaiki ate, thanked them for the food, got up and left to go meet his teammates to report to the Hokage.

Nagi looked like he felt: like a zombie, only more brain-dead. By silent agreement, none of them spoke as they made the walk to the Hokage's office. Kaiki couldn't even find it in himself to feel nervous.

Tsunade-sama - who'd always intimidated him, even as a little kid - stared at them over her hooked fingers. She seemed to be searching for the right words, and finally said, quietly, "To say nothing of your disobedience, you could have gotten yourselves killed."

Kaiki looked down at his nails. His teammates weren't speaking, so he ventured, "We're sorry, Hokage-sama."

"Mm hm." Tsunade-sama didn't look impressed. "Are you, now."

Nagi said, in a small voice, "We just wanted to find Naruto-sensei."

Her lips thinned. "I see."

"We won't do anything like this again," said Hikaru, and Kaiki and Nagi nodded.

Tsunade-sama turned in her seat, looking at something on the wall behind her. Kaiki frowned, moved a little so he could see it: a calendar, with the date Naruto-sensei had left circled in thick red ink. "I hope," she said, "your instructor doesn't do anything like it again. It's time to - Well. You don't need to hear these things." She sighed and dug a fingernail into her temple. "Kaiki, Hikaru, Nagi - I know you want to become strong, but you must trust your instructor to do what's best for you. Moreover, running after a jounin on a dangerous whim could have endangered him as well as you. And that isn't the spirit of Konoha."

"But," Hikaru said quietly, "we wanted to help, too."

At that, Tsunade smiled ever so slightly. "That's very good. That's what makes Konoha strong - we all want to protect and help each other. But you also must develop the sense of when you will be a help or a hindrance. In this case, I'm sure you can figure out which you were."
"Will Naruto-sensei still be our instructor?" Nagi asked. "Or... is he mad at us?"

"Regardless of personal feelings, he will continue training you. Don't worry about that." She hadn't answered his last question.

Kaiki hesitated, then said, "Will he leaving to find Orochimaru again?"

Her whole face narrowed, eyes darkening. Kaiki wished fiercely he knew what was going through these people's heads - he hated not knowing, not being on the inside. Not being trusted. "He will not," Tsunade-sama said. She unfolded her hands and set them on the table, drumming her nails across the wood top. "I'm sure you realize by now the magnitude of what you did. I don't need to lecture you any further. You can go now."

At the door, Kaiki turned around one last time. The Hokage was staring off into space, still running her nails across the table in a fast, sharp, nervous rhythm. She didn't notice that he was still there.

Kaiki shut the door behind him quietly.

----

Naruto dipped his hands into the sink and splashed a handful of water onto his face, wincing at the cold, and then dribbled another into his hair. He didn't feel like showering, and his hair was still a bit sweaty from tossing and turning last night. He reached for a towel and tossed it around his shoulders as he walked back into the kitchen, where a steaming bowl of ramen and a black cup of coffee awaited him.

"Thanks," he said, drudging up a grin. "Wow, this smells great."

"Eat up," Sakura said briskly, sliding a spoon to him as he dropped into his chair. "Your wounds are still healing, you need lots of food."

"I'm not really hungry," Naruto said. Sakura's eyes narrowed, and he laughed and dipped his spoon into the bowl. He touched it to his lips, gingerly, then slurped it into his mouth; swallowed, and let out a long sigh. "Mmmmm. That's really good, Sakura-chan."

Sakura smiled, turning her attention to her own breakfast. They ate, comfortably loudly, stealing food from each other: Naruto swiped half of her banana, and Sakura took a few bites of his ramen. "I have to admit," she said, "for a fast meal, this stuff isn't too bad. Really though, Naruto, you shouldn't eat this *all the time* - no wonder you're so short."

"Sakura-chan." Naruto gave her a frown. "That's not very nice."

"It's true. You still look fifteen, sometimes." Sakura's smile faded as she turned her spoon in her bowl absently, lifting it to her mouth and then dropping it. "Except for your eyes," she murmured.

"Ehh?" Naruto closed them into slits and said, grinning, "You know, most people tell me how beautiful my eyes are - even the old hag likes them."

She didn't take the bait; instead, she smoothly changed the topic. "So, do you think your genin will be ready to take the chuunin exam?"

Naruto shrugged, slurped down some more ramen and coffee. "Beats me. They're not too bad. Did I tell you Hikaru managed to learn the first stage of the Rasengan?"

"No. That is pretty good. Most people can't manage the Rasengan at all."
"Except for me," Naruto beamed.

Sakura did smile now, and threw a piece of bread at him. "You know, if you didn't brag about yourself all the time, you'd probably be considered the best jounin in Konoha."

"Nah," said Naruto. "If I didn't brag about myself all the time, people would forget about me."

"I wouldn't. Shikamaru wouldn't. Or Gaara, or Kankurou and Temari or Lee or Neji," Sakura rattled off, raising her eyebrows.

"Maybe they would. I mean," Naruto picked up a noodle and sucked it into his mouth, affording Sakura a nice glimpse of his canines, "if I weren't around to bug everyone, how soon do you think they'd forget me? I mean, c'mon. I'm not someone you tell your grandkids about."

"Yes, you are. Besides, what are you talking about? You're going to be *around* for everyone's grandkids to know." Sakura set down her coffee and leaned forward. "Naruto," she said firmly, "look at me. Hokage-sama has forbidden you to chase after Orochimaru. What are you thinking?"

"Sakura-chan, I'm not thinking about-"

"Don't lie to me."

"Seriously, Sakura-chan." Naruto plucked the last of the banana from her plate and stuffed it into his mouth, but Sakura just kept him pinned with a beady eye, not even rising to the bait. "Come on. Would I lie to you? I swear. I'm not thinking about anything."

Sakura sighed, then lifted herself out of her seat and took their plates to the sink. She turned on the water, and said over the rushing sound, "It's not fair, you know. It's always been like this. You and Sasuke, always up ahead of me, and I've been trying to catch up with you, trying to know what you're thinking... you were alike in more ways than you thought, you know?"

"Was? Sakura-chan," Naruto forced a smile, trying to take the leaden sound out of his voice, "you mean we're not anymore?"

"I wish you wouldn't act like this. I know Sasuke and you were...."

"And why the hell do you keep using the past tense for him? 'Was,' 'were,'" Naruto mimicked. "It's 'is.' It's not like Sasuke's dead, you know?"

"That's not the way it is anymore! Why do you have to be so stupid?"

"Why not?" Naruto stood up, slammed one fist on the table for emphasis. "What would you know, anyway? You never once tried to go after him!"

She slapped him - and it happened so fast, and her hand was off his cheek so quickly that for a moment Naruto thought he might have been seeing things; then the sting came, the hot fiery burn on his cheek. It didn't hurt, not really, but Sakura still looked horrified. They stood there, staring at each other, Sakura's hands over her mouth and one of Naruto's covering his cheek.
"Oh, Naruto-" Sakura broke down first, lowering her head, knotting her fingers on the table. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, but you knew why I didn't go after him, right?"

There was a lump in his throat. Naruto cleared his throat and, when it didn't disappear, spoke around it. "You still could, Sakura-chan."

Sakura shook her head; let go of the table and stepped up to him, wrapping her arms around his neck. One of her hands came to rest lightly against the back of his head, settling through his hair. "I can't," she whispered against the cheek she'd hit. "It's too late, Naruto. There is no present tense. Let it go."

Tsunade'd said the same thing, and Jiraiya. Even Kakashi before Sasuke had killed him. Naruto shut his eyes and dropped his face into her shoulder, feeling her tears running down his neck. He stroked Sakura's hair, wrapped his arms around her waist, didn't want to let go ever but knew he would have to. His little girl was gone, she wasn't trying to catch up with them anymore - she was trying to leave them behind.
Chapter 8

During the middle of August, Konoha celebrated the birthday of the Yondaime. The village had been preparing for weeks, and now there wasn't a house without some sort of decoration, a wreath or a banner or lights; the night before, the jounin set out to do their one job that didn't involve death and politics: this morning the streets were sprinkled with flowers, little white ones that Tsunade-sama said symbolized death and rebirth, but were probably the only ones you could get this time of year during the rainy season.

Kaiki had learned all about the Yondaime in his classes, and properly understood the importance of the birth of Konoha's savior and everything, but it all seemed a bit too morbid for him - they celebrated his birth, but everyone deftly danced around the subject of his death. Twenty-three, his mother said once. He was only twenty-three.

After his parents left, his father smiling more than usual and his mother cheerfully modeling her latest dress, Kaiki puttered around the kitchen. His father had cooked that morning and left some eggs and miso for lunch, but when he tried a bite it made him sick to his stomach. He put the eggs away, back in the refrigerator; the miso he poured in a container and tucked into his backpack.

A cold air was coming in through the window. Kaiki slung his backpack over his shoulders, went around the house to see if he was missing anything, then paused by the window to close it. He lifted his nose, sniffing the air. "Rain," he muttered. "It figures." He shut the window and latched it tightly, in case there was a storm.

He tumbled out of his house, clacking his sandals noisily against their porch, and headed over to the closest window of the next house; he poked his head in, yelled out: "Nagi! It's me! Are you coming? I swear, you better not be sleeping still-" Grinning, he ducked the tossed pillow.

A few minutes later, his teammate stepped out onto his own porch, still hopping into his sandals. "You're a jerk," Nagi said, pulling a face at him. He trotted down the stairs and fell into line with Kaiki, and they headed towards the center of the village. "Hey, did you bring lunch? My parents didn't come home last night and I didn't fix anything."

"Lazy. Your parents were out partying, huh?"

"Nah. My dad was on a mission and my mom was pulling an extra shift at the hospital." Nagi reached behind him, opened the flaps on Kaiki's backpack, and let out a whoop. "Cool, my favorite. I love your mom."

"Yeah, well." Kaiki elbowed him away. "She hates you, you know."

Nagi bared his teeth, then looked pointedly away. Kaiki laughed and ruffled his hair.

When they reached the center of the village, a little ways away from the Hokage's office, it began to rain - to just sprinkle, really, but it was colder than it should have been for August and, from the way the clouds were gathering, it seemed it would be raining harder in the afternoon. Kaiki pressed his shoulder to Nagi's, wrapped a hand around his friend's shirt as they pushed through the crowd. It was like this every year, all the tall people at the front of the crowd, pushing for a place to see the festivities; they'd have to climb onto a roof to see everything.

People they knew called their names, grabbed their shoulders, tousled their hair. Their Inuzuka classmate was with his clan, all bunched together, heads bent against the rain and furs pulled up
around their faces; the Aburames were further down, all grouped calmly beneath several huge
umbrellas, but Hikaru wasn't with them. Kaiki paused for a moment to check, but Nagi grabbed his
shoulder and pointed down the street. "Come on," his friend shouted into his ear; "we can get on top
of the Ichiraku. Ayame always lets us."

At the Ichiraku, the master threatened to chase them off; but when he turned back to his ramen,
Ayame winked at them and gestured that she would give them a leg up. On top of its little roof, they
huddled into the one slightly dry spot. Kaiki scanned the crowd, seeing his family come into view,
his cousins and uncles and aunts, his brothers, sisters, and parents. "I don't see Hikaru still," he said,
slipping his shoulders out of the straps of his backpack.

"So?" Nagi said. "If she sees us, she sees us. Wonder where she is, though."

"I don't see Naruto-sensei, either." But then, Kaiki remembered, Naruto-sensei worked for Tsunade-
sama; he might be with her - and maybe Jiraiya-sama would be there, too.

The rain began to fall heavier, and Kaiki could see the people in the crowd shifting uncomfortably.
Nagi was jostling him, squirming, groaning; every year the people acted like they weren't used to the
rain. It almost always rained on the Yondaime's birthday.

"Dammit! The rain just went down my ass." Nagi stuck a hand down his pants and made an awful
face. "Oh, man."

"Pull your pants back up," said Kaiki. "Jeez."

Just then a murmur went through the crowd, and they both turned - Nagi still with one hand down
his pants - to see the Hokage ascending the small platform. Kaiki looked, but he could only see
Jiraiya-sama and Tsunade-sama's student, Shizune, next to her; Naruto-sensei was nowhere in sight.
A funny feeling went through Kaiki's stomach. He shook it off - at least he didn't have to see that
goofy face today, right? Or hear that obnoxious voice telling him he wasn't good enough. Still, it was
strange that Naruto-sensei wasn't here.

"I wonder where he is," Nagi muttered.

Kaiki put on a nonchalant face, and said, "Hell, maybe he got tired of this dumb festival. It's the same
every year. And shut up - Tsunade-sama's speaking."

"You were the one talking!" Nagi said, but was drowned out by the patter of rain on tin roofs and
Tsunade-sama's voice.

Strength, honor, pride, love - the things that the Yondaime, youngest Hokage of their village, had
loved. Kaiki almost had this speech memorized. And duty, mustn't forget duty, and the courage to
make sacrifices; these were the things that kept Konoha strong. "It was a tragedy," Tsunade-sama
said, "when the Yondaime died - as those of you who were alive when this happened know - but his
sacrifice, his courage, his strength made it possible for Konoha to survive. One died that all might
live, and now all remember, and keep him alive.

"That is the rock upon which this village rests. We are individuals, but sometimes individuals must
be sacrificed for the whole. Physical death is not the only way one perishes, nor the worst. One
needs only to look at the worst enemy of this village, Orochimaru, who is so obsessed with his own,
single life that he is willing to sacrifice the ideals, the people of this village to keep one spark alive.

"The jounin and chuunin of the village know this. The genin - our hope for the future - will learn it."
The little river near the grove was flooding. Cold water washed over Naruto's feet and pooled in the dips of the forest, spilled out in great splashes as he stepped in them.

The incense at the Yondaime's shrine had gone out. Naruto lowered his umbrella and shook the water off it, then propped it onto the shrine, struck a match, and re-lit the incense. It wavered, daunted by the storm around it, the rising river; Naruto cupped his hands around it for a moment, and when it burned more brightly stepped back. He touched his fingers to the Yondaime's portrait.

"So," he said, and his voice echoed into the heavy silence of years. No one spoke in this shrine, in Konoha's holy place. Lifting a kunai from his hip pouch, he continued, "Happy birthday, Hokage-sama. I guess I'll be seeing you around."

Naruto gripped the base of his braid and, in one quick movement, flicked the kunai under his hand, severing the braid from his head. He lifted it in his hands, feeling the weight of six years' growth; measured it against his arm. Then he dropped it into a coil next to the incense.

"I guess that's just my way of saying thanks," he said to the Yondaime's serene face, quietly. "Because I never did thank you, you know. Well. I guess you wouldn't know, or care, but hey. This's just the kind of guy I am."

In a few minutes or so, the umbrella would fall. Naruto wrapped the braid around the incense holders so it wouldn't fall off, then turned, tugging the brim of his jacket around his face, and walked out of the grove. The scent of sandalwood stayed heavy in his nose, left his teeth on edge.

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"Hey," Kaiki said, swallowing his bite of miso and half-standing, leaning on Nagi's shoulder to look. "Hey, it's Naruto-sensei!"

"What? Where?" Nagi craned his head and cursed. "I can't see him, get off me."

"Sorry." Kaiki made his way carefully to the edge of the roof and squinted against the rain. "Hey, he's *leaving.*"

Nagi pressed up against his shoulders and said, breath tickling Kaiki's neck, "Where do you think he's going?"

Their teacher was walking briskly towards the Konoha gate. He was wearing a coat, but Kaiki could see a hint of his bright hair and a flash of his tanned skin; he had on a backpack and was loaded down with extra pouches for kunai and shuriken, but even with all the bulk he was still moving quickly and smoothly, in that graceful sliding way he did sometimes, like a big cat, a wild animal.

"He's leaving," Kaiki said again.

"Duh," Nagi said. "You said that already."

"No, I mean he's leaving for good."

Nagi stilled next to him, leaning heavily onto his shoulders. "Like... to hunt Orochimaru, you think?"

"Yeah," Kaiki muttered. He shrugged off Nagi's hands and crouched down, then slipped off the roof and landed lightly on his feet. "Come on!" he called up to Nagi, wiping water out of his face and off his jacket. "Let's go!"

Nagi slipped off, landing next to him, and let out a little yelp as Kaiki broke into a run. "Jeez, wait!
Where the hell are you going?"

The crowd had begun cheering as Tsunade winded down her speech, and they were grouped so closely together that Kaiki had to push through them, brushing against wet arms and ducking under rain-slick legs. When he broke free of the crowd, the rain pelted heavy on his head and rushed into his field of vision, coating Konoha and the roads in a shield of cold gray. Kaiki raised a hand to protect his eyes and slid to a halt at the gates; he turned around and saw the guards huddled in a group, saw them passing around a drink.

Nagi bent over his knees, panting. "These guys... probably didn't even see him leave. Hey, Kaiki!" he said as Kaiki turned back around. "Look, there's nothing we can do, you know? Can't we just go back?"

He couldn't see anything beyond Konoha; it was raining too hard. Naruto-sensei was a jounin, one of the best in the village; he was probably miles away by now. Kaiki crouched low to the ground and set his hands on his knees, turned his face down and away from the rain. What am I doing? he thought. "You're right," he muttered. "There isn't anything we can do."

Nagi stepped up to him, pressed his warm weight against Kaiki's side. "What do you think he'll do?" he said. "You think he's gonna really do it this time?"

"I don't know," Kaiki said. He snorted a bit, then began to chuckle as he wiped the back of his hand across his nose. "How the hell am I supposed to know? He could be going off to join Orochimaru, for all we know! Maybe we'll become chuunin and go on a mission and there he is! Naruto-sensei, part of the Sound-nin!" After all, hadn't it been like that for him?

"I guess." Nagi looked out the gate, brows drawn tightly together, lips pressed so hard against each other Kaiki could see the imprints of his teeth. "That's it, then, right? Maybe we'll never see him again."

"Hey!" One of the guards had turned to them, bottle halfway to his lips. "What are you kids doing? You should know you don't play games around the gates! Go on, get outta here."

"They weren't playing, Shiniou," and Kaiki turned, frowning, as Hikaru walked up holding an umbrella. She pulled down the rim of her jacket and smiled at the guard, continued, "They were waiting for me. I'm sorry."

"Well," said the guard, "get your friends and get out of here then, Hikaru. Your father'll be angry if he finds out you were hanging around here." He took a swig from the bottle and turned back to the other guards; a shout of laughter went up from the group, and the genin at the gate were forgotten.

Hikaru handed Kaiki the umbrella and they grouped around it, huddling together to stay dry; Kaiki reached over and flicked water out of Nagi's hair, then rubbed his own arms to warm himself. Hikaru glanced out to the forest and said, "He left, didn't he."

Kaiki pressed his lips together, letting the silence speak. Then he said, quietly, "You got some dirt in your hair. Here-" he reached out and brushed through Hikaru's bangs. "It's gone. Man, we all need showers."

"Hot showers," said Nagi, pressing against his side even more tightly. Kaiki wrapped an arm around him. "This rain is way too cold for August."

"Naruto-sensei's out in that," Hikaru said. She hesitated, then wrapped her arm around Nagi's other shoulder. "I'm going after him, okay?"
Kaiki snorted. "Why?" he said. "Fuck him! I'm not going after that... that jerk." The rain roared and whipped across the umbrella, making it tremble, and a cold wind drafted into their tiny space, fluttering under his shirt. He cursed, tugged at his hem. "Shit. This sucks."

"I'm not going to stop him or anything. We're not important, we can't do anything. It's just...." She paused. "I didn't get to say anything to him, you know."

Nagi caught his eyes, gave a little shrug. Nagi's eyes always changed color with the weather and they were a dark blue right now, like the clear pond next to Kaiki's house. "We'll really get in trouble this time," said Nagi.

"When has that ever bothered you?" Kaiki knocked against his shoulder.

"He's right," Hikaru said. "We'll probably never become real ninja if we do this."

They were both looking at him, both saying nothing, and Kaiki realized they were waiting for him to make a decision, like he was their leader. And he didn't even have to think back to know that it'd always been this way, but it was something else to really know it. His teammates were counting on him, were looking up to him, and that meant he couldn't go on gut instinct anymore, couldn't feel his way through a situation and hope for the best.

Nagi pressed up against him, looked up at him with his clear dark eyes. This time the smile was even harder to force.

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Naruto hopped to a higher branch and lifted his binoculars. Pressing his back to the tree trunk, he squinted through the thundering rain - ah, there, a blur of movement, the dark swirls of color that meant Orochimaru was nearby.

He tucked the binoculars back into his jacket and smiled grimly. "Stringing me along, huh, snake freak?" He yanked his hand free of the clinging wetness of his glove, raised his thumb to his teeth and bit down, then pressed it into his unrolled scroll. He moved his thumb along the rest of the scroll, spreading his blood in wide, uneven strokes; folded the scroll shut, careful of the rain, and lifted himself to his feet.

The kyuubi was moving in his stomach, sending fire singing through his veins, awash with the adrenaline of the hunt. Naruto inhaled deeply, smelled at first only rain and the musky, heavy scent of the woods; then his flesh pricked as he caught Orochimaru's scent on the wind: cold blood, scales and what little was left of Sasuke's clear, light smell. He sniffed again, just to be sure, then dropped down to a lower branch and began his flight through the forest.
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"The forest isn't too bad, you know."

Naruto lifted his foot out of the river he'd just stepped in, shook water from his sandal and glared at Sasuke. "Shut up," he grumbled, hopping a little to catch up with Sasuke. "Hey! The least you can do is *wait* for me - And anyway, you're just saying that to piss me off and you know it."

"It's your fault. You're the one who wanted to come here and train, so stop complaining."

"I wasn't *complaining.*" Naruto scratched a bite on his arm. "I was just saying the forest is out to get me! It is, seriously. The birds keep trying to crap on me and the trees keep tripping me and-"
"Here," said Sasuke, pausing on the exposed root of a tree, tossing him something without turning around. "It's for the bites." He jammed his hands in his pockets. "You'd think you would remember to bring bug spray. Idiot."

It jumped around in Naruto's hands, greasy, slimy, stinky. He held it between two fingers and glared at Sasuke's back - thank him or say nothing? Figures it'd be Sasuke - Sasuke he ended up training with out here, Sasuke who ended up giving him bug spray and not Sakura, who could spread it on him.... Naruto sprayed the air in front of him, jumped through it, and landed with a hop next to Sasuke. "Hey," he said, mustering up his most dignified expression, "uh, th-

"Ugh." Sasuke waved his hand in front of his face, raised his eyebrows. "You stink."

And he walked away, hands still jammed in his pockets, no bug bites on him, not even a damned scratch; Naruto stared after him with his mouth to still open to say thanks. He closed it, teeth clacking together, and ground his teeth.

"Asshole."

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"Naruto-kun," said a voice right next to his ear, making him stumble to a pause on the next tree branch over, "tsk, tsk - surely you didn't think you had caught me."

The rain was coming down harder, hitting his skin now with what felt like little slivers of ice, hard and cold and cutting. Naruto crouched to his knees, slipping the scroll behind his back and digging his fingernails into it. "I dunno," he called back, eyes straining to see Orochimaru through the dark and the rain. "I guess I thought I was getting lucky or something."

A low chuckle - there. Orochimaru had stopped, as well, leaning with crossed arms against the tree trunk. "Shouldn't you know better by now? Your luck run out when you were a little baby, and Jiraiya's beloved student sealed a monster into you. Such a bad run of misfortune you've had ever since."

"My bad luck began when I met you." Naruto slid a handful of shuriken into his sleeve.

"Ah? Well, that might be so. So, Naruto-kun," said Orochimaru, raising an eyebrow. "Are you still trying to save your Sasuke-kun? Are you here to free him? Do you think he's looking out through my eyes right now, trying to crawl out?"

The shuriken bit into his fingers. "No." He whispered it at first, and it slipped out into the wind, lost in a breath. Naruto raised his voice, curled the shuriken tighter into his palm - "I've decided the only way to free him is to kill you, Orochimaru."

Orochimaru's eyes widened, snake-slit pupils lighting. "Try, Naruto-kun," he hissed, and his tongue flicked out, moistened his bottom lip. "Oh, do try and kill me for the sake of your Sasuke-kun."

He flickered and disappeared, but Naruto could see the dark blur of his form moving down the trees and into the glades below. He tensed on the balls of his feet, lifted himself and followed, sending the shuriken flying towards Orochimaru's form with a flick of his wrist. Naruto hit the ground running, sent up a spray of water; the kyuubi's chakra was rising, lifting up and burning the falling rain, creating a shield of steam. He raised his fist and aimed for Orochimaru's face.

Orochimaru caught it bare inches away from his eyes, then wrapped a leg around Naruto's and pulled, dragging them close together so that Orochimaru's cold breath lifted up his bangs. "You really are a wonderful creature," Orochimaru murmured, close to his lips. "My idiotic teammate didn't know
exactly what kind of genius he was teaching, the poor fool. The Yondaime created you to be a monster, Naruto-kun - nothing more, nothing less. It makes me smile to see that he has succeeded."

Naruto pulled his lips away from his teeth, matching his sharp canines to Orochimaru's slit pupils. "If you think the Yondaime was anything like you," he responded, breathing in that cold, moist breath, "you're fucking stupider than I thought."

They broke away, met in air, touched hand to hand and skin to skin - nothing very different from how they had danced together for years, him and Sasuke, him and Orochimaru. Naruto was surprised, even when his hands grazed Orochimaru's throat or Orochimaru drew blood from his skin, that he could find no anger in himself. Different, then, from how he'd fought for so many years, to prove himself, to prove someone else wrong. Everything seemed still, somehow: his body, Orochimaru's, the rain, the swaying of the trees.

Naruto dropped back to the ground, crouching on his palms, and ducked his head down for a moment to drag in a deep breath. Blood trickled from his lip; the cut had faded long ago, but his healing mechanisms had never stopped him from bleeding. Across from him, Orochimaru crouched as well. Naruto could sense the wary blackness of his eyes, testing him for movement. He wiped his mouth with his knuckles, dropped his hand to look at the red smear left there - watch it mingle with the rain and run in a pink trail down his arm.

Then the blackness turned to red, and Naruto looked up to see the Sharingan pupils wheeling slowly and steadily. He chuckled a little. "Oh, come on, snake freak," he called. "What're you using that for? You know all my tricks, right?"

"Take note, Naruto-kun. A little caution never hurt anyone."

But Orochimaru, Naruto had figured out years ago, was never cautious when he needed to be. The snake bastard was stepping around him now, with the wheeling motions of a nesting mother animal; Naruto smiled and ducked his head down. Time's up, Orochimaru, he thought; then said it, just to feel his lips form the words and to taste them. He raised his hands, linked them together.

Deep inside him the kyuubi moved, and his chakra flared outwards.

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"It's Christmas Eve, you know. What the hell are you doing out here?"

Naruto sat down beside Sasuke, leaned over to try and peer into his teammate's face, but Sasuke moved so that his bangs covered his eyes. Making a face, Naruto leaned back on his hands, looking at the burned-out remnants of what might have been a house once, standing like a huge, lonely black ship in front of them.

"That was my house, you know." Sasuke wrapped his hands together, set them under his chin. "I lived there with my parents, when I was little."

"Oh," Naruto said. "Well, shit." No wonder it looked so lonely. "How come... how come, you know, it's the only house around here? I thought you had, like, a whole big clan."

Sasuke's lips curved, ever so slightly. "I did. They were all burned down, too. And swept away."

"But they kept your house? That's... I guess that was kinda nice of them, right?" Naruto leaned over again, and this time he could see Sasuke's eyes. He'd thought he might be crying or something, but he was dry-eyed, tight-faced - typical Sasuke. Did the guy cry over anything?
"No," Sasuke said. "Not really."

"What, you wanted 'em to burn it down?"

"Not really." Sasuke shrugged. "I wanted them to keep it as a... reminder. For that man, so if he ever came back, he could see it and remember what he did."

Naruto forgot sometimes - because no one ever talked about it - that Sasuke's whole clan had been murdered. It wasn't like he had come home one day and his mom or his dad had died of a heart attack or something, or died on a mission like a ninja should; he'd come home one day and they were all just... dead. He looked at the house, wondered what Sasuke thought when he looked at it. The house itself didn't look like Sasuke had lived in it: it didn't look angry, didn't look like it wanted revenge. It just looked like it was tired. Like it wanted to be swept away and given a chance to rest.

Naruto glanced down at the little cup in his hands, shook it so the clear liquid in it stirred, like a little stone had been thrown into it. "Yo," he said, and, when Sasuke moved his head a little, he handed him the cup. "It's sake, dumbass," he added. "Got some from the boss at the Ichiraku."

Sasuke tilted his head, a little frown tugging at his lips; then, like Naruto had, he jiggled the cup a little and looked down at it. "Don't you want it?"

"Nah. It tastes gross. Besides, you kinda look like you need it." Naruto leaned over, letting a teasing grin take over his mouth; crooned, "Whaaaat, you're gonna tell me the great Sasuke doesn't likek alcohol? Or haven't you ever had any?"

Sasuke snorted. "Fuck you, Naruto." He put the cup to his lips and jerked his head back, like the adults at the bars did; when he looked back down, his mouth was twisted in a grimace. He handed the cup back.

"I guess I should say Merry Christmas now, or something," Naruto said, flashing his teeth. "But I'm not gonna, because you're a jerk and all."

Folding his hands under his chin, Sasuke nodded. And - it might have been a trick of the moonlight, or from the sake Naruto had drunk earlier - after a few seconds, his lips curved up ever so slightly.

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"Holy crap!" Nagi stopped, hands wheeling a little to catch his balance, and Kaiki pushed into him from behind and Hikaru ran into him, too. They teetered on the branch, each grabbing the other for support until Nagi caught the tree trunk and steadied them. "See that?" he said, for once not yelling at his teammates - he pointed in front of them, voice rising to a squeak. "Did you see that? Holy shit, I can't *believe* it!"

"Of course I didn't see it," Kaiki said, slapping the back of his head. "Your fat ass is in my way, I can't see anything!"

"Chakra," said Hikaru. She had set her hands on Kaiki's shoulders and lifted herself up; her jacket rim was unzipped and her glasses were down so Kaiki could see her wide, dark eyes. "Two separate systems. They're both *huge.*"

"Bingo, right?" Kaiki breathed in deeply. "Must be Naruto-sensei and Orochimaru."

"Huge," Hikaru repeated. "You don't get it, Kaiki.... people just aren't *supposed* to be that powerful."
"Well, they are." He gave Nagi a push, but his friend wasn't budging; he was still staring out to where he had pointed, irises dark with fear. "Come on! Are we just going to sit here and wait until they've blown themselves up? We all decided to come out here, so let's go already."

"Hey, man," said Nagi, voice small and thready, "this is crazy. I thought everyone in the village... how weak they always said Naruto-sensei was... This is *crazy*! Kaiki," he turned around, set his hands on Kaiki's shoulders - holding him for comfort or stopping him from moving, Kaiki didn't know. "What are we doing?"

His face seemed frozen; it had never been so hard to smile, not even when he and Nagi were six and got busted for cheating on their finals and they'd thought they were never going to become ninja. And wasn't it crazy, comparing this to that? No one, no one had ever told him being a ninja was like this. "I don't know," Kaiki said, and reached up to set his hands on Nagi's. "But we decided to do it. So let's go, okay? Come on, I'll go on ahead."

The next blast of chakra nearly made him fall, it was so huge and so close - so close Kaiki could feel the heat of it on his face. And then there was stillness of a kind Kaiki knew wasn't natural in a forest; the only sound was the rain falling and rivers rushing. He caught himself breathing fast, took in a slow breath, and wiped the sweat and rain off his face.

"We're close," said Hikaru next to him, almost whispering. "We should try to get into the brush and conceal ourselves."

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"Fuuinjutsu - Shiki Fuujin!"

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"Sometimes I wonder," Jiraiya said, lighting his pipe and inhaling. A cloud of smoke rushed into the Yondaime's face, obscuring his smile.

Naruto lifted his chin from his hands and frowned. "Huh?"

"Well." Jiraiya tilted his head to the side and exhaled away from the portrait this time, then grinned and blew a bit into Naruto's face. He laughed when Naruto began coughing and sputtering, covering his mouth. "You know a little bit about the sealing system the Yondaime used for the kyuubi, right?"

Naruto wrinkled his nose, then rubbed it, trying to get the tingly-smoke feeling out of it. "I know it put this weird bastard in my stomach," he said, scratching the bridge of his nose.

"Damn, didn't they teach any of this to you in school?" Jiraiya arched his eyebrows. "I see not. Of course not, can't be teaching you valuable information about the past, now can we? Anyway, my genius student modified one of the Elemental Sealing systems, which are seals like the one Orochimaru used on you to block the kyuubi's chakra. With me so far?"

"Yeah, yeah," Naruto waved his hand. "So, what about it?"

"Like I said, my student modified one of the seals so that he could use it on souls. The kyuubi's soul, for example, or in the Sandaime's case, Orochimaru's."

Naruto looked at the Yondaime's portrait. He always expected it to look a little different, or maybe to change right in front of him; but it was always the same, that weird smile, the too-calm face. He was never sure what he thought about this guy. "Yeah, so, big deal. He made a seal."
"Please!" Jiraiya slapped his face. "You hurt me right here, little boy. Naruto, it's not just another seal. Do you know how much power it takes to go around messing with someone's soul? A damned huge amount, that's how much. Naruto. You have a great deal of power in you-" He leaned over and poked his finger into Naruto's stomach. "Right here. Have you ever thought about this power? It's very nice you get to use it, I'm sure, but have you ever thought about what it costs you to use it?"

Naruto slapped his finger away and rubbed his stomach, frowning. The seal tingled, like it always did whenever someone touched it. "Sure I have!" he snapped. "And, um... well... well, I mean, it sucks that I have to share my body with this stupid fox. Right?" he added, less sure.

"Exactly so," said Jiraiya. "That's a pretty big cost. Can't imagine myself what it'd be like to share house with someone else for the rest of my life and have no say in it."

"Hey," Naruto said, leaning back on his arms, "it was your student who did this to me, you know."

"Yes, he did. And what do you think it cost *him* to be mucking around with the kyōubi's soul so he could put it in your body?"

"Um. He died?"

"Bingo." Jiraiya lifted a finger, face falling into straight, solemn lines. "You're right, he died. That's the price of power, Naruto. Pain, suffering. Death. The Yondaime and the Sandaime used this technique, but they both died to be able to sample its power. In a way, you're lucky. You have much more power than they ever did, or ever would, or could. You're lucky you can stay alive when you use it - but even you have your limits."

Naruto frowned, narrowed his eyes and glanced at the portrait again. He widened his eyes, narrowed them again. The Yondaime looked the same no matter what he did. "So... what were you wondering, pervert hermit?"

"Ah, that. I was wondering something, wasn't I?" Jiraiya rubbed his hand over his mouth. He was looking at the portrait, too, and Naruto wondered if it looked different to him; if the Yondaime were showing his teacher a serious face. "The way the seal works, Naruto, is by making a contract with the God of Death - you do your business, you mess somebody up, he takes your soul in return. And ever since I heard that he used it, and that he died... I've been wondering what it looks like to be facing your death. It's always seemed strange to me - he knew that before I did."

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He could hear the Shinigami's tongue sliding across its sword, hear it grinding its teeth on the blade. Naruto tried to focus on Orochimaru's face pressed close to his, on the cold breath that had always made his skin tingle, but his hackles were going up at the cold presence behind him, at every slither and every breath he heard it take.

Orochimaru had screamed and shouted and raved at first, spat cold fire into his face, but when Naruto didn't loosen his arms he lowered his voice. "Naruto-kun...." He couldn't stop the tremor in his voice, though, the fine thread of fear woven in Sasuke's tenor. "What are you hoping to do? You'll only kill Sasuke-kun, you know. I know that's not what you want. You're too," he bared his teeth, "kind."

"No, I won't. I'll be taking your soul," Naruto informed him, "not his."

"And what makes you think they're separate anymore?"

Naruto closed his eyes, smiled slowly; tasted rain on his lips, cold and clear. "Then it doesn't matter
"What do you think they're doing?" Hikaru hissed into his ear, nearly making him jump out of his skin.

"Looks like they're hugging."

"I seriously doubt they're doing that." Some of the fear had left Kaiki; he didn't know why, but he suddenly felt that Naruto-sensei had the upper hand in the situation, strange as this all was. He reached out and brushed aside a leaf, peering out at their dark-skinned, light-haired instructor wrapped around the light-skinned, dark-haired traitor of their village. They were speaking, but for once, Kaiki didn't want to know what they were saying. Didn't want to know what they were saying.

He shivered, feeling a cold brush at the top of his spine. He let the leaf drop back into place. "Naruto-sensei's winning," he said, and knew it was true. And he also knew that he was missing something again, some crucial part of the picture. "But..."

"Somehow he's not," Hikaru said. She pressed her lips together.

"I hate this shit," said Nagi.

Deep inside Sasuke's body, there were two souls. Naruto had always known this, hadn't needed the Byakugan to tell him he was right. It wasn't Sasuke's style to do that, to fade away like mist and relinquish himself to whatever were to happen. He had just sunk down - deep inside himself, to a place where he could watch Orochimaru in control. Watch him kill Konoha ninjas. Watch him play with Naruto. Watch him play with everything, as a snake does with its prey.

"Live terribly," Itachi had told him; "run away." And Sasuke had. Sasuke did what he did best - run. There were so many shadows when Naruto plunged his hands into Sasuke's body - places that Orochimaru hadn't taken control of and Sasuke had left behind, retreating ever further. Memories passed through his fingers like old, yellowed scrolls, flashing past his eyes and sinking into his brain; feelings wrapped around his fingers, cold and warm and hot. Everything that was Sasuke he saw and touched, but skirted past the deepest parts, where Sasuke had escaped with his soul. And then Naruto lifted himself up a little, back into the places where Orochimaru's black soul had settled itself - reached out with his hands and wrapped himself around that blackness, sending a chilling cold numbness up his fingers, into his arms, into all his body.

Dimly, he knew that Orochimaru's physical body was struggling, but his soul struggled even more, wrapping itself around Naruto, sinking itself into his body, refusing to be moved.

"You are not the Sandaime!" Orochimaru shrilled at him, pulling Naruto back to himself. His Sharingan pupils wheeled rapidly, like three hands trying to pull themselves up out of a sea of blood. "You cannot even come close to what he did, and remember, Naruto, he only took my arms - you are a loser, have been all your life, you will *never* defeat me!" His voice lowered, smoothing out as if he had ironed out all the terror. "You are not, and never will be, comparable to this body. It is perfect. You are just a hodgepodge of hasty sealwork, a nothing, a cage for something beyond your capacity. You, Naruto, are easily defeated by taking away the stronger of the souls that inhabits your body!"

Naruto grinned, pushed forward with his arms and back with his legs, tightening his fingers around
the cold edges of Orochimaru's soul. "I wish I could say the same for you," he spat out over the ache in his throat, the tightness of his teeth pressed together. "If I took away the stronger soul in this body, it would just be you left - and you'd be nothing."

Orochimaru narrowed his eyes. "You won't defeat me," he said. "The Sandaime was an old man - you're young, in your prime. And you actually intend to sacrifice your life? Don't make me cry. You can still live, you know. Give up this fool plan and unsign the contract you made with the Shinigami."

"Can't." Naruto squeezed his eyes shut, reached deep inside himself to where the kyuubi slept. *Wake up, you bastard - it's time to pay your due.* And the kyuubi reared upwards, climbed up out of his body with steel claws, sent his chakra exploding outwards - a stream of raw, furious power, like the uncontrollable winds of a fire or the solid wall of the sea.

He almost fell backward as something suddenly gave, and opened his eyes to see the swirling blackness of Orochimaru's soul half out of his body, twisting and struggling just as much as its physical counterpart.

"Sasuke-kun," Orochimaru rasped, "won't thank you."

The Sharingan pupils were fading with Orochimaru's power; his resistance was weakening against the kyuubi's chakra. Naruto's arms were trembling, all his limbs losing their feeling, but he dug his fingers in, gritted his teeth and pulled again. When he opened his eyes again, Orochimaru's were staring at him with black hatred. Naruto smiled. "I know he won't thank me," he said; "I know he'll never forgive me. Sasuke... he doesn't accept gifts too well."

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Kaiki leapt up, all thoughts of hiding forgotten; his teammates stood, too, crowding around him as they all stared before them. The rainfall had quieted, was almost gentle now, letting them see clearly the black, vaguely human-shaped form that Naruto-sensei - or the sea of chakra around him - had pulled out of Orochimaru's body. It hovered between them for a moment, a writhing black mass that, even standing so far away, made Kaiki want to turn and run away. It was pure hatred, pure evil.

Then the wind blew, pulling a gust of rain with it, and the black mass disappeared into Naruto-sensei's stomach as if it had been pulled by invisible hands. Orochimaru - Uchiha Sasuke - stood where he was for a moment, face gone blank, mouth slack, the redness fading from his eyes; then he wavered and fell backward onto the ground. He didn't move again.

Kaiki took a step forward, but Hikaru grabbed his hand and pulled him back. "Wait," she hissed into his ear. "You can't go near that chakra! It would burn us alive."

As Nagi pressed up against him, Naruto-sensei, took, wavered a little; took one step forward towards Uchiha Sasuke's body, a staggering, hesitant movement not at all like the sure, graceful way he usually moved; and then he, too, fell. The red chakra faded and disappeared.

"Sensei!" Kaiki shook off Hikaru's hand and ran forward, stumbling in the slippery mud. He slid to a halt in front of Naruto-sensei and knelt down, and, reaching out carefully, pulled his shirt away from his steaming chest and belly. An eight-pointed seal was painted in black swirls on his stomach, and, above it, an identical seal gleamed on his chest. This one swirled and moved, wheeled around slowly. Kaiki hesitated, then reached out and hovered his hand over the seal; then touched it carefully, feeling the hard ridges of something like scar tissue, hot to the touch.

"Nagi," said Hikaru as she kneeled down next to him. "Go check on Orochimaru."
Kaiki dropped his hand. "That's not Orochimaru," he said quietly, glancing over to watch Nagi approach him hesitantly, like a rabbit not sure if its predator is yet dead. "It's the Uchiha. Orochimaru's gone."

Hikaru touched the seal, too, more gently than Kaiki had, almost reverently. "Don't you remember, Kaiki?" she whispered. "We're not supposed to say that name around Naruto-sensei."

"Uchiha's alive," Nagi called. "I think he's just... sleeping, or something."

Hikaru still had her hand on the seal, and was staring at it, engrossed; so Kaiki picked himself out of the mud and moved closer to Naruto-sensei's face. He set his hand over Naruto-sensei's mouth, held his breath as he waited for warm breath to touch his palm.

After what seemed like forever, it did.

Kaiki pressed his hand to his own mouth, and breathed out slowly. He sent up thanks to something - what, he didn't know. Whatever it was, he hoped it would accept his words. "Hikaru," he said, gesturing for her to come over. "He's breathing. He's probably really hurt. You and Nagi go get some tree branches and we'll try to make stretchers."

He kept one ear open for his teammates as they traipsed through the woods, noisily stepping on leaves and tree branches - even Hikaru wasn't minding that they stay silent, for once - and the other for the occasional rasp of Naruto-sensei's breath. Kaiki checked his chest and stomach once more, then felt his legs and his back, looking for any injury, but there was none. Biting his lip, he set his fingers to the pulse at Naruto-sensei's neck. It beat steadily once, then paused for a long time before throbbing again. With his attention focused on the pulse, Kaiki almost didn't notice that Naruto-sensei had moved his arm, lifting it up; then it brushed his face and he jumped, startled, and leaped back a little. "N-Naruto-sensei," he gasped. "Are you awake?"

His eyes were closed, but Naruto-sensei smiled ever so slightly, just a little lift of his lips. Kaiki couldn't help but smile himself; he moved back to Naruto-sensei's side and - he didn't know what else to do - took his hand. "Are you hurt?" he asked quietly. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Well." It was spoken on a breath, little more than a sigh, but it seemed the best Naruto-sensei could do. "You could tell me what you're doing here... but I shouldn't ask that, should I?"

"Sensei, it would be a stupid question. But-" Kaiki grinned and wiped his eyes with his free hand. "You're a stupid guy, right?"

"Kaiki." Naruto-sensei opened his eyes a slit, revealing a sliver of red - Kaiki frowned and looked closer, but Naruto-sensei closed them again. "Do me a favor."

"What, sensei?"

"Bring Sasuke over here. There's still something I've got left to do."

"What do you mean?" Kaiki felt his smile waver and clamped down on it, forced it steady again. "You'll have plenty of time to do things when we get you to the village. You just - you need to rest, or something. You just fought a huge battle. And you won, didn't you?"

His teacher's smile quirked. "I guess you could say that."

"So just - wait, okay? Sasuke is resting, too. We'll take care of both of you." Kaiki squeezed his hand, trying not to notice how cold it was. It just needed to warm up a bit, that was all.
This time Naruto-sensei opened his eyes all the way, and Kaiki quailed to see his irises like a sea of blood. Then they softened, Naruto-sensei's eyebrows coming down, and his lips spreading in another smile. "You're a smart kid. There is no time, okay? Just... bring Sasuke over here. Close enough for me to touch."

Nodding slowly, Kaiki let go of his hand and slid his way through the mud, trying to keep his hands away from the mucky mess. When he touched Uchiha Sasuke's body - warily, in case Orochimaru had found a way to cheat death (or whatever Naruto-sensei had done to him) after all - it was cold, but his pulse was steadier than Naruto-sensei's. His skin was pasty, though, whiter than any skin Kaiki had ever seen, and the black circles under his eyes made him look like death. The tattoo on his face had faded to something like gray; soon, Kaiki figured, it would probably disappear all together. He slid a hand under Uchiha's neck and half-lifted him up, and dragged him to Naruto-sensei's side where he lay him back down, back in the mud and the rain.

Naruto-sensei turned his head, looking with his red eyes at the Uchiha's face. There was something there that Kaiki couldn't read, something he hadn't ever seen. "Kaiki," Naruto-sensei said, looking back at him. "Help me, would you?"

Kaiki nodded. Shaking rain out of his eyes, he reached out and wrapped his muddy hands around Naruto-sensei's arm; even with his own fingers so cold, he could still feel the ice-chill of his teacher's skin. He set Naruto-sensei's hand on the Uchiha's stomach, then drew back, covering his mouth with his hand.

"Fuuinjutsu," Naruto whispered, "Shiki Fuujin."

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The kyuubi was still inside him - waiting for his death, or just patiently awaiting whatever happened - as Naruto spread his fingers over Sasuke's belly. He could barely feel Sasuke's skin, his own was so cold; but he remembered it being hot once, just like his own, remembered fire running through his veins and mirrored in his Sharingan eyes. It was like all the years were disappearing, and this was the Sasuke of so many years ago: the kid who'd teased him, insulted him and looked at him, sometimes, with heavy eyes, with a look Naruto hadn't understood; who'd pushed him to be his best, who had made Naruto push back just as hard.

The first friend, and no matter who came afterward - not Neji, who knew what to say, what to push, when to leave or be quiet; not Gaara, counterpoint to him, identical in so many ways; not even Sakura-chan, whose friendship he'd worked so hard for and for so long - always the one in his mind.

Naruto smiled as he lifted his other hand, moving his fingers into the proper seal. "Man," he whispered. "You're really going to hate me for all this, you know that?"

Jiraiya always said, the sealer is sealed as well as the one he's sealing. He wondered, but never asked - didn't have to, because Naruto knew - if the Yondaime, his best student, his favorite, were inside Naruto somewhere.

Naruto never told him, but sometimes he thought he might be - sometimes he felt the ghost of something that wasn't him, something that wasn't the kyuubi; he thought he felt the shadow of that smile, the cloud of that calmness, the clarity of an intellect that wasn't his own. He thought he felt someone watching over him, and in those brief fleeting moments, it felt like the thing Naruto had always wanted most. A family.

If I do end up in your soul, Sasuke, it's not such a bad place to be. And maybe I can do for you what he did for me. 'Cause you always did need someone looking out for you.
Funny, the way these things turn out.

The kyuubi was moving, sliding up his belly, clawing past his lungs, burning his teeth and tongue; giving him one last bit of power. Naruto gritted his teeth, lifted up his hand and settled it over Sasuke's face. Felt his eyes, his lips, the curve of his jaw and the fading cold of the curse seal. He smiled, breathed out long and slow.

Sasuke's lips were moving under his fingers, but too late, too late - he was falling, being drawn into darkness and then coming into something soft, something warm. Something not unfamiliar, something he'd always known, something he'd sought for many years - and now here he was. He'd found it. It was his.
"The council is advised-" Tsunade paused a moment to shuffle her papers. The council members stared at her solemnly, a sea of frozen, wooden faces. She cleared her throat and continued, "The council is advised that, while Uchiha Sasuke committed acts of treason, conspiracy, murder, sedition, and torture, one of Konoha's own died to give him a second chance, and, as the Hokage, I feel that capital punishment is not an option to be considered here."

"You must be joking, Tsunade-sama!"

"Tsunade-sama, he betrayed the Konoha - killed countless of our own, so why should the life of one be sufficient enough to grant him pardon-"

"Tsunade-sama, you are allowing your own partiality to influence your judgments!"

"The council is advised," Tsunade repeated firmly, "that I am not willing to consider execution. My friends... twenty-one is too young to die."

Tsunade leaned against the black monument, allowing her old teammate a few minutes to stare at the new name inscribed on its endless surface. Then she stood, began walking; and Jiraiya fell into step beside her, the clacking of his geta echoing in this old grove. A cloud of smoke framed his face, older than it had been a few months ago. "Where do you think he learned it?" she asked, looking up at the sky - it would rain soon, the blue sky had turned to gray and black hours ago. "The seal, I mean."

"Where else?" Another cloud of smoke escaped with Jiraiya's chuckle. "From the Yondaime's monument. I took him when he was thirteen... and he kept going back, especially after Orochimaru took Sasuke's body. I always wondered what he was looking at. Well, now I know."

"Now we know," Tsunade said quietly. Next to her foot, a little circle of ground darkened, and as they walked the sky opened up and began spilling rain. It pattered the ground in a steadily sad sound, lonely, cold. "Nawaki, Dan, your student, our master... it's too much sometimes, Jiraiya. Too many."

Jiraiya touched her shoulder, then slipped his arm in between the crook of her elbow. His hair smelled like sandalwood incense. Tsunade lifted her face up to the rain, to the whitening sky, and shut her eyes.

"What sentence did the council decide for Sasuke?" Jiraiya asked.

"The harshest they could give him. After five years of house arrest - the length of which I'll be trying to reduce - he'll be stripped of his status as ninja and all the privileges thereof. After all that... he won't be allowed to leave Konoha again. A prisoner within his own village... how ironic." She had protested the sentencing - if not for Naruto and Kakashi, then for her own sense of justice - but they thought this sentence the only one able to take the place of execution.

"Hmmm." Jiraiya dragged on his pipe, eyes narrowing. "And if he leaves the village?"

"Well," Tsunade shrugged, "then hunting-nin will be sent out with orders to kill on sight. If he escapes them - God keep him. If he comes back here, he'll be executed. I wasn't able to get around that one."
"Then that's another one we've lost," said Jiraiya. "Naruto didn't seal the kyuubi into Sasuke so he could sit around on his ass here in Konoha. He gave him the kyuubi so Sasuke could finally kill his brother."

"A cruel gift," Tsunade murmured.

Jiraiya smiled as he tapped on his pipe to loosen the herbs. "The best one anyone ever gave him."

They held Naruto-sensei's funeral in the middle of fall - only a few weeks before his twenty-first birthday. Tsunade had told Kaiki - and red and green leaves fell onto his coffin, into his grave and on the black memorial in the grove when they chiseled his name into it. For the next month, Kaiki and Nagi and Hikaru trained by themselves, meeting each other in the afternoons and heading down to the lake. He and Nagi wandered around the village together in the evenings; Hikaru had been engaged to the new clan heir, and wasn't able to spend her time with them as she liked. At the shops, Kaiki started buying bits of chocolate for her so he could give them to her on her wedding day.

Kaiki taught Nagi to gather chakra in the balls of his feet, then coaxed him out onto the lake; he caught Nagi when he fell and pulled him back up, until one day Nagi let go of his arm and began walking. He danced on the lake, waved his arms, laughed and splashed Kaiki with a handful of cold fall water. Kaiki splashed him back, and they fell into the lake together and swam back to shore to where Hikaru was waiting, eyebrows arched over her sunglasses.

The first snow of the season fell, coating Konoha with a light sprinkling of white that reminded Kaiki of the powdered sugar his mother spread on her sweet foods. Kaiki woke Nagi up, waited for him to get dressed, shouting to him through the window; they picked their way through the falling snow into the markets. Hikaru waved to them from a group of Aburames, spoke to her fiancee and joined them, giving them a bit of a smile. They bought breakfast and went down to the lake, where Hyuuga Hinata smiled to them and said that - as Naruto-sensei had asked her to - she would be teaching them now, and hoped they would be able to make it into this month's chuunin exam.

She praised their learning, their strengths - Hikaru's book knowledge, Kaiki's strategies and leadership, and Nagi's enthusiasm and energy - and began to fill in the gaps in their instruction, teaching more patiently and more kindly, yet more firmly than Naruto-sensei had. They took missions with her, D rank and then slowly moved into C rank; trained in the forest, against the other genin teams, and by the middle of October Kaiki and Nagi were sitting on Kaiki's porch, rolling back their sleeves and comparing their new scars. It snowed again, heavily this time; Hinata took them out onto the lake, where they learned how to control the weight and pressure of their bodies on surfaces - so they wouldn't break through the ice, and wouldn't bend tree branches for their enemies to follow.

Sometimes Sakura came and taught them, too, cutting her own arm and letting them tend it, telling them how to care for everything from the slightest scratch to the deepest, most gaping wound. "Like when Naruto-sensei got stabbed," Nagi said as he tightened the bandage around her arm, and Sakura smiled and said Yes, like that time. Sometimes she would tell them a story about Naruto and her and Sasuke, and Hinata would nod and smile and say that she remembered that.

Kaiki burned to ask if Uchiha Sasuke was alive, but Sakura looked older and more worn now, the way his own mother did at times. He kept his questions to himself.

The chuunin exam came and went; Hinata said that they were probably ready to enter it, but she thought it best to wait until the next time - they had had a hard year, no need to add unnecessary stress. She tested them with the Kaiten; none of them could break through, not even the tiniest of Hikaru's insects, but she listened to the strategies they came up with later and said that Kaiki's, if he
could pull it off, would work. She smiled, ruffled their hair, said they were coming along very well.

"Now get strong," she said when it snowed too hard to train on the lake, and gave them a few weeks' break.

Kaiki trained with weights and sparred with Nagi, but he found that it was too pretty outside to be training all the time. At night, he walked in it alone, going down the alleys where no one had walked and looking behind himself at the lone, solitary tracks he left behind. He climbed a tree and looked out across Konoha, at the trampled snow in the markets, the untouched snow on the roofs; he told himself it was foolish, it had snowed before and he had always admired it - but when he walked by himself, down a path where no one had stepped, he couldn't remember ever having felt this way. In his backyard, he even bent down and scooped up a handful of snow, tasting its wet, cold fullness cutting to his teeth, then lifted his face to the falling snow and stuck out his tongue to catch more snowflakes.

Hikaru turned fourteen and married the Aburame clan head on a dark, snowy day. Kaiki stood close to her afterward, handed her the little brown box he had filled with chocolates. A high collar covered most of her face, but he could still see her smile.

After the marriage, she had to drop out of their team. She would never become a chuunin or a jounin, not officially.

Kaiki trained with Nagi, and sometimes Nagi beat him; his old childhood friend, the kid he'd been next door to his entire life, was getting stronger, filling out with muscle, becoming taller and thicker. But he still smiled sweetly when he stood over Kaiki, and held out a hand to help him up. Most of the time, though, Kaiki won and Nagi would grumble and scowl like always, and say someday he was going to be stronger than everybody.

On Christmas Eve, Kaiki escaped the pack of his family, waving to Ino and Shikamaru who were leaning on his porch, and ran down with Nagi to the old memorial. It had snowed the night before, but the snow was still pocked here and there with footsteps, three pairs, the light, evenly-spaced prints of jounin. Kaiki drew Nagi into the bushes around the monument and they crept to the front, brushing aside leaves until they could see the three jounin. Kaiki put his hand to his mouth and narrowed his eyes as Tsunade and Jiraiya turned, clearly leaving behind their companion.

The ninja who stayed at the memorial was young, only a little taller than Naruto-sensei had been; thin, well-toned, and pale like the moon. His face was clear of its black mark. He stood still for a long time, stiller than the trees in the forest which still swayed in the wind; only after a long time did he move, and then only to stretch out his hand and touch the monument. His pale hand looked strange against the black stone. He curled in his fingers with their long, sharp nails and looked up at the sky; at the stars.

Kaiki brushed Nagi's elbow, nodded for him to follow. They crept out of the bushes and ran back to the village. In the markets, the people were milling about and laughing, faces bathed in bright lights that illuminated wide smiles, white teeth and clear, unworried eyes.

Kaiki wondered what Uchiha Sasuke would look like in bright light; wondered if he might just merely fade away, like the shadows.

Kaiki became a chuunin at the beginning of the next year, Nagi at the end. They still visited Hikaru, who had a child two years later.
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