Any Port in a Storm

by DasWarSchonKaputt

Summary

Dying isn't always painful, Minato is sure. He probably just has really bad luck. (SI)
(Minato-centric)

Notes

This has been in the works for ages. I just haven't had the guts to really post it until now. Three chapters are written and ready. Fourth needs to be written and fifth needs a lot of work. We'll go from there.

- Inspired by Catch Your Breath by Liangnu
Minato is sixteen, on the cusp of a long-deserved promotion to jōnin, when he is pulled off active
duty pending the results of a psychological evaluation. Jiraiya, his once-sensei and superior officer,
spends three days bullshitting and bootlicking his way through Konoha’s convoluted internal
politics to ensure that he is the one Minato has to face in the whitewashed room they have been
assigned.

The conversation starts off light.

It’s textbook psychology. Small talk designed to push him into a relaxed state of mind, a costless
way to get overwrought shinobi to lower their guards just enough for the evaluation to go ahead.

Minato forces himself to go along with it.

In some ways, it is far too easy to fall into the familiar rhythm of smartass remarks and exasperated
amusement with his sensei. It’s a throwback to a time long since passed: lazy summer afternoons
spent arguing about fūinjutsu, evenings wasted hauling Jiraiya’s hopelessly drunk arse across
Konoha, mornings when he woke up and felt for the first time like things would maybe be all right.

Nostalgia at its finest, deadly in its potency, until almost out of nowhere: “You don’t scare easily,
do you, Minato?”

Minato blinks. “Maybe,” he allows, unwilling to do more than passively agree.

Jiraiya makes a note on the lined pad of paper in front of him. Strange – Minato was convinced it
was just a prop.

“You don’t agree with me.”

No, he doesn’t. Fear is a constant component of life as a shinobi. It is part of what makes them
human, part of what stopped Minato from losing himself to the bloodshed, part of what
characterises this life as a whole.

But he doesn’t let it control him.

Jiraiya makes another mark on the pad of paper. A quick glance over the table confirms that it is in
dot code, and not one Minato is inherently familiar with. Smart, but then again, Sensei has never
been stupid.

“What would you say then,” Jiraiya says slowly, words weighted carefully, “has been your most
terrifying experience to date?”

That is… a good question.

Peace in Konoha has always been nebulous at best. Minato was born in the midst of one war and is
living in the beginnings of another. He is no stranger to battlefields, not stranger to slaughter, no
stranger to loss.

How things change. But he doesn’t want to think about that. He doesn’t think about that.

And yet… “Waking up.” The words force themselves out of Minato, a dry, reluctant scrape from
the back of his throat.
Jiraiya frowns. “Waking up?” he echoes.

Minato steadies his voice. “Waking up.”

Another note and another frown from Jiraiya. He looks up and meets his student’s eyes dead-on, face uncharacteristically grave. “Tell me about it.”

Minato opens his mouth. For a second all he wants to do is to tell Jiraiya the truth. *I was four years old, he would say. The words would be bitter and unnerving, but he would say them. I thought I was going insane. I still don’t know if I wasn’t.*

Jiraiya is Minato’s sensei, but beyond that he is a father figure where Minato’s own was significantly lacking, the one constant thread of support that he has been able to cling to through his genin and chūnin days. Jiraiya is a man who lives for the future, for whom prophecy and destiny and fate are more than just words.

He thinks Minato will save the world.

He is wrong, but that isn’t the point.

Jiraiya is a dreamer. He would believe Minato. That isn’t the issue.

“Waking up,” Minato repeats, taking in a deep breath. The words taste strange on his tongue. “It was dark and there was so much pain. I thought I was dead.”

*I should have been dead.*

“You weren’t though,” Jiraiya prompts.

Sensei has always trusted too easily.

So, Minato opens his mouth, swallows past that treacherous second of doubt, and he lies.

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**I**

**Cloudburst**

Wartime Konoha is vastly different from the village in times of peace. As the Second Great Shinobi War rages over 200 miles away in the Land of Rain, Konoha’s citizens prepare with grim wariness for the day when the fighting is finally brought home.

“No. No, you can’t do this. He’s a child. He’s my *son*. I didn’t—we didn’t—you can’t.”

Inamura sighs. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry, Namikaze-san,” he says.

In the past five years since war has broken out, Academy recruitment has doubled, almost all of those extra students civilians. Not many people manage to link the cause to the effect before it is spelled out for them, like—like this.

“He’s four years old, Inamura-sensei,” the woman, Namikaze Masako, pleads. “He doesn’t even know what chakra is. He’s—my *son*. He’s not a soldier.”

*No,* Inamura thinks looking down at the young blond boy, *not yet, but soon.*

Namikaze Minato is a quiet child. He watches Inamura with a narrowed, discerning gaze, one which frankly unnerves the medic. It is far too similar to the way that his Hyūga genin teammate looked at him, right up until the supposed-genius lost it and opened her wrists before the finals of
their Chūnin Exams.

Too clever by half, their sensei had always said about her.

Inamura takes a deep breath, chasing away memories that have long since been buried. “Namikaze-san, you and your son are both citizens of Konoha,” he explains in the same, tired tone he has employed to five other women today alone. “You both enjoy the benefits of that position. This is what is asked in return.”

“This is barbaric,” Namikaze hisses. “There isn’t a single ninja in our family. Minato-chan is—he’s normal. He’ll—”

Die before his twelfth birthday? Probably.

“—You can’t do this, please.”

That’s the thing, though. He can.

Once more, Inamura lets his gaze stray to Minato and, once more, he receives only a flat stare in return. The sad truth of it all is that Namikaze is right in her fears. For every genin with ninja parents that dies in the war, seven more first generation shinobi die alongside them. The odds are so heavily stacked against her son that isn’t funny.

Inamura had thought he was done with sending people off to die when his injury took him out of ANBU.

But there is one consolation in all this, one pitiful piece of reasoning to back up this mass-recruitment of canon-fodder.

“Ah,” Inamura breathes, mouth twisting into something akin to a wince, “you are not quite correct, Namikaze-san.”

Namikaze stops dead in the middle of her tirade, eyes flashing dangerously. “Excuse me?”

“You son,” he elaborates, “is many, many things, but he is the furthest thing from normal.” He stands, careful not to jostle his injured leg too much, and hobbles over to withdraw a leaflet from a rack across the room. He holds it in his hands so that neither mother nor son can see the title, then sits back down. “This is for you, Namikaze-san,” Inamura says, handing over the leaflet.

Minato looks down at the shiny piece of paper that has been placed in his hands. His eyes track from right to left, before he suddenly drops the leaflet in favour of giving Inamura a highly disturbed look.

Namikaze picks up the leaflet her son has dropped. “You gave my son a leaflet on penile fractures?” she asks incredulously, holding the offending piece of literature as if it will burn her.

Inamura smiles without humour and takes the leaflet back. “I wanted to see if he could read kanji,” he says, silently adding, and uncommon kanji at that. “As I thought, Namikaze-kun here possesses a reading ability that is far above the level expected from his peers.”

Namikaze bristles. “What does that have to do with anything?”

But Inamura can tell – she is thinking, now. There is less panic hidden in her posture and, from the way she threw her gaze at her son, she likely was not aware of just how advanced he truly is. She works in a library, Inamura remembers now, and probably just leaves him alone in the stacks as she
“Namikaze-kun has a chakra condition that is called a Yin-Yang imbalance,” Inamura said. “The documentation for this condition is… patchy, at best. It’s usually only noticeable before a child reaches puberty and their energies start to balance out.”

There is a long stretch of silence.

“…Is it dangerous?” Namikaze finally asks.

“Not at all,” Inamura answers. “In Namikaze-kun’s case, his imbalance tips to favour the Yin half of his chakra – spiritual chakra, energies associated with mental development. It’s usually indicative of a child with higher than average intellect for their age.” He pauses. “The last recorded case was that of Orochimaru, the Sandaime’s student.”

She looks pale. “They’re not going to let him go, are they?” she whispers.

Inamura shakes his head.

Namikaze takes in a deep breath, steadying herself. “Okay,” she says. “Okay. He’s going to be a shinobi. Okay.” She wraps an arm around her son. “How long do we have?”

“Until he’s six.”

“What do I do?” The voice is so quiet that it takes Inamura a moment to figure out it came from Minato instead of his mother.

Inamura shifts in his seat, trying to find the most comfortable way to sit with his injured leg. “Read mostly,” he says. “The Academy texts are available in most civilian libraries and getting a head-start on those will free up a lot of time when you’re actually attending classes. You’re really too young to do any sort of physical conditioning, and you’re not from a clan so chakra training is out until you’re able to do it under supervision. Other than that…” he hums, “I’d advise picking up playing the flute, or knitting.”


Inamura smiles. “Exactly.” He sighs. “Work hard, keep your skills sharp, trust your teammates, and you should be fine.”

*The lying gets easier, Inamura-kun*, Sensei once said. *Soon enough it will come to you as naturally as the truth.*

It was far from the last time Sensei was wrong about something.

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Minato does not often like to think about the first few years of his second life. There isn’t much of it that he remembers, in all honesty, and it is probably best that he keeps it that way.

Those years do not matter so much anyway; he did not start to remember who he was until he turned four.

There really isn’t any way to accurately describe the paranoia-inducing experience of having flashes of a former life return to you. At first, the memories felt like distant dreams – fiction conjured up by his mind to soothe his subconscious. They were certainly mundane enough: he
dreamed of a life in an orphanage, strange foods and stranger tongues, people and faces blurred by
the distance of time.

And then suddenly, he was choking on his own blood, burning in impotent agony, cursing again
and again because he had been too slow and now we are both dead—

He woke up screaming.

This is what it means to wake up. It means unrelenting terror, a mess of his bloody death and most
poignant memories; it means a childhood of nightmares that grip his mind tight and refuse to let go.

For the longest time, Minato was convinced he was going insane.

It wasn’t actually outside of the realm of possibility – children with high IQs in Konoha were
recorded as being almost twice as likely to develop some form of mental instability in the future.
The trick, apparently, was in maintaining at least the façade of functionality.

So that is what Minato did.

He pretended and pretended and pretended until he just—couldn’t, anymore.

Minato sits on his bed, listening with half a mind to the sounds of his mother scurrying about the
kitchen below.

My name is Namikaze Minato, he thinks, and he hates how it does not feel like a lie.

He is not Namikaze Minato, the man he read about so long ago. He is not the legendary Fourth
Hokage, the man who unflinchingly carved a gory path through Iwa’s forces in the Third Shinobi
War, dying with a body count more than 50 times his age in a world without technology more
advanced than the fridge. He is not the Yellow Flash, who people were honestly unsurprised it
took a 200ft tall being of pure chakra and malice to take down.

He is not a legend on a page of a book.

My name is Namikaze Minato, he thinks and wraps his thin arms around his waist. I do not want
this.

“Minato-chan!”

He startles at the sound of his mother’s voice.

“Time for dinner!”

Minato swallows past the lump in his throat and dries off the tears he hadn’t realised he was
crying. He pushes himself up off the bed.

Once upon a time, a girl died too young to be anything but a tragedy, chanting with her last
thoughts that she should have been faster, that she would give anything to be fast enough—

Well. You know what they say.

Be careful what you wish for.
Sunshower

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

II
Sunshower

Once upon a time, there was a girl who saw the world around her in a series of patterns. It wasn’t a constraining model, nor was it a perfect one, but it was useful and it let her predict and prepare for certain events. Numbers fell into step neatly following that: there were nine cracks in the ceiling above her bed, 28 steps up to her form room each morning at school, four missed stitches in the knitted jumper she was given for Christmas.

Three bullets to her chest to kill her. One through her friend’s temple to kill him.

And then patterns didn’t seem so useful anymore at all.

Minato doesn’t want to think of the numbers that he has stacked against his name right now. He doesn’t want to think in terms of death rates and probability, to think about how many of his classmates he has to come out on top of to have the best chances for survival.

So he doesn’t.

He doesn’t search the information out, even if it would be pitifully easy to compile the figures. The civilian library is just metres away from the records office, after all.

Minato tears his eyes away from the building, not wanting to think too hard about why his gaze keeps gravitating towards it in spite of his decision. He forces himself to concentrate on the page in front of him, tuning out the playground rabble that threatens to disturb his focus.

Obsession can be just another form of avoidance, after all.

“My mum says that you’re going to die.”

The voice comes from above Minato and he doesn’t have to look up to know that someone is standing in front of him. They probably have their hands on their hips, demanding his attention, and they probably don’t expect to be denied.

Children. Always so unintentionally self-centred it makes his head spin.

“Hey. Hey! I’m talking to you.”

Minato debates the odds that the girl – or boy-with-high-pitched-voice, he supposes – will leave him alone without a response on his part. They’re pitifully low.

He draws his eyes up and away from the book that he isn’t really reading to meet the eye of Ichikawa Kana, or Kada, or something like that. She sits next to him in maths class, or she did at one point, and is just brattish enough that he was giving her a wide-berth even before he recovered all of his memories.

She hovers over him, the end of one of her ratty pigtails in her mouth as she chews on it thoughtfully.
“Yes?” he asks.

“My mum says you’re going to die.” She tilts her head at him. “Are you?”

Is he? He doesn’t know. How terrifying. “Maybe,” Minato allows.

“Why?”

“Sometimes,” he says, rolling the words around in his head carefully before he says them, “people die.”

Sometimes, all the patterns in the world won’t save you from the fact that you are the freak of probability that dies choking on your own blood at 17.

Ichikawa isn’t impressed. Minato wouldn’t expected her to be. “Why you, though?” she asks. “What did you do?”

And that’s the question, isn’t it? What did he do? Is this karma, or just cosmic coincidence – is it even real?

But he does not say that. Ichikawa is not looking for that answer.

“I pestered someone when they were trying to read,” he says instead, a snarl forming at his lips as he spits the words out. It takes him very little time to realise just how much of a terrible idea that was.

Ichikawa takes one look at him, processes what he said, and then bursts into tears.

Minato stares after her blankly. Yeah, he thinks as the crying girl flees to the nearest teacher. I’m fucked.

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“Why have the gods cursed me so?” Masako asks, eyes cast up to the sky. “Is this what they meant when they talked about teenage rebellion?”

“I’m five,” Minato points out helpfully.

She sighs, dropping her eyes to her son briefly. “Most of the time you don’t act like it,” she says, but stops that thought in its tracks before it can be led back to Inamura-sensei and war and conscription. She looks back up at the sky. “Is this payback for how easy he was as a child?”

“I’m still five,” Minato adds.

“Quiet, Minato-chan, I’m lamenting.”

She feels more than sees her son’s smile, and allows herself to relax somewhat. Minato is not a problem child. He is quiet and introverted, preferring the company of his own mind to those around him, but he is not cruel.

Right now, though, he is stressed.

Minato hides it well, just as he hides near everything else, but it still bleeds through to his mannerisms and actions. He’s scared, and Masako cannot blame him, and he does not know how to deal with that fear.
“I’m sort of happy about this, you know,” she tells her son, ruffling a hand through his blonde permanent bed-hair. “Finally, you get into trouble for something normal. Who gets into trouble for reading?”

Minato blushes, shifts, and mutters, “At least it wasn’t a leaflet on penile fractures.”

Ah. Yes. Well, there’s that, she supposes.

“You’re going to apologise to Ichikawa-chan tomorrow, though, aren’t you?” Masako says, wrapping a loose arm around Minato’s shoulders.

He grimaces, but nods.

Your son is scared, Masako thinks. She knows she needs to talk to him soon, to explain what his future as a ninja means for them as a family, but just—not now. Let her have these few last days of denial.

Let her have this last year of her introverted, bookish son, before Konoha takes him and turns him into either a corpse or a killer.

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“My mum says that you’re going to become a shinobi and that’s why you’re going to die,” Ichikawa triumphantly informs Minato the next week. She looks smug, with her arms crossed and her stomach stuck out, and Minato hates her for it a little bit.

Hates her because – and he realised this as he lay in bed last night, staring at the ceiling and trying not to cry when he counted the cracks and came to five – she is the only one who seems to care enough to try and talk to him.

It’s pathetic, but his existence has come down to a lonely boy reaching out to a spiteful girl for human contact.

“Your mother sounds like a very cheery woman,” he says. He doesn’t look up from his book.

Ichikawa is not dissuaded. “She says that you have chakrata and that people with chakrata become shinobi.”

“Chakra,” Minato corrects absent-mindedly.

“Whatever,” Ichikawa says. She flicks one of her pigtails over her shoulder and bends over to peer at his book. “What are you reading?”

He silently lifts up the book to show her the title.

“It’s in kanji,” she points out. “I can’t read it.”

He sighs. “It says, ‘A Short History of Konoha’,” he says. “We don’t go into as much depth here as they do in the Academy.” At her perplexed look, he elaborates, “Where you learn to be a shinobi.”

“Oh,” she says, drawing out the word. “Is it interesting?”

“Somewhat.”

“Do you wanna go play?”
“Not really.”
Ichikawa frowns. “You’re really boring.”

“Perhaps,” he agrees.

She huffs, then turns and runs off. Minato watches her go.

Maybe… Maybe that wasn’t so bad.

He snorts. Maybe it was.

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The next week, Ichikawa does not show. Nor does she the week after that. Minato does not think much of it, beyond the coiling emptiness that festers in his stomach, and tries to tell himself that he does not care.

He doesn’t, really. Because she was just a girl.

He doesn’t even consider—

“No,” he breathes. No, no, no, no, no, she was just a child, just a child, how could they, how could they, how could—

“Are you okay?”

“Ojōsama!”

She was supposed to be safe. A civilian. Chakra-less. Innocent.

*But no-one is safe in a war.*

“Something’s wrong! His breathing’s all—”

He hears the slap before he feels it. He freezes, head turned to one side by the force of the hit, and then slowly takes in his surroundings.

He is lying on the floor – *when did my legs give out?* – and above him, hand still raised as if anticipating the need for another slap, is a young girl his age. She is nothing like Ichikawa. Dark hair and dark eyes, dressed in an expensive looking dress – an Uchiha, almost certainly, and there is a hint of familiarity to her features…


He finds his tongue. “Uchiha Mikoto?”

The girl blinks, not lowering her hand. “Do I know you?”

So this is Sasuke’s mother. She is… different to what Minato had been expecting.

But what was he expecting? The seemingly mild-mannered woman who had smiled gently as her own son cut her down?

She’s *five*.

“No,” Minato says, answering her question.
“Ojōsama!” There’s the sound of a scuffle in the small crowd that has surrounded him and both he and Mikoto turn towards the sound. Fighting their way through the mass of bodies are two Uchiha police officers. “You can’t run off like that!”

Minato takes advantage of the distraction to scramble to his feet and flee.

Ichikawa Kanako is the latest name on Konoha’s long list of civilian casualties. She and her family were ambushed just ten miles out of the village, on a trip to visit relatives in Wave. A family friend paid the mission fee for a body-retrieval squad to be sent out and the Ichikawa family were buried last Wednesday in the cemetery near their former house.

It has been over and done with for days.

Minato is not sad that she is gone. He is not grieving a beloved friend; in the grand scheme of things, the loss of Ichikawa means near-nothing to his everyday life. He didn’t even know her first name until he read it on her gravestone.

*She couldn’t even read kanji yet,* Minato thinks blankly.

He hates this. He hates how Ichikawa has become an avatar of him in his mind, how he does not care that she is dead beyond that fact that it has shaken his world view. A child is dead – shouldn’t that be enough?

*But I was a dead child once, too,* he thinks, and then he laughs. Bitter chuckles echo through his body, and they just keep on coming, never stopping, because he finally understands.

He does not want to die. That is what this all comes down to. He is not even sure that this life is real, and either way it will be violent and horrific, he knows, but he does not want to lose it.

It is all he has.

*I do not want to die.*

He is not the Namikaze Minato he once read about, but this is not a story. This is the last, deluded hope of a dead child who did not want to die.

He digs under his pillow and withdraws the knitting needles that his mother silently pressed into his palm after the meeting with the doctor.

He will not die like Ichikawa Kanako, helpless in the absence of a ninja bodyguard. He will not die like that terrified teenage girl, inhaling her own blood in useless self-sacrifice.

He is not Namikaze Minato, but he thinks he may be able to stomach dying like him.

Minato takes a deep breath, and then he begins to knit.

*One,* he counts through his first stitch, *two, three, four.*
Regarding the girl-reincarnated-as-boy thing -- Minato fully regards himself as male, but he also acknowledges that in his past life, he identified as female. It won't be forgotten and it is elaborated on at a later point and then discussed a bit more in detail.

We have our first canon character introduced (apart from Minato) this chapter. I kind of love the story arc I have planned for Mikoto, who is going to be several shades of awesome, no word of a lie.
It pays to be circumspect.

Father used to say that a lot, mostly when he was muttering about his work for Intel before the war took him out of Konoha to the front lines. Mikoto doesn’t see him much anymore and, when she does, he’s just silent.

That’s fine, though. Mikoto knows how to deal with silence just fine.

Her mother is the one she struggles with.

Mikoto scowls up at the woman in question one last time, arms crossed in direct challenge. Uchiha Kiyomi stares coldly back, not a shred of affection visible in her features.

“Mikoto.” The word is a warning, spoken in a dangerously level voice, and Mikoto supposes that she’s supposed to heed it.

“Mother,” she returns evenly, instead.

They stare at each other for a moment more, before Kiyomi breaks the silence. “We have discussed this,” she says, each word weighted. “You are not going to the Academy.”

“Yes, I am.”

“No, you’re not.”

Mikoto looks away.

The Clan Head’s only daughter: this is the role Kiyomi would have her play. It’s the role that the Elders would have her play, too, for all Mikoto wants to scream and tear her hair out. She should sit back and learn flower-arranging and kimono-wearing, safely waiting out her years until she is old enough to marry whomever her father has picked to take over the clan.

She is nothing more than a status symbol.

*It pays to be circumspect,* Father used to say. Mikoto listened and she learned.

Her ideas of politics are a little crude, she is aware, but they will suffice just fine for this argument. She isn’t looking to topple a government, after all, merely outwit her mother.

“But Uzumaki-sama—” she starts to say and then very deliberately stops.

Kiyomi freezes. “Uzumaki…sama?”

*Got you,* Mikoto thinks.

Because it pays to be circumspect – to be aware of not only your own background, but that of your
Uchiha Kiyomi is a civilian – not even _clan-born_, and scandals like that remain alive in the gossip no matter how long has passed – and though she plays the game well, she still does not understand it quite the same as someone who has never known anything else.

Mikoto looks up at her mother. “Uzumaki-sama said she wanted to sponsor me through the Academy,” she says and she watches how each word drains a little more colour from her mother’s face. “It’s okay, though. I mean—she won’t be offended if we say no, will she?”

Kiyomi’s face is very, very blank.

And Mikoto knows she has won.

Sometimes the best traps are the simplest. The ones that are easy to set up, easy to understand, and easy to miss.

She met Uzumaki Mito at the Memorial Stone three weeks ago, when she was staring at it and counting the number of fallen clan-members listed there. The redheaded woman was sedate and quiet – and, well, Mikoto is good with quiet.

Their conversation was mostly one-sided. Mito seemed content to listen to Mikoto ramble, a distant smile on her face that said she was remembering someone else. And then, things came tumbling out of Mikoto’s mouth.

She’s worried about her dad. He’s not supposed to be quiet. She thinks he doesn’t see her and her mother so much as people as obligations anymore.

The only person her mother will let her play with is Fugaku, who pulls her hair and calls her names, and she is terrified, because she thinks she might have to _marry_ him someday.

Sometimes, she imagines she has friends who sit on her bed and listen to her talk about everything. They tell her that she shouldn’t want to become a shinobi, anyway, because she only wants to do it to spite her elders.

But that’s not it. She wants to become a shinobi because no-one expects it of her, because it is the only future she has that she can see as being truly _hers._

And then Mito put a hand on her head and told her that if she was unhappy, she should do something about it. And Mito offered her help.

_Sometimes, Mito explained, all you have to do to win a fight is make sure that a loss on your side is equal to a bigger loss on theirs._

So, this is the question that Mikoto has placed in front of Kiyomi: is she willing to risk alienating the most powerful political figure in the village barring the Hokage?

“I see,” Kiyomi says finally, her lips pursed.

Mikoto very much doubts that. Where she is concerned, her mother has always been so very _blind._

She supposes that she must seem like a very terrifying five year-old to her civilian-born mother, but this is just the way the Uchiha like their children. Brilliant and poised with a thrilling undercurrent of _danger._

_It pays to be circumspect_, Mikoto thinks again later that day, but she is smiling, a signed enrolment form clutched tight in her hand.
In Minato’s worst moments, Konoha feels like inescapable culture shock. It hits him, sometimes, when he stands in the market place and watches his mother hand out strange currency, just how little of this world resembles what he used to know. A different language, a different climate, a different body – it has been five years and he still feels like he is playing catch-up.

_Not right not right not right not right—_his mind won’t shut up. And there are five cracks above his head and his mother—_not his mother_—won’t stop looking at him like he will dissolve into nothing, and he is not safe here.

The words on the page in front of him blur.

He scrunches his eyes shut and opens them again. The words are clear once more.

Maths. In another life, he would have told you it was in his blood. It’s different this time around—_just like everything else—a_ touch easier, seconds faster, but still, somehow, it is the same.

How trite. It isn’t some mystery for the ages why maths is the same wherever you go. It’s as simple as four words: the decimal numeral system. Most humans have ten fingers; most humans count with ten units.

He never did get to learn very much calculus before. It’s—nice, to do it here, like he’s checking off a bullet point in a list of regrets.

“Huh. So you _are_ actually reading it.”

Minato looks up from his book and—

“Oof!”

—_ouch._

The girl in front of him rubs furiously at her chin, her eyes flashing. “You idiot!” she hisses. “Be more aware of your surroundings!”

Given that his head was also a casualty of the collision, Minato is decidedly unsympathetic. “I could say the same to you,” he says icily. Then he blinks.

And his stomach drops out from underneath him.

Stood in front of him is not an echo of Ichikawa Kanako, not another child ready to parrot back their mother’s spite-filled words, but someone worse. Uchiha Mikoto. A canon character.

_You are a canon character,_ his mind throws back at him.

Oh God, he is not prepared to deal with this.

“—And you’re not even listening to a word I am saying, are you?”

She’s been ranting at him, Minato realises belatedly. He bits down on the panic that is threatening to take over his thought processes. “Sorry,” he mutters.

She raises a dubious eyebrow and places her hands on her hips. For a moment, she looks so utterly ridiculous that Minato has to choke back a laugh.
“I said,” she repeats, “that I didn’t ever get your name at the market.”

He blanches. She remembers. That’s—brilliant. Truly.

“Namikaze Minato,” he says shortly.

Uchiha Mikoto – *Uchiha Mikoto* – scrunches up her brow. “I’ve never heard of a Namikaze Clan,” she says, mostly to herself. “Are you a civilian?” There’s something that he can’t quite read in her tone. Disdain? No, but maybe something similar.

“Aren’t you?” he shoots back.

Her lips quirk into a quiet, triumphant grin. “Not for long,” she says happily. “I’m going to the Academy next month.”

“That’s nice,” Minato says flatly, moving to turn back to his book. It really isn’t – nice, that is – but he supposes that Mikoto is as entitled to her delusions as he is to his.

She peers at him, her head appearing in his line of sight down to the book. “This is so weird,” she says. “Your eyes *look* like they’re reading, but… Are you sure you aren’t just pretending?”

“Yes.”

She narrows her eyes. “Are you sure you’re sure?”

“Yes,” he says again.

“Well, if you’re sure.”

“I am.”

“I guess I’ll just go, then.”

“You do that.”

When he next looks up, he is alone.

--

For some reason, Minato is finding it very hard to be surprised right now.

Mikoto’s lips twitch into an expression that isn’t quite a smile. “Fancy running into you here,” she says lightly. Behind her, two Uchiha policemen look to be struggling between an intense need to laugh and their pressing duty to glower Minato to death.

He gives them a half-hearted scowl. “Hello, Uchiha-san.”

“You keep a regular schedule,” Mikoto says in place of returning the greeting. “A shinobi should strive to be unpredictable.”

“I’m a civilian,” Minato says flatly. He walks past the policemen and down into the maths aisle, Mikoto following behind with a slight skip in her step.

“Not for much longer,” she says cheerily. He flinches. “Your name is down on the list of students starting at the Academy next month. I checked.”
That is… an awful lot of effort to go through to check on a boy she watched hyperventilate in the market a few weeks ago. And also a little invasive, if Minato is frank.

“Is there…” he pauses, searching for the right words, “something you want from me?”

Mikoto lips split, revealing a bright, gap-toothed smile. “I have decided,” she says, puffing up her chest, “that you are going to be my friend.”

He’s not sure if the expression on his face accurately portrays just how horrifying he finds that statement. “Oh,” he says faintly. “Good.”

Would it be too much to ask for the ground to swallow him up right now?

Clearly, yes.

--

She’s always there.

Minato doesn’t know how it’s possible for one person to be so tenacious, but it appears as if there is no force on earth strong enough to stand in Uchiha Mikoto’s way once she sets her mind on something. This isn’t at all like what happened with Ichikawa; it’s so much worse.

His mother thinks it’s sweet, he can tell, or amusing at the very least.

“I like Uchiha-chan,” she says, reaching across to ruffle his hair. “She’s good for you.”

Of course his mother thinks that. Mikoto is every cliché that his mother wants to cling to about what it means to be raised as a ninja. Sophisticated, well-mannered and better-dressed, gentle enough that you would never think for just one second that she will take her first life before she even reaches puberty.

Mikoto is what Masako wants to see when she looks at Minato in five years’ time.

He knows right now that she won’t.

Mikoto, though. Mikoto is just difficult. He doesn’t understand her, erratic as she seems to be, and he doesn’t know what it is she has seen in him that has made her latch onto him so firmly. He’s quiet and unassuming. Anxious, if she looks closer – which she has – and boring, if she doesn’t.

“But,” his mother goes on, “if this is bothering you so much, why don’t you just ask her?”

He blinks.

She laughs again. “Didn’t think of that one, huh, Minato-chan?”

He gives her a half-hearted scowl that melts away when she pulls him into her side for a hug.

--

Mikoto is sitting on the window seat at the library when Minato arrives, swinging her legs and twiddling with a loose strand of hair she has pulled down from her ponytail. “Good afternoon,” she says with a smile.

“Afternoon,” Minato returns.
There’s a pause.

Minato fists his hands in his shirt, working up the nerve, and then blurts, “Why do you even want to be my friend?”

Mikoto’s legs freeze mid-swing. “I’m an Uchiha,” she says, gaze fixed on her lap.

“I was aware,” Minato replies slowly.

She gives him an impossibly dry look that is hilariously out of place on her young features. “I am an Uchiha,” she repeats, “and you do not care.”

It takes a while for it to sink in. Oh.

The Uchiha Clan holds a lot of clout within Konoha. They are the village’s largest clan on sheer numbers alone, having the Hyūga beat by around 100 members, and they contribute more to village security than any other single group.

With all that, though, comes a certain degree of expectation. The Uchiha are somewhat larger than life – as brilliant as they are untouchable.

*How lonely,* Minato realises, and the words stir something within him.

Mikoto is still sitting in front of him, eyes fixed forward, and she is quiet. Waiting for him to say something.

So he does. “That’s not a particularly high bar to set for potential friends.”

She springs off the window seat. “I know,” she says simply, crouching down to one of the bookshelves. She pulls out a book and hands it to him. “You should read this one.”

Minato blinks. “Why?”

“I like the picture on the spine.”

He turns the book over in his hand. “It’s called a Möbius strip,” he explains. “It only has one side.”

Mikoto reaches out to touch the picture, tracing over it with her fingers. “Cool,” she eventually says.

Oh, fuck it. “If you get me some paper,” Minato offers, with the distinct feeling he is signing his own death warrant, “I can show you how to make one.”

Her answering smile is blinding.

And that, he supposes, is that.

[End Prologue]

Chapter End Notes

Mikoto is probably my favourite character to write, even if I find her the hardest. She's a devious little runt, that much is for sure, but she doesn't always understand
everything that happens around her. There's a line that got cut, where someone is
talking to Minato about Mikoto and Minato says, "I didn't befriend her for her politcal
connections," and the other person says, "It would have been out of character if you
befriended her at all. I'd say it was the other way around." Or something like that.

Basically, in their friendship, Mikoto is the one who is grabbing Minato's hand and
leading him places, and Minato is the one who lets himself be dragged while looking
like he'd rather be literally anywhere else.

Mikoto's situation is at odds with Minato's. Where he was forced into the Academy by
a wartime law, her clan excersied their privilege to keep her out of it. So, where Minato
sees the Academy as a symptom of his being trapped, Mikoto sees it as a gateway to
freedom. Partially, it's their different statuses in society talking, but part of it is also
because of the fact that Mikoto grew up in Konoha -- it is all she has ever known --
and Minato, for a given value of growing, didn't.

Anyway, the whole point of this was that I wanted to say that Mikoto and Minato's
friendship is possibly the most important relationship in this fic, it's nuanced, and
you're going to be seeing a lot of them as we go on.
Dew Point

Chapter Notes

Hilariously, I actually have a really good reason why this chapter is so late coming out. Here goes: heart operation. Yeah, I was in hospital. The good news is that it seems like the corrective procedure worked and I no longer have a heart condition. We’ll see, though.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

IV

Dew Point

“And if you copy my movements on your own dolls…”

There are so many things wrong with this that Minato doesn’t even know where to start.

Sprawled out over his desk is a well-stitched doll. They made them in class last week, a series of lessons that skyrocketed Minato’s respect for the elderly anatomy teacher. It takes a special kind of bravery to supervise a group of five year-olds challenged with delicate needlework, he thinks, not that any of that erases just how very, very messed up this all is.

They’re learning kill-spots. On personalised cloth dolls.

He slants his gaze sideways at Mikoto, whose lips are pursed in concentration as she mimics their teacher’s movements. Her doll is more elaborate in design than Minato’s, dressed in a tiny handmade kimono and wearing its yarn-hair up in an ornate style. It looks disturbingly similar to the fleeting glances Minato has caught of the Uchiha Matriarch, not that he’s ever going to say that aloud.

In contrast, Minato’s doll is utilitarian. The hair is dark brown, the most common colour in Fire Country, and the clothes are a plain, dark grey. It looks like everyone and no-one and, when he finished it, Risako-sensei gave him an unreadable look.

He sort of hopes it wasn’t approving.

Minato prods his doll in the chest, listening with half an ear as Risako-sensei describes the best way to reach the heart with a blade.

Disturbing, he thinks quietly, does not even begin to describe it.

The thing about the Academy is that it is callous – out of necessity maybe, but callous all the same. It must be the influence of the war, Minato thinks, because there is no other reason he can come up with for the disconnect between what he remembers and what he is experiencing.

In time, Minato tells himself, I will get used to it.

It’s a thought that is as reassuring as it is terrifying.

The remainder of his anatomy class drags by, Risako-sensei’s voice washing over him without
really sinking in, and before he knows it he is packing away his cloth doll and reaching for his books so that he can leave for his next class.

Timetabling, Minato was quick to learn, is something that is a bit of a mess at the Academy. Since the objective seems to be to graduate as many students as quickly as possible, most Academy classes are grouped according to ability with a few, other one-off courses used as timetable fodder to make it all work out. It doesn’t really strike him as the most efficient system, but it seems to work at the very least.

Mikoto scowls at him as he walks out of the door. He musters up a weak smile in return.

Advanced Unit Tactics rates pretty highly on Minato’s list of “Dullest Academic Experiences”. The teacher is a passionless husk who is gripping to the edge of this mortal coil through sheer stubbornness alone and the material, while important, is taught via excessive memorisation as opposed to comprehension and analysis. On top of that, it’s twice as bad as most of the other classes on his timetable, because he actually needs to pay attention during it if he wants to pass his graduation exam.

The hour practically crawls by and Minato, who places at just over three years younger than the vast majority of his classmates, muses that it’s just as well they leave this class to the Academy’s later years.

By the time it is lunch, Minato’s head feels fuzzy and all he wants to do is to sit in the shade and pretend he doesn’t exist.

“There you are!”

Minato opens his bleary eyes just in time to catch Mikoto’s exasperated expression before she drops to the ground next to him. She reaches into her bag and pulls out a packed lunch, which she promptly forces into his hands, and then retrieves her own.

Minato blinks at the packed lunch.

“I’ve been looking for you everywhere,” Mikoto says, already starting to dig in to her food. “Risako-sensei took forever to let us go and even then it was only because she had to get to some meeting with the windbags at the Hokage Tower.” She skewers a piece of fish and jams it into her mouth.

Then, she blinks at him. “Well? Eat up.”

“I’ve already eaten,” Minato says, still holding the lunch like he’s afraid it will self-destruct.

Mikoto rolls her eyes. “For the past eight days, you’ve only eaten an apple for lunch,” she says, matter-of-fact. “Eat.”

He stares at her for a moment more, before sighing and opening the lunch.

Momentarily appeased, Mikoto turns back to her own meal. “Anyway, I can’t wait until I can test out of this stupid history class and get into—what is it you do?”

“Advanced Unit Tactics.” He hopes his tone conveys the precise level of eagerness he holds for the class.

“That,” she says. “It’s ridiculous. We’ve only had a village system for, what, 50 years, so you’d think we wouldn’t have that much history to learn, but no, it really is important to know the precise
squabbles that blocked Tobirama-sama’s plan for a village development charter for three months!”

“You’ve been holding that in for a while, haven’t you?” Minato asks, prodding at his portion of rice unenthusiastically.

She smiles crookedly. “Somewhat.”

Minato looks down at his lunch, prepared with the same obsessive neatness that Mikoto applies to all areas of her life, and feels something akin to guilt flare to life in his stomach. It is so easy to forget, sometimes, that Mikoto is just six. She’s a child who talks like an adult, but she is still just a child.

Mikoto prods him sharply. “Eat,” she says again.

Minato sighs and makes a big show out of chewing on his next mouthful of food. Mikoto offers him a shamelessly pleased smile in response.

--

The Academy lets out at precisely 4pm each day, a stream of sweaty and chatty students pouring out of its doors onto the streets almost the same moment they are dismissed. Minato watches the mass-migration somewhat longingly through the window of his mathematics classroom, before he turns back to the reason he’s not out there with the rest of them.

Tsuneo-sensei’s presence as a consistent component of the Academy’s staff is something of an enigma – and not in a good way. As disconnected as Konoha’s civilian population can feel from the situation at hand, the village is very much at war. Someone as young and able-bodied as Tsuneo-sensei wasting away in the Academy is not a good sign. At the very least, the man seems to like kids, but that really means nothing in the grand scheme of things. If Konoha’s shortage of capable soldiers is as dire as everyone says, then Tsuneo-sensei should be on the front lines irrespective of how much he enjoys his current job.

Which is it, Minato thinks as he watches Tsuneo-sensei through narrowed eyes. Insubordination? Crippling trauma? Suspected treachery?

Tsuneo-sensei shuffles through a couple of papers on his desk, closing his textbook and dropping it into a drawer. “One moment, Minato-kun.”

Minato waits, wondering if this is supposed to put him off balance.

Desktop appropriately tidy, Tsuneo-sensei looks up. “Right,” he says. “How are you doing?”

Minato blinks. “How am I… doing?”

Tsuneo-sensei’s returning look is a little amused. “That is what I asked, yes.”

“I’m fine,” Minato says, regaining his ground.

“It’s been six months since you were enrolled in the Academy, Minato-kun,” Tsuneo-sensei says and now he definitely sounds amused. “I told you at the start that we’d be having a review around now. Did you forget?”

No, not exactly, but at the time he had been too freaked by Tsuneo-sensei’s apparent normalness to really register what he was saying so much. “Yeah, I guess.”
“Pretty out of character for you, I’d say then,” Tsuneo-sensei says with a grin. “Right.” He sits down on the edge of his desk, posture deliberately open and approachable. “Was there anything you wanted to talk to me about?”

Minato shakes his head.

“Well, on the academic front, you’re doing fine. Akiyo-san wants me to let you know that she’s nominating you for advancement in taijutsu when the next round of evaluations comes around in a couple of months – work hard for that, okay?”

Minato nods.

“A man of few words, I see,” Tsuneo-sensei states wryly. “In that case, I won’t keep you. I’m sure you’re eager to get home – and if I keep you any longer, I’m sure Uchiha-chan will start preparing to storm the castle to rescue you.” He reaches forward to ruffle Minato’s hair and Minato forces himself not to duck away from the hand.

“You’re a good kid, Minato-kun,” Tsuneo-sensei says. “See you on Thursday.”

--

Mikoto is waiting for Minato in the shade of a tree, her Uchiha protection detail looming over her like two particularly surly shadows. She waves enthusiastically at him and he waves meekly back.

They set off together, Mikoto chattering happily at his side. It’s a pattern that they have fallen into over the past few months: Mikoto talks, words spilling from her lips aimlessly, and Minato either listens or lets his mind wander. He’s terrible company most days after the Academy.

His schedule is somewhat more packed than Mikoto’s – a clear sign that he is being pushed towards early graduation, according to her – and though he remembers working much longer hours before, he doesn’t yet have the stamina to endure it. So he smiles tiredly at Mikoto’s jokes and drags his feet and pretends not to notice the open concern on her face at his state.

Soon enough, their odd group reaches Minato’s house and he peels off from the entourage to push open his front door and shuffle inside.

He’s greeted by silence. Masako, it seems, isn’t home yet.

It doesn’t surprise him. Lately, she has been working more and more hours at the library, citing a new reference system as the reason behind her absences. Minato might be inclined to believe her, if he hadn’t long since noticed that she stopped coming home as often almost the week he started at the Academy.

So, this is how Minato’s daily routine ends: he toes off his shoes, slips out of his backpack, climbs the stairs to his room, and he cries into his pillow.

This isn’t how it was supposed to be. The Academy wasn’t supposed to be some—factory. It wasn’t supposed to be about churning out cannon-fodder for Konoha’s stupid, fucking war that even the fucking daimyo doesn’t want. Mikoto wasn’t supposed to have to look after him and he wasn’t supposed to be so unable to handle it all that he can’t stop crying.

He doesn’t even know what it was supposed to be, but surely, surely it can’t have been this.

I will get used to it, he tells himself. Eventually, I will get used to it.
Eventually, the casual mentions of death and blood loss at the Academy will not seem so strange. Eventually, Mikoto will not have to remind him to eat. Eventually, Minato will stop feeling like something less than human, something cold and remorseless and robotic.

Right now, he cannot wait for that eventually to arrive.

Chapter End Notes

First off, ages. Minato is five right now. Mikoto is six. This chapter takes place in October (six months since April, when they joined the Academy).

Other important things: Minato is under a fuckload of stress at the moment and, for the most part, he’s oblivious to it. By that, I mean that he doesn’t realise how much his emotional stability and decision making ability has been affected by the great deal of stress he is under. He doesn’t even realise what is causing all of the stress – his impending graduation, the fact that he doesn’t trust Tsuneo-sensei at all, how alien he finds all of this compared to his previous experiences of school.

Basically, Minato is not dealing very well with the Academy.

Mikoto, by contrast, is. Her doll, by the way, is not intended to look like her mother, but to look like how her mother wants her to look. So, Mikoto’s not killing her mother multiple times in anatomy class, but rather her mother’s image of her future, if that makes any sense whatsoever.
Turbulence

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

V
Turbulence

Yamanaka Inoichi vs. Namikaze Minato

He glares at the words written in smudged chalk, feeling irritation claw its way up inside of him. Behind the blackboard, Kimi-sensei is watching the rest of the class with blank-faced attentiveness and, to be honest, that just pisses him off more.

A greasy hand falls onto his shoulder. “Handseals.”

...What?

Inoichi turns to give Chōza a peevish look.

Shrugging, Chōza tips the remnants of his crisp packet into his mouth. “Your family jutsu requires handseals,” he says, munching on his mouthful. “You know, as you’re so angry about your match-up.”

“I’m not angry,” Inoichi immediately denies. “Just—who the hell’s Namikaze Minato?”

Chōza has only a clueless shrug to offer in return.

Suddenly, a pair of arms drape over Inoichi’s shoulders and he feels the weight of someone’s chin resting on his head. He doesn’t need to look around to see who it is.

“Shikaku,” Inoichi growls, “get off me.”

Shikaku doesn’t. “Oh so you’re fighting Namikaze, are you?” he muses through a yawn from his position above Inoichi. “How troublesome for you.”

Inoichi waits just long enough for Shikaku to relax, then lets himself drop downwards without warning. The sudden loss of his prop makes Shikaku stumble and that, in turn, brings a shallow grin to Inoichi’s face.

Chōza, long since inured to any and all interactions between his two best friends, reaches into his pocket for another packet of crisps. “So, you know him, then?”

Shikaku settles himself on the ground. “Namikaze?” he asks, words slurried by yet another yawn. “Sure, why not?”

“Who is he?” Inoichi asks.

Wordlessly, Shikaku raises a hand and points to a short, blond kid in the crowd.

In a word, Namikaze is... underwhelming. He’s willowy and somewhat girlish-looking, even at a distance, and dressed in that awkward combination of clan-insignia-less, second-hand clothes and brand new shinobi sandals that marks him as nobody important.
“Huh, I’ve never noticed him before,” comments Chōza. “Was he just moved up to our class?”

Shikaku nods, rubbing blearily at his eyes. “According to my father, he’s some kind of prodigy,” he informs them blandly. “Apparently they have him flagged for potential ANBU recruitment. Kimi-sensei’s not really a fan, though.”

Inoichi follows his friend’s gaze to Kimi-sensei and watches the corners of her mouth tighten at the sight of Namikaze. Oh, Inoichi thinks, the realisation hitting him slowly. The match-up isn’t meant to be a snub to me.

From just a glance, Inoichi can tell that Namikaze’s fighting style likely relies very heavily on speed. The kid just doesn’t have the build for something with more of an emphasis on strength. It makes Inoichi the very worst possible opponent Namikaze could have been assigned.

Inoichi is built solidly and compactly: he hits as he hard as he does fast.

He drops to the ground next to Shikaku. “He’s going to be paste by the end of the spar, huh?”

Shikaku regards Inoichi closely. “I think,” he says slowly, “that’s mostly up to you.”

Inoichi gives Shikaku a scowl in return.

The fact of the matter is that Kimi-sensei will probably get away with this. At best, Namikaze is the son of some no-name chūnin; at worst, he’s one of the orphanage brats. No-one with any power is going to fight his battles and no-one with any power will give a shit that he is being screwed over by a teacher with a spiteful streak.

Especially given that Kimi-sensei has chosen a clan child as her main weapon against him.

No-one else gives a shit, so why should Inoichi?

“Namikaze-kun, Yamanaka-kun,” Kimi-sensei calls out suddenly. “Please take your positions inside the ring.”

After a pointed “good luck” from Shikaku and a hearty thump on his back from Chōza, Inoichi makes his way into the ring. Namikaze is already standing there, waiting.

So Inoichi smirks at him and takes his time getting into position. I can beat you, he projects. I can beat you and I won’t even have to break a sweat to do it.

There is no reaction from Namikaze.

It’s like Inoichi is facing down a cardboard cut-out instead of a person. Namikaze’s expression, if anything, shows nothing more than acute boredom.

Suddenly, it isn’t enough that this is a set-up to take the little bastard down a few pegs. Suddenly, Inoichi understands completely and resolutely why Kimi-sensei doesn’t like this empty kid so much. Suddenly, Inoichi wants nothing more than to remove that look from Namikaze’s face bone by bone.

Kimi-sensei gives them both a smile that is a little too sharp and raises her arm. “Hajime!”

Namikaze doesn’t move from his starting position.

That cocky little—
Inoichi springs forward.

Namikaze counters the first strike smoothly, not a single muscle twitching in his face as he uses his arm to deflect the blow. Inoichi grits his teeth and lunges forward again. And again. And again.

It’s no lie to say that Namikaze is fast. His inborn reflexes alone must be off the charts for him to react so well to each of Inoichi’s strikes, and that’s saying nothing of the refined, precise flow of Namikaze’s taijutsu. All of it just pisses Inoichi off.

*So what if you’re a prodigy?*

Inoichi slams his fist forward, Namikaze sliding to the side at the last minute to avoid it.

*So what if I bore you?*

A kick that doesn’t connect and more fancy footwork from Namikaze.

*What the hell is wrong with you?*

Namikaze’s empty expression has not changed since the fight began.

*Is that all? Inoichi wants to scream. React, sneer, wince, something!* 

He ducks suddenly, leaving Namikaze unprepared for the sudden change of pace, and twists around to knock his opponent down.

*What the hell is wrong with you? Are you just that arrogant? Am I really so trivial to you?*

*What—*

“Yamanaka!”

—the hell—

“Inoichi!”

—is wrong with you?

Inoichi comes back to himself at the feeling of a sudden pain in his wrist. He blinks, looking down at his wrists and seeing, just for a moment, a tiny hand wrapped around them, fingers dug into the pressure point on the joint. Then, something sweeps into his legs, knocking him off balance — when did he kneel down on the ground? – and tumbling him over and—

Namikaze is hanging above him, one hand pinning Inoichi’s wrists together on his chest and the other poised just above his throat. His face is as blank as ever, but there is something chilling underneath the calm exterior.

“Call it.” Namikaze’s voice is a dry rasp.

From his position on the ground, Inoichi has a perfect view up at Namikaze’s neck, at the angry, red marks that encircle it.

...*I did that?*

“Call it,” Namikaze repeats.
“…Match to Namikaze Minato,” comes Kimi-sensei’s voice. She sounds a little reluctant, as if she cannot quite comprehend what she has just seen.

*Why didn’t she stop me?*

Inoichi’s wrists are released almost immediately. He rubs at them and, as he glances across the ring, catches Shikaku’s eye. There’s open disapproval written all across his friend’s face. Inoichi looks away.

And it’s because of that that Inoichi happens to see Namikaze collapse as he tries to stagger out of the ring.

---

Minato gasps awake, the phantom sensation of blood gurgling in his throat clinging to him as he forces his eyes open. The burning stench of disinfectant hits him a second later, shortly followed by a slew of other notable facts about his surroundings: white-washed walls; scratchy, too-clean sheets; a wilting vase of flowers.

He’s in hospital. Huh.

He turns his head to the side, ignoring the way it feels like someone has stuffed his ears with cotton wool, and notices the figure in a chūnin vest that is sat at his bedside. Minato squints at them.

“Tsuneo-sensei?” he asks. The words feel like brambles coming out of his throat.

Tsuneo-sensei looks up from the stack of papers on his lap that he is grading and smiles tiredly. “Hey, kiddo. You gave us quite the scare, there.”

Minato stares at him silently.

“No comment from the invalid, huh?” Tsuneo-sensei mutters. “Why am I not surprised?” He puts his papers away, scooting his chair around so that he is facing Minato more fully. “What do you remember about what happened?”

Minato forces a swallow, hoping the saliva will soothe his throat. It throbs in protest at the action. “I passed out,” he says shortly.

“Tsuneo-sensei raises an unimpressed eyebrow at Minato. “I’ll be honest, Minato-kun, I was hoping for a little more detail than that.”

Minato glowers. “I was fighting Ino—Yamanaka-kun. He strangled me. I flipped him. I got up. I passed out.”

There’s a brief silence, filled only by the extended sound of Tsuneo-sensei sighing. “Kimi-sensei is being reprimanded for her conduct during the spar,” he says. “You won’t be put into that sort of situation in the Academy again.”

That’s… good, Minato supposes.

“But that’s not what I’m here to talk to you about,” Tsuneo-sensei goes on. He frowns. “Minato-kun, how much sleep are you getting each night?”

Minato says nothing.

“It’s just conjecture at this point, especially without talking to your mother to confirm it, but the
only reason that the doctors could come up with for you collapse was exhaustion. Uchiha-chan thought it could be low blood sugar – apparently you have a bad habit of skipping meals – which would fit with the picture I’m slowly putting together of you.”

Minato narrows his eyes. “And that is?”

Tsuneo-sensei’s face is devoid of his usual easy-going cheer. “You’re intelligent and you know it. Disastrously passive in all the worst ways and, if not for Uchiha-chan’s admirable persistence, you would probably be completely isolated as well. You don’t really like me and you don’t really want to be a ninja.”

Wrong.

It’s all Minato wants to say to Tsuneo-sensei’s assessment of his character. *I like you just fine,* he thinks, *but I don’t trust you at all.*

Instead, he says, “I chose this.”

For a moment, Tsuneo-sensei’s features twist and Minato is struck by just how sad his teacher looks. “Yes,” Tsuneo-sensei says. “For a given value of choice, I suppose you did.”

Discomfort coils in Minato’s gut. Regardless of what Tsuneo-sensei thinks, this path was Minato’s choice and he is committed to walking it. And maybe that decision does look pitiable to the older and wiser eyes of the bright, young chūnin who sits in the village teaching children as his friends kill and are killed on the front lines, but Minato does not want pity from anyone.

*I chose this.*

Sometimes, the lies he tells himself make him feel like a coward.

“We’ll be talking about this more at a later date,” Tsuneo-sensei says. “Right now, I have a class to teach.” He reaches out and ruffles Minato’s hair. “Be good for the doctors, okay, kiddo?”

Minato watches him go.

*No,* he thinks. *I really do not trust that man at all.*

--

Sometimes, when Masako looks at her son, she wonders if he is truly the small baby she cradled in her arms after eleven hours of labour. It’s a foolish question to ask herself, in truth, because Minato looks like a carbon copy of herself at that age. It would be easier to deny the identity of his father, she thinks, and she wishes that she had loved a different man to the one that was bored with her after only a month.

That much, she can pride herself on. Minato is nothing like the man who gave him half of his genetic code.

He’s still sleeping when she arrives at the hospital, having dozed off again after reportedly waking up to briefly chat with his teacher at the Academy. She wasn’t here for that and she knows the kind of impression the hospital staff have gained of her.


Maybe the first of those is fair, but the idea of becoming so heartless as to *lose interest* in her son
makes something hot and heavy stir in Masako’s gut. She is not Takuto; love is not a momentary fascination for her. She commits.

Masako has been working twice her usual hours at the library, budgeting like crazy, and she is almost there. There is almost enough money.

This is commitment.

Masako settles down beside Minato’s bed and presses a gentle hand to his forehead. Just a little longer, Minato-chan, she thinks. Just a little longer and I will get you out.

Chapter End Notes

There a couple of things to address in this chapter.

The first is Inoichi. The main reason that he seems like such a dick is because he is literally all of eight years old. Children do not balanced soldiers make and Inoichi is no exception. Here's a line that got cut that I hope sums it up: “When asked to describe Inoichi in one word, Chôza said impassioned. Shikaku said intolerant. Shikaku was the more right of the two of them.”

I guess it's mostly that I wanted to do something different with this generation's InoShikaCho, because they're not their children and they all still have a long way to go before they reach their adult selves. Right now, it's probably best to think of them as immature, because they are.

The second is Nan Tsuneo. This guy has actually been in this story since the first draft, which is seriously impressive. He's survived six rewrites, mostly because I really enjoy playing him off Minato. Minato's pretty much immovable distrust of this guy is pretty funny to me, but that's mostly because I have a twisted sense of humour.

Regarding Minato's emotionless expression, that's mostly because he's really, really bad at expressing himself. He's used to Mikoto, who is freakisly perceptive when it comes to social situations, and so tends not to pick up on the fact that he's broadcasting one emotion, when he thinks he's showing another. Minato thinks his face is showing nothing more than intense focus; Inoichi takes it as boredom and dismissal. Have I mentioned that Minato isn't great with people?

And I'm sure I actually had more to say, but I'm honestly so tired that I can't think straight. On a similar note, if you happen to notice any errors in this chapter (or the rest of the fic) please let me know so I can fix them.

Oh, and there was a bit of a timeskip between the last chapter and this one. We are now nine months since the start of the Academy -- January of the next year. Minato and Mikoto are now both six.
Overcast Skies

Chapter Notes

Right. This chapter is super late, and I do actually have a sort of explanation. It seems I celebrated too early in Chapter 4, because I have had a recent resurgence of symptoms which implies that the procedure didn't work as well as it should have and I might have to have another operation.

In other news, I'm looking for a beta for this fic. It would mostly consist of acting as a sounding board as I try to write out chapters, and proofreading to make sure I haven't missed any errors. If you're interested, send me a message on tumblr, where I am daswarschonkaputt.

VI
Overcast Skies

Mikoto sighs, rolling backwards to look up at the sun in the sky.

It truly is a lovely day.

While Konoha can boast unrelentingly hot summers, wintertime tends more towards temperate than anything else. Of course, extreme conditions don’t really mean all that much to shinobi – the very first thing Mikoto learned in Jutsu Theory class was how active chakra circulatory systems aid in homeostasis.

Still, Mikoto sort of wishes she could have been born in January like Minato. Getting dressed up in a kimono for celebrations is twice as miserable when her mother is snappish from the heat.

On days like this, Mikoto thinks, it’s hard to remember that there is a war going on.

She’s not sure what Minato would say in response to that if he were here. He’d probably shrug, determinedly non-committal in that way that says he has an unpopular opinion that he isn’t going to share because he doesn’t have the energy to argue his point. Minato never seems to forget about the war, whether he’s training himself into the ground and skipping meals, or silently dragging his feet as they walk back home.

It’s a little sad, Mikoto figures, that she knows her best friend so well that she can simulate his reactions just as well without his presence.

She misses him.

Which, she’ll admit, is a little pathetic. Minato has only been gone from classes for three days, and it’s not like they share many of their courses anymore, but—

He’s her best friend. Her only friend, if she’s honest.

Right, Mikoto decides suddenly. That’s enough moping. She sits up, stretching out her arms and flitting her eyes around the Academy’s grounds. There has to be something else here that she can
focus on, like a playtime squabble, or her current campaign of psychological warfare on
Yamanaka, or—

Sawaka-sensei.

Mikoto feels her focus narrow down on the woman who’s talking to another student across the
grounds. Sawaka-sensei is the latest in a long line of injured chūnin who have been posted to the
Academy whilst they recover their strength and, as of current, Risako-sensei’s substitute whenever
the old crone is called out of class to meet with the Hokage. Mikoto would place the young chūnin
instructor as prettier than average, but there is a scar running through her lips that marks her too
obviously as a shinobi for most civilians’ tastes. Not that that means all too much, if what Mikoto
has heard about Sawaka-sensei’s romantic entanglements is true.

All of it adds up to make a rather mundane shinobi, embroilment in Konoha’s gossip network or
no.

But still, there is something about Sawaka-sensei’s presence that has been bothering Mikoto ever
since she appeared. Mikoto just can’t figure out what.

“Hey, there, Uchiha-chan. What’s got you frowning today?”

Mikoto barely suppresses a flinch, before plastering on her most docile smile and looking up at the
cheerful face in front of her. “Nothing much,” she says.

Tsuneo-sensei ignores her comment, instead following her gaze. “Ah, Sawaka,” he says, nodding.
“She studied under your sponsor, right?”

The comment blindsides Mikoto a bit. “What?”

“You didn’t know?” Tsuneo-sensei asks. “Sawaka’s a sensor-nin, or she is when she’s not teaching
you louts how to find someone’s heart.” He grins easily, gently teasing, but Mikoto isn’t paying
attention to him anymore.

Mikoto wants to curse aloud at her narrow-mindedness. It’s such a simple trap to fall into, to think
of her teachers only in terms of their current jobs, but Academy instructors are ninja too.

Sawaka-sensei is a sensor-nin. Akiyo-sensei specialises in taijutsu. Tsuneo-sensei is a repurposed
kenjutsu expert.

And Risako-sensei—

She used to work in negotiations.

Mikoto feels like her stomach has dropped out from underneath her. There’s only one reason that
the Hokage might have called on someone as old and withered as Risako-sensei to serve.

It’s all coming to a close.

--

Two years ago, Inamura sat across Namikaze Masako and her son, and he told her that the boy
belonged more to his village than he did to his mother. It was a death sentence padded with
platitudes Inamura neither meant nor believed, but he dutifully built his case and he sent the mother
and son away with enough false hope that he could pretend everything would be fine.
To a child like Minato, Inamura supposes, two years must feel like an eternity. Minato probably feels like the person he is today and the person he was back then are completely separate entities. Maybe he feels proud of that fact, of all the ways he has grown, but somehow, Inamura doubts that. Because the way that Minato is staring at him, too perceptive for both his age and his own good, hasn’t changed one bit.

“I’ve been hearing some very interesting rumours about you recently, Namikaze-kun,” Inamura says, digging in his desk drawer for the Minato’s file. “Apparently, you beat the snot out of the Yamanaka heir in a spar. Of course, there’s also the fact that you’re the one sitting in my office right now, and not him, so I suppose you can’t trust everything you hear on the grapevine.”

Minato shrugs.

“You know, this whole thing will feel a lot less like trying to draw blood from a stone if you engage with me, Namikaze-kun.”

Minato just shrugs again.

To be honest, Inamura hadn’t really expected that to work at all. He sighs, trying to ignore the echoes of too clever by half that refuse to let him go.

“You’re underweight,” Inamura says, not that he expects a reaction from that either. “And not by an acceptable margin, either – drastically so. I’m recommending that you be suspended from any classes at the Academy that require you to actively manipulate chakra until you make the weight up again.”

That does get a reaction, not that it’s precisely the one that Inamura is expecting. Minato looks neither uncomfortable with nor surprised by the news; instead, he simply looks resigned.

“As a shinobi-to-be,” Inamura continues, “your metabolism tends to run a little faster than the average civilian. You need to be taking at least 1800 calories a day, if not more. When you start actively burning chakra on a daily basis, these numbers skyrocket. If you do not start eating properly, you will cause yourself serious, permanent harm.”

It’s a speech that probably comes across as a little stencilled, Inamura is aware, as if he is ticking a series of boxes on a checklist. Right now, though, he’s not sure that he can handle anything less impersonal, anything that might persuade Minato that he has an ally in him.

Inamura is not Minato’s ally.

“Taking you out of chakra-intensive classes also has the positive side effect of reducing your workload. Your academic supervisor has agreed not to schedule anything in the new gaps in your timetable. Hopefully, you will use this free time to help you get your health back on track.”

“Okay,” Minato says.

“Good,” Inamura says. “Next: I spoke to a nutritionist yesterday and we put together a diet for you.” He withdraws a sheet of paper from his desk. “I expect you to stick to it. Your academic supervisor also has a copy and he has assured me that he has ways of finding out if you are deviating from it.”

“Okay.”

“And one last thing, Namikaze-kun,” Inamura says.
Minato meets his gaze.

Inamura is not Minato’s ally.

“Get some sleep.”

He’s Minato’s doctor.

---

It is a little scary, Mikoto sometimes thinks, being the best friend of Namikaze Minato. It’s even scarier, by that logic, being the only friend of Namikaze Minato. She can still remember the first time they met, when he started hyperventilating in the middle of Konoha’s main market, and she definitely remembers how he slipped away in the ensuring chaos.

So it’s not like Mikoto has ever held only any delusions about exactly how well-balanced Minato is, but she still didn’t predict any of this mess. She should have, on reflection, because all the clues were there and she strives to notice these things.

Minato, though, does look somewhat better now. There’s more colour in his cheeks and the dark circles that have marred his face beneath his eyes have started to fade away. More than anything, he looks bored, and she will take that over stressed any day.

“Hey, Minato.”

Minato looks up from the thick textbook that is balanced on his lap. “Hey.” He seems a little unsure, a little hesitant.

What an idiot.

Mikoto sinks to the ground next to him. “You’re an idiot,” she says, matter-of-fact, and hands over the lunch she made for him that morning. “I got your fancy new meal schedule off Tsuneo-sensei.”

Minato huffs. “I can cook, you know,” but he doesn’t argue about eating the food.

“I’ll believe it when I see it,” Mikoto says imperiously.

He smiles into his food. “So, what did you do to Yamanaka-kun?”

“Whoever said I did anything to Yamanaka?” Mikoto asks lightly.

Minato raises an eyebrow. “He caught my eye whilst we were running through kata and nearly jumped out of his skin,” he says flatly. “I refuse to believe you did nothing.”

Mikoto feels a small smile twist at the edge of her mouth. “For a while, I really did consider doing something,” she says, cracking open her own lunch, “but then I figured that whatever he’s imagining I’m going to do to him is about ten times worse than anything I could plan. So now I just smile really pleasantly at him whenever I see him.”

Minato stares at her like she’s grown a second head. “You’re engaging in psychological warfare with a Yamanaka?”

Her grin stretches into something more feral. “And I’m winning.”

Minato continues to stare at her, before his lips start to twitch. He bites down on them, smile fighting its way to the surface, and then he breaks. Laughter falls out of his mouth, open and
relaxed and Minato in a way that Mikoto never thought she would hear. She memorises the event, the exact pitch of his laugh, the way his entire face scrunches up, and she knows that even without her Sharingan flickering in her eyes, she will not forget it.

And then she looks away. “I… I’ve been wanting to talk to you, Minato.”

The laughter fades away. “About what?” She knows that he’s staring at her again; she can almost feel it burning into her side.

She doesn’t know how he’ll react to this; she barely knows how she’s reacting to this. But she thinks she’s slowly going out of her mind with the information weighing down on her.

She takes a deep breath, opens her mouth, and speaks. “I think that they’re negotiating the end of the war.”

Minato freezes. Tension laces its way through his muscles, coiling him up tight and holding him there. “Oh,” he says.

Yeah, Mikoto thinks. Oh.

Chapter End Notes

There totally should have been more Minato in this chapter. The entire scene between him and Inamura was originally written from Minato's point of view, but it got rewritten because I couldn't make it work.

Ugh, I hate this chapter so much. Mikoto feels off, Inamura feels one-dimensional, and I'm just posting it because I honestly don't think it's going to get much better no matter how many times I rewrite it. Things pick up again next chapter, I promise.

Oh and Sawaka-sensei is a kind-of-canon character. In that, they exist in canon, but we never meet them and are never offered a name. That, combined with some of Mikoto's remarks, should be enough to tell you who she is. If not, you'll find out pretty soon.
The first team arrives at midday.

Minato watches them trudge through the gates, weariness weighing heavily on their very beings, too far away to see the tired smiles on their faces. Beside him, Mikoto draws her knees up to her chest, pulling them close with one arm and using the other to keep herself balanced on top of the wall.

“Minato,” she says quietly as her eyes track the returning ninja. “Do you think it’s okay to be scared?”

Minato turns his head to the side to take in her hesitant expression. He looks away, uncomfortable.

“I think fear of the unknown is natural,” he says.

“But it’s peace,” Mikoto says. “It’s a good thing, right?”

Minato curls his hands up into his jacket sleeves and thinks of the announcement yesterday. It was expected, at least to him and Mikoto, but that didn’t make it feel like anything less than a punch in the gut. Lost in a crowd of their classmates, Minato and Mikoto had watched the Hokage standing above the village, voice booming as he declared victory.

Masako cried when she heard the news.

Peace with Ame, Iwa and Suna. No more war.

Minato bites his lip as he considers his words. “This war is all we have ever known,” he says. “Konoha in the midst of conflict is a known quantity to us – predictable to a certain extent. We don’t know what to expect, so I think it’s alright to be afraid.”

Mikoto hums, neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

A second team drags themselves through the village gates. Minato watches a woman burst free from the crowd of civilians waiting and throw herself at one of the shinobi.

“Hey! You kids aren’t allowed up there!”

Minato and Mikoto jump in tandem at the sound of the shout. Below them, shaking his arm wildly, is an Uchiha police officer.
Mikoto waves at him. “Hi, Shigeru-san!” she calls.

Minato feels a great deal of sympathy for the man when he slumps in what is probably well-deserved weariness. “Ojōsama,” he says, sighing, “your mother and father are looking for you.”

Mikoto makes a face at that. “Of course they are,” she mutters, hands fisting in the hem of the T-shirt she’s wearing. Minato blinks, noticing for the first time that it’s one of his; he has vague recollections of lending it to her to wear after she got blood down the front of hers after losing a tooth in class.

“You should go,” he tells her.

She shoots him a betrayed look.

“They’ll only be angrier if you don’t,” he points out, “and you don’t know that it’s something bad.”

Mikoto scowls once more at that, but she does start to push herself to her feet. “I bet it’s about Fugaku-freak,” she says under her breath.

She leaps down from the wall, landing smoothly on her feet near the police officer, makes a face at him too, and then stalks off back home. She doesn’t say goodbye.

Minato stares after her, left with the definite impression that he messed that up somehow. When his gaze turns back to Shigeru, the police officer is giving him a flat look.

“You’re still not supposed to be up there,” Shigeru says.

Minato sighs, stands, and jumps down too. There are some battles it simply isn’t worth it to fight.

--

It’s getting dark by the time Minato finally makes his way home. He fumbles with his key in the half-light, before he slots it into the lock and pushes his front door open. Immediately, he is hit by the strong smell of curry.

Minato freezes in the doorway, momentarily thrown.

“How was your day? Did you enjoy your day off?”

That’s Masako’s voice. His mother is home. And she’s cooking curry.

“Hi Mum,” Minato calls back, the words coming out somewhat strangled. He doesn’t precisely know what to say. *Tonight’s meal is supposed to be grilled mackerel,* is what his rational brain suggests, but he bites back the words.

Minato toes off his sandals and shuffles into the kitchen, the front door swinging shut behind him. He can’t remember the last time he came home to this situation. It was before he started the Academy, surely, or shortly after at least.

*Is this because the war is over?* Minato asks himself.

Masako doesn’t turn around from where she’s cooking, but she does shoot a small smile over her shoulder at him. “How was your day? Did you enjoy your day off?”
Minato starts to narrow his eyes at his mother’s back, before he forces himself to stop. No, he refuses to look at his mother with suspicion, not without something more concrete than behaviour that doesn’t fit with his model of her. She’s family.

That has to count for something, right?

“It was fine,” Minato says, pulling out a chair and pushing himself up onto it. “Mikoto and I hung out together.”

Masako hums lightly. Then, she says, “You know, you don’t have to be a ninja to be friends with Mikoto-chan.”

Maybe that seems true to Masako, Minato thinks, that real friendship can survive something as trivial as a difference in jobs, but it’s more complicated than that. Being a shinobi is more than just a job – it will seep through to every pore of Minato’s life, gently acidic until it has corroded every part of him into the smooth, unflappable shape of a soldier.

There is a reason, after all, why most shinobi marry other shinobi.

Once a ninja, always a ninja, indeed.

But Minato doesn’t say that. Instead, he says, “I guess.”

“Minato-chan,” Masako says, “do you want to be a ninja?”

Yes, he should say. It would be a lie, but it would be a kind one. And to trade honesty for kindness – it would not be a terrible choice to make. But it wouldn’t be Minato’s.

“No,” Minato says. “I don’t want to be a ninja.” He pauses, watching Masako’s back tense. “But… I don’t think I will hate it.”

And that seems to snap something in Masako. She whirls around, chopsticks held so tight the wood is straining in her grip. “This isn’t you!”

Minato feels the words almost like a physical blow. Masako never shouts at him. Never. In defence of him, maybe, but never at him. Guilt coils low in his gut and, absurdly, he thinks, This wasn’t how it was supposed to go.

“These are not your choices, Minato!” Masako all but shrieks, tossing the honorific aside carelessly. “These are the choices of your teachers, your commanders – not you. You are just a child, Minato! How will you know what you will and won’t hate? You’re six! You barely know the world, let alone yourself! I know you,” she inhales raggedly. Then, quieter: “I know you.”

It feels like everything is fracturing around him, crumbling apart, and there is nothing he can do to stop it. He doesn’t know what to do. He doesn’t know what he’s supposed to do.

Masako takes in another deep breath, visibly forcing herself to calm down. “Sorry,” she says. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have yelled.”

Minato has always been aware of his size – actively aware, for the most part. It’s his main weapon to use in a spar, after all, the way he ducks and jabs and darts, too small and too fast to be caught. His instructors at the Academy tower over him, for the most part, too, and it’s hard to forget the nature of the gaps in their relative strengths.

But he has never felt his size more acutely than now. “What—” he breaks off. What am I supposed
to do? The answer to that question is obvious: he already knows what he is supposed to do.

“What do you want me to do?” he asks.

Masako looks to him with something like hope in her eyes. “Here,” she says, placing a form down on the table. “All it needs is your signature.”

Minato looks down, his eyes immediately picking out the words withdrawal and termination of service and financial compensation. He wants to ask his mother where she got the money, but the answer comes all too quickly. The extra hours. He wants to ask how long she’s been planning this, too, but that question has an obvious answer too.

He wants to ask as many questions as he can think of, anything to delay the inevitable.

This isn’t like the time he lay on his bed, desperately thinking of his situation, and persuading himself that he was making the right choice, when he wasn’t making a choice at all. This isn’t like the conversation with Tsuneo-sensei, full of cosmetic concern. This is real.

This is his.

This is a choice.

He decides.

--

“Minato-kun,” Tsuneo-sensei calls out just as Minato prepares to dash from the classroom. “I’m going to need you to stay behind after class.”

Minato freezes, feeling the eyes of his classmates settle on him, before he nods and drops his bag back down onto the desk. Slowly, the rest of the class filters out, until Minato and Tsuneo-sensei are alone.

“Sit down, kiddo,” Tsuneo-sensei says, jimmying open one of the drawers of the desk at the front of the room. “This talk isn’t going to be a short one.” With one final yank, he gets the drawer open and pulls something out from inside it.

It’s a bar of chocolate.

“This isn’t my normal classroom,” Tsuneo-sensei explains as he begins to unwrap the bar. “It actually belongs to your old taijutsu instructor and, if there’s one thing I know about Akiyo-san, it’s that she has an incorrigible sweet tooth.” He breaks off a chunk of chocolate and passes it to Minato.

Minato looks from the chocolate in his hand to Tsuneo-sensei. He generally avoids eating things that he has strong memories of from his previous life, because they never taste quite right this time around.

Tsuneo-sensei sighs, misreading his hesitance for something else. “Just eat the chocolate, Minato-kun.”

Minato looks back down at the chocolate and, with delicate fingers, breaks off a small chunk. He hesitates for a moment more and then pops it into his mouth. Something in his chest tightens as it melts into his tongue, slightly too heavy in its sweetness.
“I met your mother last night,” Tsuneo-sensei says. “She cares a great deal about you.”

That goes without saying, Minato figures, but he remains quiet.

“I sympathise with your mother a lot, Minato-kun. It is very difficult being the parent of a first generation shinobi – I know my own parents struggled in similar ways – and it only gets harder once you graduate.”

Tsuneo-sensei snaps off another bit of chocolate. He offers it to Minato, who turns it down with a shake of his head.

“Minato-kun,” Tsuneo-sensei says, “why didn’t you sign the withdrawal papers?”

Minato purses his lips. “You think I should have.”

There is a ragged exhale, a sound that seems to age Tsuneo-sensei a decade in the duration of one breath. “Minato-kun,” he says, voice strained, “I am extremely worried about you. There is this massive disconnect between what you want and what you eventually end up doing – if you even know what you want. You lack ambition, but you aim high, as if you’re following some sort of script of how you think you’re supposed to act. Strip all that away, and all I can see is a kid with a terrifying lack of sense of self.”

His expression hardens. “Minato-kun, the life of a shinobi is not something you can survive without knowing who you are and what you stand for.”

*My name is Namikaze Minato,* Minato hears, as an echo. *My name is Namikaze Minato,* the words that still do not feel like a lie. *My name is Namikaze Minato – isn’t that…*

*Isn’t that enough?*

“No, Minato-kun,” Tsuneo-sensei’s voice interrupts the thoughts whirring through Minato’s head. “No, it’s not.”

Oh, so he said that aloud.

Minato feels pinned in place. He wants to be anywhere but here, in this classroom, having this conversation with Tsuneo-sensei, but he doesn’t get a choice. Instead, he’s crowded against a desk, still refusing to sit, a square of chocolate slowly melting in his palm, and he is staring at the saddened expression spread across his teacher’s face.

“I don’t trust you.” Minato doesn’t mean for the words to escape his mouth, but they burst out anyway.

Tsuneo-sensei looks neither surprised nor offended. “Why?”

“You don’t fit.”

Minato should stop speaking.

“I don’t fit?”

“You’re neither old nor injured.” *Stop.* “Your interpersonal skills are above average.” *Stop now.* “You don’t appear to have any problems respecting authority.” *Stop speaking, Minato.* “And you were posted to the Academy in the midst of a war.”

For a moment, Tsuneo-sensei just stares. Then, he drags a hand down his face. “Has anyone ever
told you that you’re too clever for your own good?” he asks, sounding exasperated. “Not that it’s a bad thing – I just never expected that to be the reason you’ve been so difficult.” He places the chocolate down on the desk, before reaching into a pocket of his chūnin vest and withdrawing a picture. “Here.”

Minato takes the photo. It’s well-loved, with worn, dog-eared corners, and a questionable stain around the edge, but the subject is well visible. A good-looking young man wearing a kimono stares out of the image, a small, affectionate smile tugging at his lips. He looks like one of the nobles from the capital.

“Who is he?” Minato asks.

“My boyfriend,” Tsuneo-sensei replies drily, taking the photo back. “Or perhaps more relevantly to this conversation, the current daimyō’s youngest and most trusted advisor.”

It hits Minato slowly. The daimyō’s support of the war has been wavering at best and to have such a link into his court – Konoha cannot afford to risk losing Tsuneo-sensei, not with the way that politics in the capital have been looking. And the capital isn’t empty of spies, so most of Konoha’s enemies are probably already aware of just how important Tsuneo-sensei is.

“You’re a high profile target,” Minato says.

Tsuneo-sensei nods. “I’m not allowed to leave the village without a jōnin escort. It’s made organising romantic rendezvous a logistical nightmare, just so you know.”

Minato can imagine. He doesn’t realise that he’s clenching his fist until he feels melted chocolate squeezing out between his fingers. “Why did you become a ninja, Tsuneo-sensei?”

If the change of subject is odd, Tsuneo-sensei does not comment on it. “Honestly?” he says. “Because Konoha was in the throes of the First Shinobi War and they needed more soldiers. Now, if you’re asking me why I continued to be a shinobi, that would be to impress girls.” He gives Minato an encouraging grin. “I can’t say that that one worked out all too well for me.”

Just as soon as it appeared, though, the grin falls away. “Minato-kun, potential does not equate to obligation. You are allowed to walk away. You are allowed to be selfish.”

“Sensei,” Minato starts. “I—” He needs to wash his hands. He needs to go home and to face his mother, even if just being in her presence makes him feel like a failure of a son. He needs—

Tsuneo-sensei places a hand on Minato’s head. “It’s okay, kiddo,” he says. “I get it.”

He crouches down, so that their gazes are level. “It’s going to be hard, Minato-kun, but I want you to know – I’m rooting for you.”

Minato ducks his head. He does not meet his teacher’s eye. “Thanks, Tsuneo-sensei.”

Chapter End Notes

Ah, and to think I had so much to say when I first started writing this chapter. This was actually a very difficult chapter for me to write, which is probably because it’s so... I can’t even think of the word. I’m out of words.
I have a bunch of headcanons about how Tsuneo and his boyfriend met (are they headcanons if I'm the author? Who knows) which may or may not make it into the story. There's an arc coming up covering one of Minato's C-rank missions that takes place in the capital, and the boyfriend will most definitely be making an appearance, along with a certain someone who we've only heard of in brief mentions.

There should be a timeskip between this chapter and the next one, which will bring about the end of our time at the Academy.
Crepuscular Rays

Chapter Notes

So, I had an other operation. It knocked me on my arse. I'm only just back at work and the operation was on April 1st. (You know what's reassuring? Having your operation on April Fools' Day.) I didn't have a very fun time of it all, but the operation seems to have worked. Fingers crossed, you know?

Beta credit goes, once more, to the ever-awesome Chargefire and anqied. I'm writing you guys sonnets in my head, seriously.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

VIII
Crepuscular Rays

Back when he started this relationship, back when it was a dalliance at best and a mistake at worst, Tsuneo found it hard to relate to Natsuhito. He was seventeen, then, a fresh recruit into Konoha’s infiltrations team, and not really experienced enough to recognise the shatter-patterns that trauma leaves on a person.

Now, if anything, Tsuneo thinks he relates to Natsuhito a little too well.

Seven years can change a lot in a person. Seven years can crystallise into an unruly teen dragged into reluctant adulthood, or the ascent of a brilliant 20-something into a position of power. Seven years and still, Tsuneo is lying back on a mattress that is far too soft, not quite at ease.

“You know,” he says quietly to Natsuhito, “one of my students calls these meetings ‘conjugal visits’.”

Natsuhito turns his head on his pillow so that he can meet Tsuneo’s eye. “Is that another Konoha thing?”

“Pretty sure it’s just this kid,” Tsuneo replies. “I get the impression it’s some kind of inside joke.”

Natsuhito frowns lightly. “How old is this kid?”

“Eight.”

“So probably not a joke about sex,” Natsuhito muses.

Tsuneo huffs out a laugh. “I get enough flak from my colleagues about being pimped out by my village,” he says. “I don’t need it from my students as well.”

Natsuhito goes very, very quiet.

“Hey,” Tsuneo says, reaching across with a gentle hand, “hey, you still with me?”

Natsuhito flinches, but he blinks a couple of times and seems to come back to himself. “Sorry,” he mutters. “Lost in thought.”
Ah, Tsuneo thinks. He drops his hand down to Natsuhito’s waist, caressing gently with his thumb. “Do you want to hear more about this student of mine?”

“They sound kind of precocious.”

“It wouldn’t be the way I’d choose to describe him, if I’m honest,” Tsuneo says. “He’s generally very self-contained – doesn’t emote well. Extremely intelligent, though – he’s graduating on Monday, actually.”

“Didn’t you say he was eight?”

“Honestly, if someone hadn’t flagged the kid for medical issues, he would have graduated aged seven,” Tsuneo says. “Wartime graduation age is ten, so it’s not that early, all things considered.”

Tsuneo talks and continues to talk, words spilling from his lips without much thought, voice muted and gentle, and he waits until he can feel Natsuhito drifting off to sleep beside him before he stops. Then, he lies in the silence, mind refusing to quiet down, and resigns himself to a night staring up at the ceiling.

He isn’t sure if Natsuhito has ever noticed how uncomfortable he feels when faced with luxury like this. It’s not something that Tsuneo particularly wants to broadcast to his lover, who has clawed his way through a den of wolves to earn this lifestyle, but he never really knows what to do with wealth. Or power, really.

It’s just as well, all things considered. If he were more ambitious, he would have probably never met Natsuhito.

Then again, it’s not like this is what Tsuneo had in mind when he imagined his future love life as a child. *Pimped out by my village*, he thinks again, wondering when he got to be okay with thinking of it like that. Probably around the same time the war kicked off and he was pulled off active duty to teach children – or maybe the moment he realised that there was an entire squad of ANBU listening in on him and Natsuhito going at it.

Oh, well. It is what it is.

Tsuneo closes his eyes. He listens to the sounds of Natsuhito breathing by his side, and curls his fingers in the expensive sheets.

He can be happy like this.

--

Nan Tsuneo is a pretty chill guy by shinobi standards – fuck, he’s a pretty chill guy by civilian standards, too. It has a tendency to rub people up the wrong way when they first meet him; it’s easy to mistake Tsuneo’s own particular brand of roll-with-the-punches easy-goingness for flippancy. Personally, Sawaka doesn’t mind it, though that might have more to do with exposure than anything else.

Sawaka met her current roommate after he flunked out of infiltrations and was then assigned to be the muscle in her tracking unit. They gelled pretty solidly in that time and it didn’t take her long to figure out that Tsuneo’s rather mediocre service record was due in a large part to his crippling lack of ambition.

He isn’t an orphan like her, she reminds herself. He didn’t grow up constantly scrambling for even the most basic hint of acknowledgement, burning heavily with the overcoming desire to be
someone. Tsuneo has always been someone, and that someone is the type to fade into the background, unnoticed and not particularly driven to be noticed.

It’s why infiltrations wanted him to start with.

It’s also why they dropped him faster than you could blink the moment he actually decided to do something interesting.

Sawaka sighs, putting down the book on clan traditions in Konoha that she’s been pretending to read since she finished dinner. It was a gift – a rather pointed one, but a gift nonetheless – which is the only reason she has dedicated so much time to trying to soldier through it. The clock on the wall tells her jack shit about how long it has been since she picked it up; she and Tsuneo dismantled the thing about five minutes into moving into the apartment. The ticking was driving them nuts.

Today’s a Sunday, which means that Tsuneo should be getting back from one of his village-sanctioned sleepovers sometime tonight. He’s normally in by dinner, but she guesses that it all depends on whether or not he and loverboy decided to be clingy this morning.

Sighing, Sawaka looks between her book and the door to their apartment. Until Tsuneo arrives, she really doesn’t have an excuse not to be reading it.

Just as she’s preparing to open the book again – the things she does for love, seriously – there’s the sound of a key clicking in the lock on the door, and then it swings open to let Tsuneo stagger in, dead on his feet and smiling gently.

Sawaka grins at him. “Well would you look at you,” she says. “Should I start putting together a dowry?”

Tsuneo stumbles towards the kitchen, making a couple of choice hand-signs that she taught him.

She laughs. “Okay, okay, I’ll lay off,” she says. “Dinner’s on the stove, by the way. Boring old stir fry, but if you want something more exciting you have to be here to voice an opinion.” He makes an affirmative sound, and she hears the sounds of him dishing himself up a helping. “How’s loverboy?”

Tsuneo emerges from the kitchen, already mid-chew on a mouthful of tofu. He swallows. “Natsuhito’s fine,” he says and shuffles through to the sofa. He sits down next to her. “What did you get up to whilst I was away?”

“No, Tea with Mito-sensei and her new protégé,” she replies. “Mikoto-chan’s devious; I like her.”

Tsuneo snorts into his food. “You would.”

Sawaka just smiles. She leans back on the sofa, sinking further into the cushions and exhaling through her nose. “So, graduation tomorrow,” she says. “You know, it’s not too late to give me some insider information on the prospective teams for the betting pool.”

Tsuneo raises an eyebrow at her.

“Hey, my win is your win, roomie,” she responds.

“I think that’s more of a marriage thing, actually, Sawaka.”

She smiles again. “There are worse things,” she says. Her eyes stray to the book sitting innocently
on their coffee table.

“Still not going to tell you anything.”

“Damnit!”

--

The morning of the graduation exam, Namikaze Masako doesn’t say a single word to her son. Breakfast is a stifled, silent affair, and she can tell that Minato wants nothing more than to escape. If he hadn’t been conditioned into methodical healthy eating, he would have probably skipped the meal.

She doesn’t kiss him goodbye when he leaves.

She doesn’t wish him luck, either.

She wonders if it’s normal to feel like this, like her child is slipping away from her, like she is going to lose him and there is nothing she can do. She wonders if she’s supposed to be proud. She wonders and wonders and wonders and doesn’t say a word.

This isn’t what she wanted for him.

What a stupid thing to think of now. Of course this isn’t what she wanted for him. How could any parent want this for their child? How can Minato possibly want this for himself?

Masako looks down at the dirty dishes on the table. Her hands start to tremble.

It has been two years since Minato walked away from his way out. Two years and she feels more distant to her son than ever.

And now he has walked out that door, and by the time he comes back, he will be an adult.

For the first time in a long time, Masako thinks of Takuto. He wanted Minato, she remembers, the moment he found out that she had given birth to a son. He would have legitimized him and Minato could have grown up in the capital, away from all this.

Would he have been happier, then?

She doesn’t know. She doesn’t even know her own son.

Masako inhales sharply.

This isn’t what she wanted for him. This isn’t what she wanted, at all.

--

Tsuneo suppresses a yawn, tapping his pen against his desk at the front of the graduating class. It’s not so much a nervous habit as it is an absent-minded one and it wouldn’t be surfacing if he had managed to net a few more hours’ sleep last night. A few students look away from their tests long enough to glare half-heartedly at him, but their attention quickly refocuses on their desks.

The graduating class this year is a bit of a mixed bag, but that much is to be expected. Transitioning from the rapid militarisation Konoha underwent during the war to the somewhat more lax requirements of peacetime has led to a rather larger range of graduating ages than normal. The vast majority, by Tsuneo’s count, are ten, but there are a few older students who took
advantage of the war’s end to postpone their graduation a couple of years.

And then, there’s this year’s outlier: Namikaze Minato.

It surprised Tsuneo a little, when he received the list of graduating students and saw Uchiha Mikoto’s name conspicuously absent. Mikoto and Minato have, if anything, proven to be nigh inseparable over the past three years; if they graduated at the same time, they would have doubtlessly be placed on the same team. From what Tsuneo can gather, though, politics has reared its ugly head once more and the Uchiha Clan have meddled to keep her in the Academy a few more years.

Tsuneo doesn’t really disapprove, but he’s been on the other end of political ministrations one too many times to wholeheartedly approve, either.

So here Minato is, head down, brow twisted in concentration, near oblivious to everything that is happening around him, including Tsuneo’s pen-tapping habit.

It took Tsuneo a while to get a firm read on Minato, but to be fair, it’s not like the kid made it even remotely easy. Tsuneo used to be bugged by it, as much as he was ever bugged by anything, because no-one seemed to notice just how close to self-destructive Minato was edging.

He’s better now, Tsuneo supposes. For a limited value of better.

Maybe Natsuhito was right. Maybe it’s not such a smart idea to throw Minato out into the field this early.

Maybe Minato will surprise all of them. Maybe, maybe, maybe.

At the end of the day, though, people make their own choices and you have to respect that. Tsuneo does not think the shinobi lifestyle is the best thing for Minato – that of a scholar, or even a politician like Natsuhito would suit him better – but this is what Minato chose. It was probably the first firm decision the kid ever made.

Two years ago, Tsuneo did not lie. He’s rooting for Minato.

His smile is genuine when Minato is the first student to turn in their exam paper.

What do I know?

Written: 89/90 (Avg 49/90)
Taijutsu: 85/90 (Avg 47/90)
Ninjutsu: 90/90 (Avg 63/90)
Genjutsu: 70/90 (Avg 61/90)

1. Flagged for ANBU recruitment after essay written in first year of Academy.
3. Originally due to graduate aged 7; delayed by a year due to end of war and medical flag for malnourishment and exhaustion.
4. Interpersonal skills are noted to be passable. Cooperative and functional in team environment. More comfortable with adults than children, more comfortable with women than men.
What can I infer?

1. Someone up there hates me.
2. The kid’s smart. Intellectual-prodigy levels smart. Very well-read, too. The exam’s not designed for full marks to be achievable. Shows maturity and innovation in his thought process.
3. Lacking parental figures and positive adult influence in his life. Politically plugged-in – coincidence or deliberate choice on his part?
4. Potential psychological risk – has a tendency to skip meals and sleep when stressed. Will need to be taught healthy coping mechanisms – caused by mother’s absence from life? Negligence?

Note: look into independent living schemes for young shinobi. If home situation worsens/interferes with training, propose as solution.

5. Probably not a good idea to send the kid on missions with a large element of personal interaction – maybe run a few simulations in-village first?
6. Someone up there really hates me.

--

Everyone is staring at him.

It is to be expected, really. At eight years old, he is the obvious outsider in this year’s graduating class, smaller, thinner, smarter than his classmates. A head of conspicuous blond hair and an unfamiliar face in a crowd of children trained to notice everything – his appearance alone makes him stand out.

The discomfort is understandable, when all that is taken into account.

“Right, class,” Akiyo calls the moment she enters the room. The class drops into silence without any effort on her part at all. “I’m about to read out team assignments, so please pay attention. Once I’m finished, we’ll break for lunch, and you can spend the meal getting to know your teammates. Clear?”

There’s a mumble of agreement through the gathered children.

Akiyo smiles, a perfunctory thing, and then turns down to the clipboard in her hands. “Team One will be…”

Slowly but surely, Akiyo whittles down at the class. It’s a simple exercise to pick out which teams are designed to pass the secondary test – any large concentration of clan kids is a pretty sure bet.

“And that’s it for team assignments.” Akiyo looks away from the clipboard. “Minato-kun, if you could stay behind, I can explain your assignment. It’s a little different.”

And that, Azusa supposes, is her cue.

--

“Minato-kun, I’d like you to meet Azusa,” says Akiyo-sensei.

No.

“She’s going to be your new sensei,” says Akiyo-sensei.
Where the hell is Jiraiya?

“Nice to meet you,” says Azusa.

Minato stares at her, heart thundering in his chest. *I... I really fucked this up, didn’t I?*

[End Arc One: Academy]

Chapter End Notes

So, about this last chapter, a few points:

Tsuneo and Natsuhito met, as you can probably guess, when Tsuneo was working for infiltrations. Tsuneo was posing as a kenjutsu instructor for the rich and powerful in the capital; he almost bungled the mission by starting his (at the time mostly sexual) relationship with Natsuhito.

(On a side note, it’s probably a good thing that Tsuneo doesn’t share his past in infiltrations arounds, seeing as I can’t imagine Namikaze “Trust Issues” Minato taking that fact well.)

This chapter we meet Minato’s jōnin-sensei for the first time, Azusa. She’s blond and a former ANBU operative. I really, really like her and I think you all will too once we get down to it.

Jiraiya is still in Ame at the moment, which is most of why Minato isn’t assigned to him as a student. Minato has inadvertently got himself graduated two whole years earlier than in canon, which he might have realised if he thought about the fact that Kushina has yet to show up.

Next chapter sees the start of a new arc - Minato's genin days.
Radiation Fog

Chapter Notes

I'm back! This one's a little longer than I thought it would be, so enjoy that I suppose. If you want to talk to me off this site, come visit me on tumblr here. I'm a generally friendly person.

Lastly, beta credit goes out once more to anqied and Chargefire, who are, as ever, utterly brilliant.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

IX
Radiation Fog

There’s a culture, among Konoha’s Shinobi Clans, that you are only worth as much as your blood. It’s always pissed Azusa off a little, this idea of pedigree and genetic stock, because it’s such bullshit. If you look at her blood, Azusa is worth less than nothing: a daughter born from the illicit union of a whore and an adulterer, both dead by equally stupid means. Overdose and overindulgence – the only legacy that Azusa’s parents have left her is addiction.

And it doesn’t matter. Not in the slightest. But that doesn’t change the fact that a lot of people think that it does.

Fucking bloodline politics. Given the choice, Azusa would have sooner drunk poison than get tangled up in that mess.

Honestly, right now, she wishes she had been more proactive about the poison.

This is a punishment, Azusa thinks, not for the first time. Of course it’s a fucking punishment, for daring to be the nail that sticks up. The only question is who it’s from.

Or, she suddenly considers, watching the way her new student’s face pales drastically at the sight of her, if I’m the only one it’s directed at.

“Nice to meet you,” offers Azusa.

Namikaze Minato stares at her, bare seconds away from a panic attack. In the background, Azusa notices Akiyo slipping out the room, probably to go enjoy the rest of her free day, abandoning Azusa to deal with her anxious charge alone.

The bitch, Azusa thinks uncharitably. It’s not a fair thought to have, but she’s not really in the mood to be fair.

She turns back to Minato. “Let’s talk.”

He visibly forces himself to calm down. “Okay,” he says in a small voice.

If Azusa were anyone else, that little display of timidity would have her quashing motherly instincts.
“My name is Azusa,” she says flatly. “As you have no doubt realised by now, you haven’t been assigned to a team like the rest of your classmates, and instead have been placed in an apprenticeship under me. I’m a jōnin and I’ve been a ninja longer than you have been alive, so when I tell you to do something, I expect you to do it. Trusting me as a person will come with time; for now, I want you to trust me as your superior in both rank and experience.”

She waits until she has some acknowledgement of acceptance from him before she continues.

“In village, during training, I am Azusa. No honorifics. And you’ll be Minato. I know you’re civilian-raised and I know that some of your instructors in the Academy may have addressed you by your family name, but you need to get used to going by your first name. Family names and clan names often represent immediate ties to a specific village – it’s simply better to avoid them, where possible. On D-ranks, you’ll call me ‘sensei’. On C-ranks, I’ll tell you how to address me before each mission – at least until you figure out the pattern for yourself. Got all that?”

Minato nods. He looks a lot more at ease, which was the whole point of that little lecture. From what Azusa can tell, Minato is more than comfortable with information absorption and processing, and placing him in a position where he had to actively listen was as good a way as any to distract him from his panic at seeing her.

And, now that he’s calm…

“Oh, then,” Azusa says. She removes the book she annotated earlier that morning from her jōnin vest. “Here are the Bingo Book profiles of every jōnin that was assigned a team today. I want you to tell me why you got me.”

---

Azusa is—difficult. That’s a good way to put it, Minato thinks. All of his preliminary feelings and reactions to her as a person are tangled up in his unmitigated panic at the prospect of having screwed everything up and, really, right now, his headspace is skating on the edge of dreaming up doomsday scenarios. He has to keep telling himself to think, to stay grounded, to compartmentalise.

He’s sort of glad that Azusa put him in a position where he had to do all that.

Objectively speaking, it could all be a lot worse. If Minato was any other graduate, he’d probably be delighted with the whole situation. She’s blond – a few shades lighter than him, actually – and lithe. Pretty. Straightforward.

But she’s not Jiraiya.

*She’s not Jiraiya and I’ve fucking this all up so badly.*

He sighs, toeing off his shoes and kicking the front door to his house shut behind him. His mother’s out today (again) so he has the place to himself – or he would, if he hadn’t already spotted Mikoto’s shinobi sandals sitting innocently just inside the doorway. He isn’t particularly surprised by their presence; he suspects that things with the Uchiha have gotten tense this past year, a combination of her sponsor’s poor health and the end of the war leading to an increasing pressure on Mikoto to drop out of the Academy.

Tugging at his holsters with half-hearted fingers, Minato shuffles up the stairs to his bedroom. There, he finds Mikoto sitting on his bed, flicking through a textbook on Fire Country’s flora and fauna.

“Hey,” he says.
Mikoto looks up from her book and scowls at him. “It even looks good on you,” she says peevishly.

*What?* Minato isn’t wearing anything unusual, apart from—ah. He brushes his fingers across the metal plate at the centre of his hitai-ate, unsure what to say. “I’m sorry,” he eventually settles on.

She rolls her eyes. “Don’t be.”

Right. Minato sighs and walks into his room, depositing his detached holster on his desk as he goes. Mikoto closes the cover of her book – or *his* book, but he’s honestly given up keeping track – and budes up on the bed so that he can sit down next to her.

“How was it?” she asks.

*Terrible,* Minato thinks.

“Oh, I guess,” he says. “I was put in an apprenticeship instead of a team, which is…” he shrugs. “My sensei seems to know her stuff, at least.”

Mikoto is looking at him with narrowed eyes.

“What?”

She looks away. “Nothing.” She inhales through her nose. “So,” she says. “What’s it like being a genin?”

“That’s probably a question you should reserve for when I’ve been one for a significant length of time,” Minato replies.

She jabs him in the ribs with her elbow.

“I’m just saying that I’m not exactly the leading expert on—” He catches her elbow before it can dig into him this time, and lets himself laugh. “Okay, okay,” he says. “I get it, okay? I’ll answer your questions.”

“You better,” Mikoto sniffs, a touch imperious. “I have to spend the next two years living vicariously through you, Minato, so step up or I’ll rescind your Best Friend title.”

“And give it to who?” he can’t help but asking.

Mikoto raises her elbow threateningly. He drops the question.

“Being a genin is…” he pauses. “I was going to say that it’s not that much different from being an Academy student, but that would be a lie. It’s very different, but it’s not a hard type of different. It’s a different routine and there’s a lot more independence involved, I think, but it’s not overtaxing. Not yet, at least.”

Mikoto nods. “I thought it would be like that,” she says quietly.

“We didn’t really do much today,” Minato goes on. “Azusa gave me an evaluation – verbal reasoning tests, a taijutsu spar, that sort of thing.”

Mikoto pauses. “Azusa?” she repeats. “That’s your sensei?”

Minato snorts. “She’s not in the Bingo Book, if you’re thinking of looking her up,” he says, remembering paging through all the bookmarked profiles and then through all the rest as well,
searching for her. He doesn’t tell Mikoto the second part of that realisation – that her absence from the Bingo Book points very firmly towards one former career in particular.

He has a sneaking suspicion that there’s more to Azusa being his sensei than her simply being the best one for the job, regardless of the conclusion she guided him towards with pointed questions during his evaluation. Maybe he’s being paranoid, but he can’t help but feel that the verbal reasoning exercise was all just one part of some kind of smokescreen.

Or maybe she wants him to think that.

Or maybe—fuck, no. He cuts that thought off there. He refuses to play mind-games with his new sensei. He’s not spending the next however-many-years until he makes chūnin second-guessing her every motivation.

“No,” Mikoto says softly. “No, it’s just… I could have sworn I had heard that name somewhere before.”

It’s Minato’s turn to pause. Mikoto doesn’t tend to mix with the common people; her circle of acquaintance is made up of the Uchiha Clan’s main family and Uzumaki Mito. That Azusa has some sort of link to that sphere of influence is telling.

Minato just doesn’t know what it tells yet.

He closes his eyes. He would have thought he learned his lesson with Tsuneo, all that time ago. Everything in moderation, including distrust. He can’t let fear and suspicion overrule his rational thought processes.

He opens his eyes. Mikoto is still frowning, no doubt trying to place where she heard Azusa’s name before.

“So,” Minato says. “How was school?”

Mikoto stops frowning just so that she can scowl at him.

--

“Again.”

First form. Second form. Third form.

“Stop.”

A correction.

“Again.”


“Again.”

They’ve been running through kata like this since they met that morning, at eight o’clock sharp, and it’s almost noon. Minato is nearly dead on his feet, and he is long past any level of affectionate tolerance he may have developed for Azusa. At this point, he’s ready to throw in the towel and tell his new sensei to fuck off; the only thing stopping him is pride.

Pride and the stubborn thought that this is a test. He’s always had a thing about failing.
“Okay,” says Azusa, what feels like an age later, “that’s enough. Stop and stretch.”

Minato nods and, even if all he wants is to collapse on the floor and maybe slip into a coma, he resists the urge. If he stops moving, he won’t start again – the theory behind static and dynamic friction doesn’t just apply in mechanics.

As he moves through a series of cool down stretches he learned at the Academy, Azusa hands him a water bottle. He takes it eagerly.

“This is why I had you do that, Minato?” she asks. Somehow, he doubts because you’re a sadist is going to be an acceptable answer.

“To test my endurance,” he answers instead.

Azusa shrugs. “After a fashion,” she says. “Really, it was to see how you act in a situation that you don’t think is fair. You didn’t, did you?”

Think it was fair for her to do that to him on his second day under her tutelage? No, fair wouldn’t the first word Minato would pick.

His thoughts must show on his face, because she nods. “Yeah, I thought not.” She takes her water bottle back out of his slack grip. “Good news: you acted exactly like I’d expect a seasoned shinobi to, so you’ve dodged what would have been months of careful psychological conditioning on my part to make you bow to authority without a fight.”

“You don’t sound particularly happy about that,” Minato can’t help but point out.

Azusa shrugs. “That’s because there’s corresponding bad news to the good news, Minato,” she replies. “Arguably, this is the better of the two most likely results I saw coming out of today, but it’s less pleasant for me in the short run.”

Minato watches Azusa as subtly as he can. Day Two and he still hasn’t figured out if he likes her. She’s blunt, by appearances at least, but she also doesn’t seem to particularly… like teaching. She doesn’t seem to like him, either, now that he thinks about it.

She comes across as low-key pissed off most of the time, really.

“So, what’s the bad news?” Minato asks.

Azusa gives him a funny little smile. “Go get some lunch,” she says. “In fact – go take a bath. The hot water will be good for your muscles, and I don’t need to see you until quarter to three, anyway.”

“And at quarter to three?”

“Meet me by the dango shop in the civilian marketplace,” she says. “Don’t do anything to burn out your chakra – you’re going to be needing it.”

Well, that sounds ominous.

--

It is ominous.

Henge drives Minato nuts. It’s a seriously crappy jutsu, which came as a bit of a shock with the
knowledge of all the ways that Naruto used it to his advantage in a fight. The problem lies in the fact that it’s not a physical transformation – it’s just an illusion. Minato and Mikoto spent an afternoon after learning the technique throwing things through each other’s illusionary heads when transformed into people taller than them.

Henge works best when your disguise is close to your original appearance, and even then there are limits. Douse someone wearing a henge in water and, chances are, they won’t appear to get wet.

And the worst thing about it all is that all these drawbacks are only mentioned once before they’re taught the technique.

“I know you hate the technique,” Azusa tells him, sounding a little amused, “but I think the death-is-upon-me expression is a bit much.”

Minato schools his features into something a bit more neutral, an immediate reaction to the criticism, before the first part of Azusa’s statement processes.

“You know I hate the technique?” he repeats.

“Oh yes,” Azusa says, motioning for him to twirl. “Your essays on the subject got passed around quite a bit.”

His what?

Oh, God, she can’t mean—

Minato colours. “I was five,” he says.

“For the first one, yes,” Azusa says. “When you implied the Academy curriculum manager was an incompetent hack – my favourite part, may I add – you were a touch older.” She frowns at him. “My chin is a little thinner than that – yes, good. Drop the blush, too, and – okay, I’m not sure if you’re frowning at me, or if you’re just frowning to keep character, but keep it up.”

She drags her eyes up and down his form and nods. “Passable,” she declares.

The highest praise he could have received, Minato thinks dryly. He’s not complaining, though; this is the most personable Azusa has ever been in their admittedly limited acquaintance.

“There’s another jutsu that disguises your voice,” Azusa goes on to say, “but it edges into one of the more difficult areas of genjutsu, so I’ll wait a little bit to teach it to you.”

Given Minato’s decided lack of talent for genjutsu, he’s not sure that that’s something to look forward to in the least.

“Are you going to tell me what we’re doing, now?” he asks.

“Don’t sound so eager,” Azusa advises, forming a seal of her own and transforming into a woman Minato has never seen before. “Chances are, you’ll hate this a lot more than the henge.”

--

Children. Minato doesn’t know what to do with them. He never has – it’s why he mastered the art of avoidance, first by using books as a barrier, and then by using Mikoto as one.

Because children, his old classmates included, do not act, do not speak like Uchiha Mikoto. They’re carelessly cruel, not because they don’t know better, but because they don’t think in terms
of effects and consequences. They act on impulse, lashing out at anything that is too difficult to reconcile.

And now Minato is literally *surrounded on all sides.*

From what Minato can gather, the woman whose appearance Azusa is wearing is some sort of helper at one of Konoha’s orphanages, and also a personal friend. It would explain why none of the kids that they’re collecting from the civilian school are kicking up too much of a fuss at Minato’s – or Azusa’s, really, given that he’s wearing her face – presence.

Well, most of them aren’t.

One of the children, a boy with hair so short he’s nearly bald, sneers at Minato. “What’s *she* doing here?” he demands.

Azusa’s expression doesn’t so much as twitch. “Things are going to be getting busy for me at the shop soon,” she says, “so Azusa’s agreed to come by and pick you lot up when I can’t make it. She has a new student – a boy your age. I’m sure you’ll get along well.”

Is she now. Minato doubts that.

The boy snorts. He gives Minato a poisonous look. “Yeah, sure.”

Minato doesn’t say anything.

The walk back to the orphanage – Tsuchida Orphanage, located on the edge of one of the village’s less savoury districts – is slow going. Azusa smiles gently and listens carefully – she plays her part beautifully. The profile Minato has been putting together for his sensei expands to include a possible past running infiltration missions, and he isn’t sure how he feels about that.

When they get to the orphanage, a stern-looking older woman greets them at the door. She looks fondly at Azusa, and scowls at Minato.

Minato tries to figure out what Azusa’s likely response to that look would be. He ends up settling on a surly expression, and gets a subtle thumbs up from Azusa for it.

Once they’re a decent distance away from the orphanage, Azusa ducks them both into an alleyway and motions for him to drop the henge.

He stumbles slightly. Azusa catches him.

“You okay?” she asks. She doesn’t sound concerned, per se, but Minato appreciates the question nonetheless.

“I’m fine,” he says.

“Good.” She releases his shoulder. “Sorry, should have warned you about the side effects of dropping a henge you’ve had up for a long time.” She gestures for him to follow her out of the alley. “Why did I have you do that?”

*Because you’re a sadist,* Minato thinks again, but once more, he doesn’t say it. “Because it served as a low pressure practice run for undercover work,” he says.

“That’s part of it,” Azusa agrees. “That explains the henge. Why did I have you come with me to the school?”
“I don’t know,” he answers.

“Guess,” she commands flatly.

Is this what every day with her is going to be like? Some ludicrous task followed by her making him figure out her potentially-non-existent motives?

_To fuck with me_, a rebellious part of Minato wants to say. He quashes it.

“At a guess…” he pauses, running through the afternoon in his head, “exposure to civilians, I suppose.”

“More specific.”

“Exposure to civilian children?”

“And how did you find the children?” Azusa asks. “Did you think you had a lot in common? The same sorts of mannerisms, vocal patterns, hobbies?”

He starts to open his mouth.

“Be honest,” she adds.

“No,” he says shortly.

“If I were to put you in a room with those children – dress you like them, take away your hitai-ate – how easy do you think it would be for someone to pick you out as a shinobi?”

Oh. Minato feels the realisation settle over him.

Azusa watches him closely. “Before the end of your shinobi career, Minato, there will likely be a time when you need to pass as a civilian. Invisibility is often the best defence against a threat. At your age, acting as a civilian is mostly synonymous with acting like a kid. Whining. Scowling. Complaining. Crying over a skinned knee.

“It’s okay to not be like that all the time. It’s okay to be quiet and withdrawn – I’m not trying to change your personality. But learn to fake it. That’s 90 percent of what it means to be a shinobi, anyway.”

--

Minato drags himself home half an hour later, pausing in the doorway when he hears his mother in the kitchen. She’s crying.

He stands there, a silent shadow, and then he turns away from the kitchen and walks up to his room.

Chapter End Notes

This arc is very heavy on the character development for Minato -- he's growing up and into himself -- so look forward to lots more of that. Unfortunately, Mikoto is going to fade into the background a bit, as the arc's focus is very much of Minato and Azusa.
In the original draft of this chapter (you have no idea how many times I rewrote that first goddamn paragraph: Azusa's POV; no, Minato's POV; no, Akiyo's POV; no, back to Azusa's POV) Minato's reasoning as to why he was assigned Azusa was written out. It came across as extremely unwieldy, though, so it got cut.

In the chapter, Azusa references two essays that Minato wrote during his time at the Academy. The first, he wrote during his first year, and, among other things, it was somewhat dismissive of henge. This essay, coincidentally, was The Essay -- the one that got Minato flagged for potential ANBU recruitment. The second essay was written during the time gap between Chapter 7 and Chapter 8.
“That’ll be 3,105 ryō,” says the cashier.

Minato peers between two towering paper bags of groceries to hand over the money appropriate amount of money, taking note of the amount of change that he’s given so he can be sure to return the correct amount to the client. He can’t help but feel like this whole operation is a little ridiculous – especially given that the fee for this mission amounts to almost double the cost of the groceries he and Azusa have been dispatched to fetch.

It’s probably a status symbol thing, Minato figures. That’s the only way anyone could justify the ludicrous cost.

He smiles placidly at the cashier and reaches for one of the bags. As he picks it up, a cabbage rolls off the rather precarious tower of vegetables peeking out of it, and he has to whip out his foot to catch it before it hits the ground. He stares at the cabbage, then flicks his eyes to the cashier. The cashier stares dully back.

Minato looks back to the cabbage. There must be some way to get it back into the bag without losing another vegetable in the endeavour; he could probably kick it up into the air and catch it. Gently. It would have to be gently.

Before he can do anything, though, he hears a sigh.

“Do you have any idea how ridiculous you look, Minato?” A hand appears in his admittedly limited field of vision and removes the cabbage from the curve of his foot.

Azusa puts the cabbage inside her own bag, smiles at the cashier, and picks it up.

Minato notes that she can see above the groceries. He hates being short.

“Cheer up, Minato,” Azusa says as she leads him out of the store. “It could be worse. I could be making you carry both bags.”

Minato scowls. “But they’re heavy,” he whines.

Azusa slants her gaze to him. “That was good,” she remarks. “Have you been practising?”
Minato nods, even if his sensei can’t see it with the bag in the way. “Yeah. With Mikoto. She’s better at it than me.”

“Ah,” says Azusa, and there’s something Minato can’t quite place in her tone. “The Uchiha heiress.” There’s no opportunity to press for what she means by that, though, because the next words out of her mouth are, “So, why do you think we do D-ranks?”

Minato frowns. “Us specifically, or the village as a whole?”

“We’re doing D-ranks because I think they’re good for you. The village, Minato.”

“Well,” he says, taking a moment to put his thoughts in line. “For starters, it’s a positive face to show to the village. Out of sight, out of mind, I suppose. Show the village genin babysitting and gardening, looking harmless and childlike, and they don’t have to think too hard about children killing people in cold blood.”

Okay, that came out a little bitterer than he was intending. “I mean, ninja don’t think of it often, but the civilian population of Konoha vastly outnumbersthe shinobi one,” he goes on, trying to force his tone to lighten. “While we’re not exactly at risk of a military takeover at the hands of our merchants and traders wielding pitchforks and screaming for the Hokage’s head, everything’s easier when people get along.”

Azusa places a hand on Minato’s shoulder to steer him away from colliding with a wall. “Another reason?” she asks, releasing him.

Minato shifts the bag in his arms. “D-ranks are good training. They’re low risk by their very nature – an opportunity for teams to iron out any wrinkles before they’re faced with a crisis in the field. Fresh genin need time to get used to mission protocol: following orders, writing reports, teamwork.

“And that leads onto the other big reason: money. Lots of genin aren’t ready for C-ranks upon graduation from the Academy, but that doesn’t mean they don’t need to be able to earn a living until they are.”

Minato almost trips over when Azusa lifts the bag away from him, but he regains his balance easily. He looks to her questioningly, but notices their surroundings before he can say anything.

They’ve arrived at the client’s house.

“You get to talk to the client today,” Azusa says, nodding at the door in front of them. “Be polite, be crisp, and don’t ramble. Professionalism is key.”

Minato nods. He reaches out with one hand to knock on the door.

Just before it opens, Azusa says, “Oh, and Minato? Good job today.”

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Konohagakure no Sato Mission Report

Rank: D
Operatives: Namikaze Minato (genin, ID: 006510), Tsuchida Azusa (jōnin, mission leader, ID: 001762)
Objective: To purchase and deliver groceries to the home of Niguchi Iyona (civilian, client).
Date(s): 27-Apr-39 (PKF)
Additional Notes: None.
Objective successful. Using money provided by the client, I purchased the groceries from Mitani General Store. Everything on the client’s list was in stock; no substitutions were necessary. Total cost was 3,105 ryō. Azusa and I then carried the groceries to the client’s home, where Niguchi greeted us and accepted her groceries and change (395 ryō). Niguchi appeared satisfied with our performance.

*This is the first report you’ve handed in that is satisfactory. The level of detail is good and it is all formatted correctly. Keep this up and you might just impress me. -A*

Minato chokes. “A C-rank?” he wheezes, eyes watering. “I’ve only been a genin a month.”

Azusa quirks an eyebrow. “What does that have to do with anything? You’re more than ready for this, Minato. Do you feel like I haven’t prepared you adequately?”

Minato forces a swallow. “That’s—” He looks down at his half-finished lunch. “That’s blatant manipulation. You’re manipulating me.”

“Well, what else do you want me to teach you?”

Minato—doesn’t have an answer to that. Which, he knows, was the point of the question.

Azusa straightens up. “Finish your lunch,” she says. “We’ll give the school run a miss today. I want you to go out and stock up on mission rations – your best bet is the Akimichi’s store in the west side of the village. We’ll be leaving shortly after sunset today, so talk to whomever it is you need to talk to in order not to get declared missing whilst you’re gone. Estimated mission duration is two weeks.”

Minato is suddenly very aware of how the wood of his chopsticks feels between his fingers. He inhales. “What are we doing?”


There’s an entire aisle dedicated to mission rations in Akimichi Fresh, the store that Azusa directed him to. Minato tries not to be so surprised by the variety available to him – the Akimichi are a shinobi clan, he knows – but it’s so hard not to compare it to shopping for rations similar to this in his past life.

He doesn’t get tripped up like this often. It’s just—he used to go camping. He once stood in a store just like this, best friend hanging off his shoulders, and he laughed about the terrible weather and mistaking paths for streams. His brain is stuck on that, on the rain and on the smell of slowly rotting tent canvas, on the taste of cheap chicken tikka masala, on the way the food burned his tongue as he ate.

And Minato, who wasn’t Minato then and hasn’t thought of patterns in years, stares at the foil packets in front of him, trying not to feel like he’s unravelling at the seams.

“The spicier ones taste the best.”

He startles slightly at the voice and turns on the spot. Minato’s breath catches in his throat.

*Kakashi,* his mind throws at him, but that’s not right. Kakashi hasn’t even been born yet. No, this
“Whoa, there,” Hatake Sakumo says. “You okay? I know I’m not that hideous.”

It’s like a slap in the face.

Because it’s so easy to forget. To just think of this as an ordinary existence, to think of the story as just that – a story. But it’s not. And Hatake Sakumo, Konoha’s White Fang, the father-to-be of Hatake Kakashi, is standing opposite Minato in a food shop and giving him advice.

And he’s going to die soon. Give it a few years and Hatake Sakumo will open his stomach in his living room, leaving his six year-old son to find his dead body.

Minato takes a deep breath. “Sorry,” he says. “Just—you look like someone I knew.”

Sakumo blinks at that. “I do?” He sounds genuinely surprised. “I didn’t think white hair was all that common in Konoha.” He shrugs it off. “So, I’m guessing this is your first time buying rations. First C-rank, genin-chan?”

“My name is Minato,” Minato says, “and, yes.” He doesn’t want to look at Sakumo – dead man walking, just you wait – and he doesn’t want to look at the rations. He ends up dropping his gaze to the floor, fingers curling into fists.

“Sakumo,” I know. “Where are the rest of your team, then? I’d have thought you kids would want strength in numbers for tackling such a daunting task.”

Minato doesn’t move his gaze from the floor. “I’m in an apprenticeship, so,” he shrugs. “No teammates.”

Sakumo doesn’t seem to be bothered by Minato’s lack of apparent enthusiasm for the conversation. “Well, like I said, the spicier ones are the best,” Sakumo says. “We used to gamble for them on the front, which is the only reason I can play cards worth a damn. Word of advice, you might also want to get some survival bars – just as a precaution. Taste like shit, but they’ll keep you alive if something goes wrong.”

Minato doesn’t know what to do with this. “Uh, thanks.”

Sakumo smiles. “No problem,” he says. “We were all genin once.”

I could change it, Minato thinks, a rebellious sentiment. He’s already fucked everything up by getting assigned to Azusa, so what’s stopping him?

Everything. Nothing. His own cowardice.

Minato picks out a few foil packets of curry rations, but he already knows they’re going to taste like ash in his mouth.

“A C-rank?” Mikoto asks, cross-legged on Minato’s bed as she watches him pack. “But it’s only been a month.”

Minato shrugs. “That’s what I told Azusa. She has final say on these things, though.”

Mikoto scrunches up her nose. “Doesn’t that annoy you?”
“What? That I have to follow the orders of my superior in both rank and experience?” Minato fastens the straps on his mission pack. “If it did, don’t you think I would have been a little more hesitant to become a shinobi?”

Mikoto rolls her eyes. “Shut up. You know that’s not what I meant.”

Minato quirks an eyebrow at her. “In the face of such censure, what choice do I have but to comply?”

She rolls her eyes again. “I can’t believe we’re friends,” she says with a huff.

She expects another joking reply – something Minato has gotten much better at over the course of their friendship – but she doesn’t get one. Instead, Minato’s face twists and then takes on a slightly grave expression.

“You know you’re my very best friend, right?” he asks.

Something sinks in Mikoto’s stomach. “Minato,” she says, voice tight, “I’m your only friend.”

You’re my only friend.

He smiles, but it feels half-hearted. “And I’ve never felt the need to make any others,” he says.

By necessity or by nature, Minato has always been serious. It comes through in everything he does – his focus, his speech patterns, his decisions. And Mikoto likes that about him. She has never felt trivial in Minato’s presence and some days that seems like everything.

But right now, Mikoto wishes that he would grin and chatter excitedly about his first real mission.

“You’re an idiot, Minato,” Mikoto says.

Minato blinks stupidly at her. Of course he does.

She sighs. “You’ll be fine on your mission,” she tells him. It’s as much a threat as it is a reassurance.

He smiles at her.

--

Azusa is already there, waiting for him, by the time Minato arrives near the village gates at sunset. She has her own pack on her shoulders.

“Ready?” she asks.

Minato shifts under the weight of his missions pack. No, he wants to say. Never. Not for this.

He meets Azusa’s gaze unflinchingly. “Yes.”

--

Mum, the note reads. Minato’s handwriting is crafted from the same print-like characters as always, void of any significant quirks. Masako used to delight in it. Now, it just makes her uncomfortable.

Mum,
If you’re reading this, then I couldn’t find you before I had to leave. I have a mission out of the village. I should be back in two weeks, but extra delays aren’t unusual. You’re down on all of my paperwork as my next of kin, so if something happens to me, you’ll be among the first to know.

See you soon,

Minato

Masako puts the note down.

And then she whirls around and slams her fist into the wall.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, Minato, you adorable basket-case of a person. "Oh, don't worry about me going off to do Super Deadly Ninja Business, Mum, because you're my next of kin, so you'll be the first to know if I die. After my sensei. And the Hokage. And probably some admins in the Missions Dept.." This is not how you reassure people, Minato.

Masako's character took a bit of a turn I didn't expect there, but I think it works. There's a point beyond which you stop being miserable and start feeling angry and Masako has reached that point.

Now that Minato's out of the Academy, he's going to have to start confronting the fact that he has information that can change things if he were to act on it. His favourite tactic of "avoid, avoid, avoid" isn't going to work so much, anymore. It's time to make those decisions about what you stand for, Minato.

Next chapter: Minato and Azusa on the C-rank. And what's this nonsense about a curse? There's no such thing as a First C-Rank Curse.
Beta credit, as ever, to anqied and Chargefire.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XI
Fujiwhara Effect

Konohagakure no Sato Mission Report

Rank: C
Operatives: Tsuchida Azusa (jōnin, mission leader, ID: 001762), Namikaze Minato (genin, ID: 006510)
Objective: To safely deliver a package containing confidential documents to Nonaka Asao (civilian, client’s business partner) in Funakanai (Tea Country).
Date(s): 27-Apr-39 to 8-May-39 (PKF) | Objective complete on 2-May-39 (PKF)
Additional Notes: This was both Minato’s first mission outside of the village and his first time seeing real combat.

Objective successful.

Minato and I left the village at around 1830 hrs. I wanted Minato to get some experience travelling in the dark, so I had plans to run until 2200 hrs, before setting up a watch for the remainder of the night. For the most part, this initial leg passed without incident, barring the times when Minato nearly fell from the tree cover.

Minato tilts forward, arms flailing gracelessly, and rushes to direct chakra to his feet. He can feel the very moment that he overloads the technique; his eyes widen in panic as he begins to fall.

A hand clamps down on his shoulder and yanks him back onto the tree branch.

“What,” says Azusa, voice pitched to heavy amusement, “did I say about our pace today?”

Minato’s pulse is throbbing in his ears; he does not flush, but it’s a near thing. “To take it slow,” he answers Azusa.

The hand on Minato’s shoulder tightens its grip. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Minato, I can feel you shaking,” Azusa states. “Sit down.”

Minato sits, guided down by Azusa’s hand. He feels her settle next to him on the branch.

“The fall wouldn’t have killed you,” she says, matter of fact. “You’ve practised falling from greater heights than this. It’s just like training, Minato.”
“I know.”

Azusa doesn’t let go of his shoulder. “There’s a difference between knowing something intellectually and convincing your survival instincts of the same thing,” she replies. “Let me feel your pulse.”

Minato extends his arm to her. She places two fingers on his wrist and nods to herself.

“What do you know about Tea Country?” she asks.

“Its main export is tea.”

“I know you know more than that.”

Minato closes his head, picturing the page in his geography notebook from the Academy. “It’s a protectorate of Fire Country and, by extension, Konoha,” he says. “Luckily for us, it’s not a particularly strategic position to hold in the game of war, so it’s been relatively conflict free over the past two wars. As shinobi of Konoha, we’re permitted to travel freely within its borders.”

“And Funakanai?” Azusa prompts.

“It’s near the border to Fire Country,” Minato says, which is about the sum total of his knowledge of their destination.

“Good,” says Azusa. “It’s a fairly well-developed settlement, so we’ll be staying there overnight before heading home. How are you feeling now?”

He realises abruptly that he’s no longer shaking, and that Azusa has moved her fingers away from his pulse-point.

“Fine,” he says.

“Okay, then,” says Azusa. She stands, dusting off her trousers. “Let’s head off.”

Minato stands up as well, and feels himself automatically channelling the correct amount of chakra to his feet to stick to the tree. He feels acutely ashamed of what just happened, because he’s better than this. He has good chakra control.

“And, Minato?” Azusa asks, knocking him out of his mental chastisement. “What will we be doing?”

“Not falling out of trees?”

“Taking it slow,” Azusa says.

---

We arrived at the border between Fire Country and Tea at approximately 1740 hrs on 1st May. By this point, the cumulative exhaustion of travelling without interruption for over four days was wearing down on Minato, so I made the decision to make camp earlier that night. Minato requested first watch, but I refused, as I didn’t think he would be alert enough to be effective in case of an attack. In the end, we brokered a compromise: I would take first watch, from 1900 to 2200 hrs; then Minato would take a slightly longer shift, from 2200 to 0300 hrs; and then I would take the final shift, from 0300 to 0700 hrs.
The first watch passed without incident and I dropped off to sleep at around 2210 hrs.

Minato woke me up less than half an hour later.

--

Minato’s fingers twist through patterns that have long since become instinctive. It’s been a while since he knitted anything, truthfully, but Azusa suggested that he find a background activity to keep him awake during watch and knitting was all he could think of. He has something of a problem with tunnel vision; if he finds anything too interesting, he’ll lose focus of his surroundings.

*It pays to be circumspect,* says a voice in his head that sounds suspiciously like Mikoto.

There’s something lonely about being on watch, Minato has realised. Maybe it’s the quiet, broken only by the gentle crackling of the fire, or maybe it’s the way that the forest seems to loom over him. He just feels small and disconnected.

Suddenly, Minato freezes.

That’s—that was the sound of one of their traps activating. But there’s no yelp of pain audible, either animal or human. It could be nothing, but… what if it’s not?

Minato reaches out his left foot to the bottom of Azusa’s bedroll and quietly nudges her awake.

Her eyes open in a flash, meeting his in the half-light. He makes the hand sign for potential hostiles, crisp but subtle – just as she taught it to him.

She nods and starts to unzip her sleeping bag silently.

In the quiet, Minato strains his ears. Slowly, the sounds of footfalls become more pronounced. He counts them.

One, two: a pair of attackers at five o’clock. Three, four, five: a set of three at eleven.

Minato holds up five fingers to Azusa. She nods, points at him, and holds up two fingers. She points to herself and holds up three.

Minato nods. Swallows. His grip on his kunai tightens.

It feels like an eternity is condensed into each second as he waits, an unnerving sensation of calm settling over him. His breathing is even; he feels hyperaware of every twitch, every flicker of light, every echo.

And then it starts.

The pace slingshots back around from slow to fast; two bandits burst from the undergrowth to Minato’s right and he reacts. He’s launched his kunai at the first of them before he can even think and—

It hits home.

Dead in the centre of the bandit’s neck. A kill-shot. The bandit drops and Minato—stares.

Because he didn’t expect that. Fighting, throwing kunai – it’s never been that easy. It’s not supposed to be that easy. That wouldn’t have killed Azusa. That wouldn’t have hit Azusa. It wasn’t meant to be an—easy target.
A flash of silver in his peripheral vision and Minato’s gaze snaps away from the fallen body. He ducks backwards, barely avoiding the sweep of the second bandit’s sword. He scrambles for another kunai, finger fumbling with his holster, and then aims a slash at the bandit’s stomach.

The bandit dodges the blow, surprisingly nimble.

*Never go into a fight against a hostile with the aim to disable,* Azusa told Minato days into their training together. *You don’t have the skill or the strength necessary to succeed. You might not ever have them. Don’t ever go into a fight prepared to do anything less than kill your opponents.*

An upwards swipe comes next, the bandit slashing their sword up into the space where Minato’s head was just moments before. But Minato is already gone – he slides feet-first across the ground, straight between the bandit’s legs. He’s back on his feet in a second and then he runs.

Chakra flares in his feet – just the right amount, learned over days of jumping from branch to branch in time with Azusa – and he sprints up the trunk of a near tree. Beneath him, the bandit has whirled around, ready to strike him down.

Minato forces more chakra into his feet and pushes off the tree trunk.

He’s not scared of falling. He’s not scared of hitting the ground. He’s not scared of anything right then.

He turns in the air. He sees it all: the dribbling of sweat down the bandit’s brow; the dark, dirty hair; the battered clothes. Their eyes meet.

Minato drops onto the bandit’s shoulders. And then he jams his kunai into the first kill-spot he can reach. The eye.

He twists with his thighs, with his whole body and—*crack.*

A broken neck. Dead. The body collapses beneath him, like a puppet whose strings have been cut, and Minato goes down too.

There’s so much blood.

He breathes.

---

*Minato handled himself well during combat.*

---

Minato sits on top of his futon, arms wrapped around his knees, staring blankly at the undecorated wall. He’s wearing an oversized yukata, provided to him by the inn, as his clothes soak in a solution that Azusa swore would rid them of the bloodstains. His knitting project is completely ruined; he set it alight using the ignition jutsu they teach at the Academy and watched it burn on the ground behind the inn.

The door to their room slides open. Footsteps. A hand on his shoulder. Azusa. She sits down beside him.

“I was a chūnin before I killed anyone,” says Azusa. “It’s not common that that happens, but sometimes genin get issued just the right combination of C-ranks and teammates that they slip
through the system unharmed. I was on a team optimised for information gathering, so there wasn’t a great deal of death to go around.

“Then, of course, I got promoted. Chūnin at thirteen. I was shuffled through to another team and, on my first B-ranking mission, the mission leader looked at me and told me that I was taking point. It was an assassination mission. The head of a sex-trafficking ring. I don’t regret it.”

Minato forces himself to look away from the wall, to look sideways to his sensei. She gives him a small, sad smile.

“You must have realised by now that I’m always asking you why we do things,” she goes on. “Reasons matter. Motives matter. Context matters. And here’s your context, Minato: the world is not a kind place. It’s savage and war-torn and twisted – the existence of children like you proves that on its own. It’s a world filled with people who won’t hesitate to hurt you and there is nothing wrong with refusing to let them.”


It isn’t about justification. Minato knows all the arguments already; the ones he did not hear at the Academy, he obsessed over in his own mind. Kill or be killed. Survival is selfish. Do it for yourself. Do it for the village. And they all make sense.

What doesn’t make sense is this: Minato is eight years old and he has memories of a life where killing was among the most reprehensible things a person could do, but in the part of his mind where he expects to find regret, or disgust, there’s just… nothing. Apathy.

Killing is easy – emotionally and physically – and it shouldn’t be.

He should have nightmares. He should be throwing up as he thinks of it. He should have watched his knitting project burn with something more than numbness.

Azusa is staring at him. Not for the first time, Minato is left with the impression that she understands more than he would ever want.

“I know I’m not the most approachable sensei, Minato,” she says, “but I am still your sensei, and you can talk to me. And I promise you this: no matter what it is you come to me with, I will not think you are trivial, or foolish, or lying. I will listen. I will always listen.”

She pulls him into her side and gives him an awkward half-hug. “Get some sleep. It’s been a stressful week.”

--

Minato and I reached Funakanai at midday on 29th May. We met with Nonaka at 1400 hrs and handed over the package.

In order to let Minato decompress, we stayed overnight in Funakanai, before beginning our journey back to Konoha at 0600 hrs the next day. The return journey passed without incident, and we arrived back at Konoha’s main gate at 1307 hrs on 8th May.

--

The bloodstains came out of his clothes almost completely. There’s only a slight discoloration left on his shirt and trousers – not noticeable, or so Azusa tells him. Not entirely convinced, Minato picks at the fabric of his T-shirt as they wait for the chūnin on duty at Konoha’s gate to stamp their
papers.

It’s strange to return to Konoha after nearly two weeks’ absence. Until now, Minato hadn’t realised how much of a home the village had become over the past eight years, how safe he feels inside the defensive walls.

After mission protocol is short and simple: register your return with the administrative ninja at Hokage Tower, pick up the deadline for your mission report, and, if necessary, report to the hospital for any injuries. Minato falls into the pattern with ease, following Azusa through the motions that she’s completed many, many times before.

When they’re done, Azusa bows out, telling Minato that he has tomorrow off from training, and he’s left standing in the street outside Hokage Tower.

It’s half past one in the afternoon; there are still hours until the Academy lets out. Mikoto won’t be free until then, so seeing the only person Minato actually wants to talk about his mission with is out of the picture.

He stands on the street for a few more moments before he sighs and, with nothing better to do, heads home.

He opens the front door.

Visible from the hallway, sat at the kitchen table, is his mother. She’s bowed over a book, making notes on a sheet of paper next to it, and her head snaps up at the sound of him entering the house.

“Minato!” She’s startled. “I didn’t expect you back yet.”

Minato blinks.

His mother reaches to close the book in front of her and he gets a flash of the cover. It’s his Academy textbook.

He doesn’t know what’s going on.

“Have you eaten lunch yet?” his mother asks. “Come on, sit down. I want to hear about your mission.”

No. She really doesn’t. She doesn’t want to hear about the two people her son killed, not in the slightest, and she definitely doesn’t want to hear about what he learned of stain-removal techniques and the different dyes ninja use.

But she’s trying.

He won’t cry. He refuses to. He’s not really eight years old. He’s a ninja. He won’t cry.

“Sure,” he says, voice tight.


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**Note: Come see me immediately, Azusa.**
Azusa stands to attention in a room lit by artificial light, all too aware of the ANBU operatives hidden around her. She’s not completely at ease, but she challenges anyone to be in her position. In her hand, slightly battered, is the mission report she filled out for the C-rank mission she and Minato ran earlier in the month.

“Is there a problem with my report, Hokage-sama?” she asks, carefully deferential.

Sarutobi Hiruzen stares her down. “It’s not well-known amongst my shinobi that I make a habit of reading the reports of each genin’s first C-rank mission,” he says. “Call it a hobby of mine to check up on the new generation, make sure nobody is making any questionable calls to endanger the future of our village.”

Azusa has a horrible suspicion she knows where this is going.

“I am not so old that I cannot read between the lines,” the Hokage says. “I will only ask this question once: did you or did you not contrive circumstances to throw your genin student into combat one month after his graduation from the Academy?”

Azusa should be used to this bullshit by now. Instead, she’s just getting tired of it.

“Beyond requesting a C-rank mission?” she replies. “No, Hokage-sama. I did not.”

The Hokage stares at her for a few more moments and then he sighs. “Azusa, I did not assign you Minato as a punishment. Believe it or not, I think he could be good for you.”

Azusa does not close her eyes, but she wants to. “I know exactly why you assigned him to me, Hokage-sama,” she says, “but it’s part of a game I have no interest in playing.”

For a moment, the Hokage looks almost as tired as she feels. “Dismissed,” he says.

She leaves.

Chapter End Notes

And thus we see the return of Namikaze "Terrible Coping Mechanisms" Minato. If he ever left. He is, to use the scientific term, Not Okay. He will be okay -- that much I promise -- but it takes a little longer for him to get there.

Lots to talk about this chapter. The first thing on my list is mission reports.

For the most part, Azusa's report reads like she's telling a story. She relates small anecdotes (like Minato falling out of a tree) and sometimes justifies decisions she made. This is pretty standard for shinobi mission reports. The only notable exceptions to this are ANBU reports, which are written in the third person, and in timeline format. (More about this later.)

A couple of quirks that you might not pick up on:

In the 'operatives' section, the name that comes first is the writer of the report. This name is generally followed by that of the mission leader (if different) and then the other members of the team in order of decreasing rank.
PKF is the year-counting system used in Konoha. It's based on the founding of Konoha. (Post Konoha Founding, see, aren't I imaginative?) Pretty much the entire rest of the world uses PFV (Post Formation of Villages) which is PKF-1. Uzushio also uses PKF, because they formed immediately after Konoha, and Uzushio and Konoha are basically super tangled up together. Why does Konoha persist to use PKF when they're practically the only ones? It makes them feel superior. That's it.

(Obviously, they have different names in Japanese, but imagine PKF and PFV as Minato's quasi-translation of the terms to English. It's what he calls the year-counting systems in his head.)

The other big thing to talk about would probably be the last scene, between the Hokage and Azusa. It wasn't originally in the plan for this chapter, but it's a pretty important scene. I'm honestly curious if any of you have got any theories as to what that's about.

Next chapter: training with Azusa, conversations with Mikoto, and reading between the lines.
Heat flares across Minato’s skin as he darts across the training ground, weaving an arc of near-avoidance between each of Azusa’s fire jutsu. He skids out of the clearing and into the trees, barely hesitating before he sprints up the bark and into the canopy. Azusa won’t risk using katon when they’re surrounded on all sides by wood; she’s terrible at water jutsu and the risk of the fire spreading is too great.

That doesn’t mean she’s out of options, of course. As if to prove this point, Minato’s instincts twitch and he flips himself around the branch, feet sticking to the underside as he hangs upside-down. An array of projectiles cuts through the air where he was just moments before.

He drops down off the branch to continue his run on the ground.

Minato is small. For the foreseeable future, all of his opponents are going to be bigger than him, stronger than him, and, as a rule, are going to have far more chakra than him. His advantages are few and far between: speed, cunning, and viciousness. Against Azusa, it’s not a matter of winning; it’s a matter of putting up enough of a fight that she’s satisfied.

He manages another thirty seconds of fleeing before Azusa corners him into a fight. From there, it’s a frantic whirl of taijutsu – bruising blows and rapid-fire footwork – that has his breaths coming in deeper. He knows his strikes are becoming less distinct, less powerful, but they’ve been at this since early in the morning without breaking for lunch. Minato doesn’t even know what the time is, but it’s definitely past midday.

It feels almost like Azusa has some sort of point to prove, but Minato refuses to examine that feeling too closely.

The fight is almost over. Minato won’t last much longer – to think otherwise would be foolish – and Azusa might be difficult to please, but even she is unlikely to force him to continue past the point that he has collapsed.

And then—BOOM.

The explosion is deafeningly loud. Both Minato and Azusa flinch, breaking apart almost immediately; it’s more a formality than anything when Azusa’s fingers flicker into the sign for hold. Minato pants, but watches her closely for further instruction.

Another explosion sounds. Neither of them flinch this time, but for a moment it’s almost like—Minato dismisses the thought. It can’t be.
Azusa signs *hold* again.


The quiet is broken by a swirl of leaves, the tell-tale signature of Konoha’s shunshin, which dissipates to reveal a shinobi dressed in a darkly-coloured kimono. Minato recognises the emblem on the man’s back before he recognises the face: this is an Uchiha police officer. Minato recalls his name a second later; this is Shigeru, one of the guards assigned to Mikoto’s escort during the war.


Minato manages a strained smile, but doesn’t shift out of his stance.

Shigeru turns back to Azusa. “I’m sure you heard the explosions just now?” he asks. “I’m part of the team distributing information on them. Details are sketchy, but I can confirm that they weren’t the result of an attack. Best we can tell, a group of chūnin practising doton jutsu in Training Ground 37 unearthed a couple of unexploded traps. Current working theory is that they’re from an evasion exercise during the First War and were simply never disabled.”


“They weren’t,” Shigeru replies, “which is why we’re pretty certain they’re from the First War.”

Azusa closes her eyes and scrubs a hand down her face, but it seems to be more from relief than anything else. “I don’t suppose you know the names of any of the chūnin involved?”

Shigeru shrugs.

Azusa sighs and then turns back to Minato, who has to suppress a flinch at the sudden shift in her attention. “Dismissed,” she says sharply. “We’ll go over the spar tomorrow.”

She doesn’t wait for a response before disappearing out of the training ground in a shunshin of her own, leaving Minato frowning lightly at where she used to be. That was… uncharacteristically abrupt, even for Azusa. He snaps back to his surroundings at the sound of a throat clearing.

When he turns back, Shigeru is watching him with a slightly amused expression on his face. “I have some other people to placate, but I’ll see you tonight, Minato-kun.”

“Tonight?” Minato echoes.

“For dinner at the Compound,” Shigeru says. “I’m on guard duty for the Main Family tonight. It’ll be just like old times.”

Minato lets the words wash over him. Tonight. Dinner at the Uchiha Compound. Because it’s Mikoto’s birthday. First of June. Right.

Shigeru frowns. “You okay there, Minato-kun?”

Minato forces a smile onto his face. “Yeah,” he says.

Shigeru makes a face like he doesn’t really believe that, but he doesn’t stay much longer. A quick series of hand-seals and he’s gone in a vortex of leaves.

Minato stares around the empty clearing. It can’t have been — Azusa is *blond,* which is about as big of a genetic marker against this as possible, but—
For a second there, after the second explosion went off, Minato could have sworn he saw her eyes flicker red.

--

Minato both looks and feels out of place at the Uchiha Main Family’s dinner table. He asked Mikoto if he needed to wear a kimono – to buy a kimono, truthfully – but she just smiled and said, “No,” in a way that said that everyone else would be wearing one and Mikoto would prefer it if he came in his scruffiest training clothes. In the end, Minato split the difference; he’s dressed in the outfit Azusa makes him keep in reserve for meeting the more important clients on their D-ranks. It’s cleaner and less worn than his training clothes, but from the sneer on her face, he doesn’t think that Uchiha Kiyomi appreciates the effort.

It probably wouldn’t be fair to try and compare Mikoto’s issues with Kiyomi to Minato’s slowly improving relationship with Masako, but he can’t help but see parallels. Perhaps the difference is that Masako primarily wants Minato happy and safe; Kiyomi just seems to want Mikoto subservient.

Minato doesn’t have to be Mikoto’s best friend to see how unrealistic a prospect that is.

Mikoto’s father is a little harder for Minato to pin down. Uchiha Kodama is a quiet shadow at the dinner table, not entirely there, but not entirely absent either. He spends the first few minutes of the meal staring at nothing, until Kiyomi reaches across the table and clasps his hand firmly.

“Dear?” she asks gently.

Minato notices that Mikoto has gone still, carefully waiting to see if her intervention is needed. It feels like a practised reflex and Minato very carefully does not think of how often this must happen.

Kodama doesn’t react.

“Dear?” Kiyomi asks again, tone a little terser.

Suddenly, Kodama blinks. His pupils seem to refocus and he squeezes his wife’s hand back. Mikoto and Kiyomi both relax in conjunction.

“Sorry about that,” Kodama apologises. “I must not be getting as much sleep as I thought.”

*Lie,* Minato thinks. He says nothing.

Kodama turns to Minato. “So I see you’ve graduated – I presume you were part of the latest batch of genin from the Academy?”

“Yes,” Minato says.

From her position opposite him, Mikoto adds, “He was the youngest member of his graduating class.”

It’s a pointed comment, Minato can’t help but feel, and he does not miss the way Kiyomi’s eyes slide sideways to him in response. Kodama looks unsurprised by the news.

“How are you enjoying your missions?” Kodama says and there’s something slightly… off with how he asks the question.
Minato very carefully does not fidget. “They’re good,” he says. “I’m probably going to be going on my second C-rank at the end of this month, if everything works out in training.”

“A C-rank completed already?” Kodama asks. “That’s unconventional.”

Minato doesn’t trust the leading edge to Kodama’s words. If he didn’t suddenly feel like his every move was being scrutinised, he would probably shoot Mikoto a questioning look. He doesn’t think she has anything to do with this, though; there is far more going on here than simple familial dysfunction.

Unbidden, his mind turns back to that moment in the training ground that afternoon, to Azusa’s eyes and red. His stomach turns. It fits; it fits far too well to simply be coincidence. A fresh genin like him has nothing else they could possibly want.

And this is his chance to give it to them, to secure himself a position of favour with Mikoto’s clan. 

_Fuck that._ Minato meets Kodama’s gaze levelly. “I was ready,” he says.

Kodama’s eyes narrow, but he nods. For a few moments, no-one says anything.

Under the table, Minato feels something brush against his knee. He doesn’t look towards the movement, but he knows it’s Mikoto, a silent reassurance and a silence promise: they’ll talk about this later.

Seconds later, Mikoto speaks, voice pitched to childish enthusiasm. “Sawaka-san was waiting for me at the end of school to give me my birthday present,” she says, as if oblivious to the awkward atmosphere. “It’s one of the kunai they used to transport information in the First War – you know, the ones with hollow handles. Apparently, she and her friends stumbled across a bunch of them in one of the training grounds earlier today.”

It’s as if a spell has been broken. Kodama looks away from Minato and towards his daughter. “They phased those out of use for a reason,” he says.

Mikoto shrugs. “I figured as much. It’s weighted pretty differently from a normal kunai, so it must have been pretty easy to tell them apart on touch. Sawaka-san and I had this cool idea to stuff the handle with explosive notes, though – by the time you’re in a position to pick it up, you’re probably already in pieces. We’re going to talk to Mito-san about it tomorrow.”

Kiyomi looks like she’s just been forced to swallow something sour. “You shouldn’t bother Uzumaki-sama so much, Mikoto. She’s sick.”

Mikoto starts to roll her eyes, then stops. The action is not missed by Kiyomi. “She’s sick, not dead,” says Mikoto. “She likes having us around. Without Sawaka-san and me, the only person she’d have to keep her company would be the idiot, and I wouldn’t wish that on my dearest enemies.” Her lips curve into a smile. “Well, maybe Yamanaka Inoichi.”

Kiyomi’s mouth opens and closes; there are probably so many things wrong with what Mikoto just said that she’s struggling to find a place to start. Eventually, she just settles on an appalled, “Mikoto!”

Oh God, Minato has missed this more than he can put into words. He missed Mikoto’s stupid baiting of other people and he missed the strange manifestations of her protective instincts. He quashes a smile, but Mikoto catches the expression, and it’s all the encouragement she needs.

She turns to her mother with an innocent expression that Minato doesn’t trust one bit. “But she is an
idiot, Mother.”

Kiyomi flushes red—whether in embarrassment or anger, it isn’t clear. “Mikoto, behave yourself!”

Minato ducks his head and focuses on his food. Underneath the table, he feels Mikoto nudge his knee again.

—

After dinner, Mikoto escapes the table with Minato and drags him up to her room so that he can give her his present. The box is small, barely the size of a coaster, and it rattles when Mikoto shakes it.

Minato watches her closely as she peels off the wrapping paper and opens the lid of the box inside. Her face shutsters when she sees the gift.

Relief rushes through Minato. He got it right. “Happy birthday, Mikoto,” he says with a smile.

She picks the bracelet he had made for her out of its nest of tissue paper. “It’s a Möbius strip,” she says.

Minato nods.

Mikoto throws the packaging away and throws her arms around his neck. The hug startles him somewhat; he and Mikoto are not usually so obliquely affectionate. Generally, they exist in a state of easy overlap, wearing each other’s clothes and pressed close when they sit next to each other. Minato hesitates, and then he brings his arms up to complete the hug.

“Thank you,” she says, quiet and fiercely sincere.

“It’s just a present,” he says awkwardly.

Mikoto releases him. “You’re an idiot,” she says, but it’s fond.

Minato smiles at the familiar epithet, but then frowns, remembering what she said at dinner. “Speaking of, I thought you got on pretty well with all of Mito-san’s old students.”

Mikoto makes a sound of frustration and moves away from Minato. She fiddles with the bracelet as she talks. “I do. The idiot’s not one of Mito-san’s students. Kushina-baka’s her niece, or something.”

Minato can’t breathe. Kushina-baka. Kushina. Uzumaki Kushina. His chest is impossibly tight with emotions that cycle past too fast for him to quantify. He might have to marry this girl someday.

He can’t believe he forgot.

He can’t believe he let himself forget.

He can’t—

“Breathe, Minato.”

He breathes.

Mikoto is kneeling in front of him, hand raised in such a way that tells him she already tried to snap him out of it with a slap. His cheek stings and his legs feel shaky; he is maybe thirty seconds away
from losing the contents of his stomach on her floor.

But the nausea fades. The panic fades. It all fades away.

“You haven’t done that since we first met,” Mikoto says. It sounds like an accusation.

“Sorry,” he mutters.

She fists her hands in her sleeves, then forcefully relaxes her fingers. “Minato, the bracelet is… a really good gift, but I want something else, too. A promise.”

“Mikoto, I don’t think,” he starts, then stops. “It’s not something I can just… stop.”

“That’s not what I want,” she replies. “Minato, if it gets worse, you have to get some help. There are people you can talk to, but it’s all voluntary, so you have to make the first step yourself. Please.”

He bites his lip. “You never say please,” he says instead of giving an answer.

“Minato, please.”

A part of him wonders if this is part of some greater scheme – another way to get some dirt on Azusa. Having a student seeking psychological help wouldn’t look good for her and would probably kick up some uncomfortable questions about her teaching methods. And this isn’t her fault. Minato’s not breaking under the weight of what his teacher is showing him.

But Mikoto isn’t like that, is she? Her manipulations are often overt, because she likes people to know that they’re being outwitted as it happens. And she wouldn’t do that to Minato.

She’s his best friend. That counts for something, doesn’t it?

“Okay,” Minato agrees. “Just—don’t tell your parents about this.”

Mikoto snorts. “I’m not sure if you noticed, but they aren’t exactly coming from a position of strength on this issue.”

Minato feels the last dregs of tension drain out of him. He moves to stand up and Mikoto barely hesitates to offer her support.

“I’m making Shigeru-san walk you home,” she says. “I don’t trust you not to collapse.”

Minato gives her a small smile. “Remind me which of us is the genin?”

“As if that has anything to do with anything,” she huffs.

--

Minato spends the next day more subdued than normal. He thinks that Azusa has read his weariness, because she isn’t as insistent on quizzing him as usual. They’re preparing to head off to the civilian school to pick up the orphanage children by the time Minato finally strikes up a conversation.

“What happened to those chūnin yesterday?” he asks.

“They’re fine,” Azusa replies. “There were no serious injuries, but that’s probably because during the war, chūnin were generally required to be able to perform kawarimi with only one hand-seal
before we promoted them.” She shrugs. “Earned us some unsavoury nicknames with the other villages, but decreased casualties by a respectable margin. It was something the Hokage’s students came up with.”

“Huh,” says Minato. Then he pauses. “Can I ask you a question?”

Azusa looks down at him. “You can ask whatever you want, Minato,” she says. “Just bear in mind that people might not always answer.”

He takes a deep breath. “Why did you leave ANBU?”

Azusa quirs an eyebrow at him. “What makes you think I ever was in ANBU?”

*Because I’m not an idiot,* Minato bites back the urge to say. Instead, he says, “You weren’t in the Bingo Book.”

Azusa’s smile is small and understated, but Minato sees it anyway. He tries to ignore the way it makes pride burn up in his chest.

“In answer to your original question,” she says, “ANBU isn’t a good fit for everybody.”

It’s an obvious deflection and the underlying message is for him to back off, but Minato can’t stop himself from pushing slightly. “But it was for you, wasn’t it?” he asks. “You liked being ANBU. You were pissed when you got shunted across to jōnin-sensei duty—”

A hand clamps down on his shoulder, cutting him off.

Azusa’s eyes are narrowed, her face otherwise blank. “You,” she says, something ice cold bleeding through her voice, “are far better with people than I ever gave you credit for. This isn’t a topic open for discussion. Understood?”

He nods.

The hand tightens enough that it’s uncomfortable, but still a long way off hurting. “Understood?” she repeats.

“Yes,” he says.

She lets go of his shoulder.

--

Masako is already home when Minato gets back, reading a novel she must have picked up at work. She’s frowning at the book, an expression which Minato knows means she isn’t all that impressed by what she’s reading. She looks up at the sound of him entering the house.

“How was training?”

Minato toes off his sandals. “Same as ever.”

Masako doesn’t ask for more detail than that. “Mikoto’s here,” she says instead. “Did you give her a key?”

He shakes his head. “She probably came in through my bedroom window,” he says. “I taught her how to disable the traps.”
Masako frowns at that, shutting her book. “In a couple of years, Minato, we’re going to have a discussion about strange girls crawling through your bedroom window.”

“Mikoto’s not strange.”

From the expression on her face, Minato senses that he has missed the point of her comment. He supposes her issue is with people invading her home without permission, but as a civilian living in a ninja village, there isn’t much she can do to dissuade the more tenacious visitors.

Eventually, Masako sighs. “Strange or not,” she says, “let me know if she’s staying for dinner? I need to know if I have to cook more.”

“I’ll ask.”

“Good. And Minato? Welcome home.”

Minato smiles widely at her before he turns to climb the stairs to his room. When he pushes open the door, Mikoto is in her favourite spot: on his bed with her back to the wall and a book in her lap. This time, it’s his old anatomy textbook – and it’s definitely his, because Minato can see the doodle of the binomial distribution formula that he jotted on the cover to explain it to Mikoto one day – but she shuts it when he enters.

“I talked to my parents,” she says, in lieu of a greeting.

Minato stops dead in the doorway.

Mikoto must read his thoughts in his expression, because she frowns. “Not about what happened in my bedroom, about what happened at dinner. Father’s not—he’s not normally like that.” She purses her lips. “I’m not stupid. I knew there was something more going on. And, well, it turns out that I know where I heard your sensei’s name before.”

Mikoto takes in a deep breath. “But I’m not allowed to talk about this with you. Private Clan business. You understand, right?”

Minato breathes. “I understand,” he says.

He was right.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, this chapter is crazy important. It wasn’t going to be, on first draft – in fact, if you looked at this chapter on my plan, you could have probably cut it from the story completely with no negative effects. But then I realised that the month I had planned to set this chapter in included Mikoto’s birthday, and things got out of hand.

Honestly, I have so much to talk about this time around. Seriously.

To begin with, if you think it’s a little suspicious that Sawaka finds Mikoto a birthday present relic from the First War on the same day that a bunch of chūnin accidentally trigger a bunch of traps from the same period, you’re right. I mean, I’m not saying that Sawaka and her friends set off the explosions, but… I’m totally saying Sawaka and her friends set off the explosions.
Next up, to clarify: Mikoto is not still holding a grudge against Yamanaka Inoichi. It’s been years. She’s moved on to bigger and better adversaries. (Like Kushina, haha.) She only mentioned his name for two reasons: it would make Minato smile and it would piss off her mother. Two birds, one stone.

Speaking of Kushina, Mikoto doesn’t like her. At all. Let’s just say that Mikoto had some nasty (and true) things to say about Kushina’s dream of becoming Hokage and that didn’t get them off to a good start.

Thirdly, the comment about performing kawarimi: one of the things that will become clearer in this fic, as we move onward, is just how much the Sannin did for Konoha during the war. This is just one of many things they did.

As for Azusa… I can’t talk much about this because, you know, spoilers, but at this point, Minato has mostly put together her entire past. I will say this, though: Minato already does not have an excellent relationship with the Uchiha, but his actions at the end of the arc sour it a great deal. You’ll see what I mean. (And probably scream at me when you do. I’m sorry.)

Next chapter: it’s November, and Minato’s on a slightly different kind of mission.
Hisao’s new roommate is, in a word, unrefined. Tsuruta Kei dresses in the type of clothes that scream *new money* at about the same volume as they do *no taste*, speaks in an accent that betrays his disastrously common roots, and probably wouldn’t recognise political manoeuvring if it hit him around the face. But that’s not even the worst of it.

The worst of it is that, because he’s Hisao’s roommate, everyone seems to assume that they’re *friends*. As if Hisao would ever lower himself to willingly associate with someone so vulgar.

Tsuruta doesn’t even seem to understand just how lucky he is to be in this position. Hisao’s father is an advisor to the daimyō – one of his most *trusted* advisors – and that is not the sort of connection that people just throw away.

Well, normal, well-bred people, at least. It shouldn’t surprise Hisao that Tsuruta does not fit into any of those categories.

Interacting with the blond airhead is an exercise in frustration. Hisao doesn’t get how someone can be so smart and so stupid at the same time – how someone can run through the exercises in kendō class without breaking a sweat and then lose consistently every time he’s called upon to spar. How with the same breath that Tsuruta betrays his complete ignorance to anything approaching literature, he can spout off answers to mathematical problems after only glancing at the question. The best Hisao can figure is that his roommate is an obsessive – studies the subjects that interest him in great depth and outright ignores anything that doesn’t hold his attention.

But that doesn’t really hold up either, because, by all appearances, Tsuruta just doesn’t care. About pretty much anything.

“Hey, you want to come play with us?” The question comes from an older student and is directed at Tsuruta. “We need another person to make the teams even.”

Hisao looks up from his letter to his father to take in the scene in front of him. It’s far from an unusual one: Tsuruta sat during break, a heavy book on his lap, with another student reaching out in polite interest.

And the response is also predictable. “I’m fine,” says Tsuruta. “You guys have fun.”

The older student throws a glance towards Hisao, who smiles and shakes his head, pointing at his letter in explanation, and then the student leaves. Hisao lets the expression drop off his face and rounds on Tsuruta.
“Do you have any idea who that was?” he demands.

Tsuruta frowns. “Nishizawa Kenshirō?” he says. It sounds like he thinks it was a trick question. “We sit together in maths class.”

Oh yes, in the advanced class. Hisao has never seen his roommate even open a textbook.

“His uncle is the daimyō of Tea Country,” Hisao hisses. “Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

“I know,” Tsuruta replies, with that same boneheaded obliviousness that makes Hisao want to do something extreme, like strangle him. “He mentioned it once. What’s the issue?”

“A daimyō. Of Fire Country’s biggest trade partner. Do you have any idea how valuable that sort of connection could be for you? For your family?”

“My father’s a cloth merchant,” Tsuruta says. “We’ve never dealt in tea.”

Hisao really is going to strangle him. He’s going to wait until his roommate is asleep and then he’s going to creep across their room and wring the life out of him. How is it possible for one person to be so utterly useless?

“What is wrong with you?”

Tsuruta actually has the nerve to look offended at that.

“No,” Hisao says, “you know what? Never mind. There is not enough good will in the world to make me deal with this.” He turns back to his letter, furiously focusing on the characters he has already written. When he looks back up a few seconds later, Tsuruta has already returned to his book.

Utterly, utterly useless.

Tsuruta is still utterly useless when he takes an hour-long shower the next morning – probably revelling in the luxury of the option, Hisao thinks a little snidely – and remains utterly useless all through their shared classes and meals. He’s useless in the evening, when he goes to bed early, and he’s useless when Hisao returns to their room and finds him already asleep.

Tsuruta is useless right up until Hisao is dragging him around the city on Sunday morning, when he turns around to tell him about the history of the marketplace – and Tsuruta is not there.

By the time he finally makes it to Sunday, Minato is only too relieved to be ditching his new roommate in the crowds of the marketplace and making his way across the city to the dilapidated apartment building that Azusa and the rest of the team are squatting in for the duration of the mission. He never thought he’d miss being a ninja, but the identity of Tsuruta Kei feels like a subcutaneous itch.

The strangest thing is probably being back at school. Graduation was months ago now, and the last time Minato attended civilian school years before that. The Taikiyō Institute is just the wrong combination of familiar and foreign that he cannot bring himself to relax within its walls.

The cherry on the cake, of course, is Inagaki Hisao, Minato’s new roommate, whom he can’t help but think of as Fire Country’s answer to Draco Malfoy. If Minato ever hears him declare that his father will hear about this—
Well. Minato probably won’t do anything. The mission comes first, after all.

It’s a simple enough exercise to lose himself to the crowd when Inagaki pauses to explain something, and simpler still to duck into a clothing store and to apply a henge to change his appearance. He adds a few inches to his height, darkens the colour of his hair and eyes, and disguises his clothes as plainer, less expensive items.

Then, it’s back out onto the city’s streets, ducking through the mass of people, constantly scanning the crowd for any sign that he’s being followed. He doesn’t drop the henge until he’s inside the apartment building.

Miyabi is the one who answers the door. “Hey, there, rookie,” she says with a grin. “I have to say, watching you at that school is the most fun I’ve had on guard duty in years. Forget assassins – if your roomie doesn’t snap and try to kill you before the month is up, I’ll collapse of shock.”

Minato stares at her, acutely uncomfortable. He doesn’t think what she’s saying is a criticism, but he doesn’t know her very well, either. Before he can say anything in return, however, a hand settles on his shoulder.

“We don’t have time for jokes right now, Miyabi,” Azusa says, voice pitched to just the right combination of severity and disappointment that Miyabi backs off. Azusa turns back to him. “How long before anyone raises a fuss about you being missing?”

Minato grimaces. “Given what I know of my roommate, we’re in the negatives.”

“Right,” says Azusa. “In that case, let’s make this brief. We’ll have to find a better way to get your report in next week – expect someone to pass you a message with the details at some point. Tell me what you know.”

So far as progress reports go, Minato thinks, this one is as painless as it is empty of content. There isn’t really much he can tell them, beyond a few surface impressions he has of the people with the most access to him.

“Anyone suspicious of your cover?”

Minato shakes his head. “It helps that I’m so young,” he says. “Most people don’t immediately leap to ‘ninja’ when confronted with a weird kid.”

Azusa nods. “Keep it that way,” she says. She glances around the room, at Miyabi in the corner and at the third person present, a chūnin catnapping before their next shift on the guard rotation. She turns back to Minato. “How are you holding up?”

Minato shrugs. “I’m okay.”

“Found a way to keep in shape?”

“Morning exercises in the bathroom,” he replies. “My roommate thinks I have a taste for really long showers.”

Azusa smiles a little, and reaches out for his shoulder again. “Keep up the good work,” she tells him. “You’re doing a good job, no matter what Miyabi says about you inspiring homicidal urges in your roommate. This isn’t a typical infiltration assignment; you don’t have to pass for unremarkable. You just need to pass as a civilian.”

“Next time I skin my knee, I’ll be sure to shed a tear, just for you,” Minato says dryly.
“Just for that, I’m going to pick the most tedious, unpleasant D-ranks when we get back to Konoha,” Azusa shoots back in a similar tone. “Miyabi, you happy to orchestrate his return?”

Miyabi nods. “Sure thing, captain.” To Minato, she says, “I’m thinking we play it as the lost school boy and the city guard graciously providing an escort. Sound good to you?”

Minato nods.

“Awesome.” She forms a hand-seal almost absent-mindedly, before transforming her appearance to match that of the guards that Minato has seen around the capital. Once the illusion settles, she turns to Minato. “Let’s get going, then, Tsuruta-kun.”

Already, Minato misses the familiar form of his own name.

But he just nods again.

The mission comes first. That’s how it has to be for the next four weeks.

Before Azusa briefed him, Minato knew next to nothing about the Tsuruta family. They’re merchants, nouveau riche, and they haven’t made any friends on their climb to fame and fortune. In that regard, at least, it’s easy to be unsurprised to find out that there’s someone out there hell-bent on killing their son.

That would, of course, be Tsuruta Kei.

Playing bait is far from the worst thing Minato has been asked to do for a mission. And even he can admit that he’s a good fit for the task at hand: like him, Tsuruta Kei is a blond, scrawny child of fewer than nine years. It’s not even particularly dangerous; if all goes well, Minato won’t even witness the eventual confrontation.

He just… It shouldn’t be difficult. Truthfully, this sort of mission should feel like a holiday – he’s even getting to explore the capital, even if his guide isn’t the most personable acquaintance he’s ever made.

He can’t help but resent himself for his inability to relax and enjoy this mission.

Minato trails after Miyabi, making sure to scuff his feet as he goes. He’s been exposed enough to the children from the Tsuchida Orphanage to know that he looks the picture of a sullen child and, stupidly, he wishes his escort were Azusa. She’d be shooting him surreptitious thumbs-up for his performance.

“Stop!” The shout makes Minato look up. His eyes easily pick out the source of the sound – of the ensuing chaos.

A sharply-dressed man is scrambling after a small girl in rags. His face is red as he runs – Inagaki would probably sneer at him and accuse him of lacking composure – waving his arms and yelling after the girl.

Minato spots the delighted grin on the girl’s face mere moments before he sees the wallet in her hand.

Ah. A pickpocket. Or a thrill-seeker, maybe, seeing as she doesn’t seem too concerned with who knows that she’s stolen the wallet.

“Stop!” the man shouts. He spots Miyabi. “Guard, she’s—” He cuts off as he trips, falling flat on
his face.

Minato bites his lips to stop himself from laughing.

Miyabi chances Minato with a brief look. “Wait here,” she says, and takes off after the child.

Next to the poor efforts of the man, Miyabi makes her chase look effortless. She doesn’t resort to using chakra, or taking to the rooftops, but then again, she doesn’t really have to. Body controlled and movements flawless, she crosses the space between her and the girl in bare seconds, snatching first the wallet and then the girl’s skinny arm.

Miyabi drags the girl over to the man, who is pushing himself to his feet and trying to look dignified. Minato can’t help but think that it’s a lost cause.

With a sharp flick of her head, Miyabi beckons Minato to stick closer to her. He shuffles over quietly, just in time to catch the bumbling words of the man.

“No, no, no,” he says. “It’s quite alright. Just a bit of childish mischief, right? You got my wallet back, so no harm done, right?”

“Yeah.” That sneer must come from the girl. “You could use a bit of exercise, couldn’t you?”

Minato comes to a stop beside Miyabi and she puts a hand on his shoulder. He has to suppress a flinch at the contact, which seems wrong coming from someone other than Azusa.

“Well,” says Miyabi, tone genial, “if everything’s sorted out here, Ishida-sama, I have to escort this young man back to the Taikiyō Institute.”

“Of course, of course,” says the man – Ishida-sama, Minato presumes – looking down at Minato. “Many tha—” He breaks off. His face whitens. “Masako?”

Minato’s stomach drops. The mission comes first.

“Sorry, who?” That’s Miyabi.

Minato doesn’t say anything.

Ishida shakes his head. “I apologise,” he says, eyes not leaving Minato’s face. “It’s just that this young man looks startlingly similar to someone I used to know. Goodness, you do look just like her.”

Minato thinks of how Tsuruta Kei would react in this situation. “Thank you, I think?” he says.

Ishida smiles widely at that. “It is indeed a compliment,” he says. “Namikaze Masako was a very beautiful young woman. I don’t suppose there’s any relation?”

How the hell do you know my mother? Minato wants to demand. How come she’s never mentioned you?

I’m her son.

“I don’t think so,” Minato says. “Unless she had a sister that married into the Tsuruta family at some point.”

Ishida sighs. “That would be unlikely,” he says. “She left the capital years ago. I suppose it was wishful thinking on my part.” He turns back to the girl, who had been making a valiant effort at
sneaking away up until this point. “Come on, then,” he says. “As you were so concerned for my health, I suppose I ought to return the favour. You look like you could use a good meal.”

The girl sneers again. “I don’t need anything from you.”

“Think of it as my wallet rewarding you for the exciting excursion.”

“Then your wallet can take me out without the company.”

“I think my wallet has had quite enough excitement for one day,” says Ishida. He nods over his shoulder at Miyabi and Minato, the girl in rags trailing after him.

Minato watches them leave. It’s certainly preferable to looking up at Miyabi and seeing how exactly she has chosen to react to that incident.

Eventually, Miyabi says, “That was Ishida Sōmei. He’s a relatively well-respected scholar here in the capital.”

Minato doesn’t look up.

“I’ll have to report that, you know,” says Miyabi.

Minato scuffs his feet. He says, “I imagine you have to report all crimes, no matter how small.”

Tsuruta finally turns up nearly two hours after he went missing, trailing after a city guard with a sheepish expression on his face. He should look sheepish. Does he have any idea how much of Hisao’s time he wasted with his stunt earlier in the day?

“How were you?” Hisao demands.

Tsuruta shrugs. “I got lost.”

He—

Hisao closes his eyes and exhales. “Useless,” he says aloud. “Utterly useless.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter takes place in November -- Minato's mission record now includes four C-ranks.

Next chapter: mystery! Intrigue! Tea!
Dear Mother,

As per our agreement, here is your weekly letter.

It’s been a pretty boring week, all told. Classes are still the same mixture of pointless and mind-numbingly boring, and my roommate is still as annoying as ever. The Institute, for all its prestige, is proving to be wholeheartedly uninteresting. I wish you had let me stay at home with my tutors.

A few days ago, Nishizawa received a package of tea from his uncle for his birthday. He wasn’t all that enthused by it – apparently, he gets the same thing every year. Personally, I think that his uncle just doesn’t know what to buy for a child and so defaults on the same gifts he sends foreign dignitaries. We’re trying the tea out today at breakfast, because, as Nishizawa insists, “we must all suffer together”. I don’t know what Nishizawa’s previous experiences with tea were like, but I can’t imagine it being half as traumatic as he is implying. Maybe he just wants to get rid of the tea as quickly as possible?

The roommate, as expected, was ecstatic at the invitation I received to suffer alongside Nishizawa, because he was included in it. Though maybe “ecstatic” is the wrong word – that would imply that there was some degree of pleasant surprise involved. I think Inagaki just thought that it was nothing less than was appropriate.

I need to go now; Inagaki left almost ten minutes ago for breakfast, where the tea-tasting is taking place. He said he’d save me a place, but I don’t trust him not to give it up to the son of the daimyō’s gardener, or something.

All my love,

Kei

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Iori can’t stop thinking about it. He looks down at his hands and tries to force himself to focus on the present. “It was—it all happened so fast,” he says. “One minute he was fine. We were all fine. Then, he started to choke.”
Opposite him, a blonde-haired woman with a blank face watches him closely. Behind her, there’s another blond, a man with wide, pupil-less, blue eyes. They’re both wearing Leaf hitai-ate. Iori thinks to himself that they make an intimidating pair. He wonders if they’re related, but he doesn’t think so.

“What happened next?” asks the woman.

Iori swallows. “Tsuruta-kun dropped his chopsticks.” Even to him, his voice sounds empty. Wooden. Maybe he’s going into shock. “He fell off his chair and—I guess she was one of your colleagues? She just appeared in the room. Told us to wait, because she was taking him to get medical attention. I tried to protest, but she just—left. Everyone was really scared.”

“You say that you made them all stop eating and leave the table exactly as it was. Why?”

“It was common sense, wasn’t it?” Iori asks. He looks up at the two of them – the man and the woman – and is met by that same blank stare. He looks down again. “We didn’t know what had poisoned him, or if he was the target. The poison could have been on his chopsticks, or laced in his food. It could have been something we were all eating. Either way, you’d need it to find out who did this to him.”

The woman and the man share a look. The man shrugs.

“We managed to trace the poison back to his cup of tea,” says the woman.

Iori’s eyes widen. “You mean Kenshirō-kun—”

But the woman cuts in. “We’re looking at all lines of inquiry.”

“—So,” says the woman opposite Kenshirō. “It was your tea.”

He panics. “Yes, but I didn’t poison it!”

The woman levels him with an unimpressed look. For a moment, there’s such a poignant similarity between the expression on her face and the way that Kei looks at Inagaki that Kenshirō thinks that he’s looking at Kei’s older sister. The colouring certainly matches up.

Kenshirō takes a deep breath. “Sorry,” he says. “Just—why would I poison the tea? I was drinking it myself, as were all my friends. I don’t want my friends dead.”

“The tea was a birthday gift from your uncle?” the woman asks.

“Yes,” he answers. “He’s the daimyō of Tea Country, so he’s something of a connoisseur. Normally, he reserves packages of Jade Dew for foreign dignitaries, but he makes an exception each year for my birthday.”

“Before the incident, Tsuruta-kun wrote a letter to his mother,” the woman says. “He implies that you wanted to get rid of the tea, that you didn’t like it.”

“No!” Kenshirō says quickly. “No, it’s good tea. And really expensive. If I just wanted to get rid of it, I’d sell it to someone.”

He can’t shake the feeling that he’s in trouble, that he’s done something wrong. He didn’t poison his friend. He wouldn’t.
“Why might Tsuruta-kun have thought that, then?”

Kenshirō sighs. “It was the only way that I could think to get him to join in,” he says. “Kei doesn’t really like social things, even if it’s something as mild as drinking tea together, so I have to phrase my invitations like he’s doing me a massive favour by turning up.” The explanation feels sad now and Kenshirō doesn’t know why.

“So, let me get this straight,” the woman says slowly. “You manipulated Tsuruta-kun into coming to your… tea-tasting venture, an event at which he was later poisoned. But you didn’t poison him.”

He bristles. “Is it so hard to believe that I might genuinely enjoy his company? I wanted him there because he’s nice and I want him to be my friend. I thought it would be a good place to start.”

“That didn’t turn out so well, though, did it?”

The question is so very mild, spoken in the most inoffensive tone possible, and that’s probably what sets Kenshirō off. He scowls at the woman and then at the man behind the woman, though he quickly looks away from the man’s gaze, the lack of pupils creeping him out.

“I’m not answering any more of your questions until you let me see that he’s okay,” Kenshirō says sternly.

It doesn’t get him the result he wants.

“Well then,” says the woman. “I suppose it’s a good thing that I’m done asking them.”

There are two Konoha shinobi sat in front of Hisao and he has already resolved to like neither of them. Unfortunately, there’s not very much he can do about that fact; Konoha and its shinobi is probably the one place in Fire Country that his father’s influence cannot reach.

They’re both blond, which is doubly offensive. It’s like they stole the hair colour from Tsuruta – and no-one should be allowed to steal from Tsuruta. Idiot or not, he’s Hisao’s roommate, which makes him Hisao’s.

Hisao’s fingers clench into fists as he thinks of the way that Tsuruta had choked on nothing and fallen from his chair.

“Take it again from the top,” the kunoichi says. She would be pretty, if she weren’t so easy to hate.

“Not until you tell me if he’s okay,” says Hisao.

“I already told you that he’s okay,” says Hisao.

“I already told you that he’s fine.”

Hisao sneers. “And I already told you that that wasn’t enough information.”

The kunoichi stares solidly at Hisao, as if she can cow him into submission with her eyes alone. It’s a waste of her time; Hisao is not budging on this.

Eventually, she relents. “Tsuruta-kun is stable,” she says. “The medics were able to neutralise the poison before it did too much damage. He’s sleeping now. Satisfactory?”

He sniffs. “Barely.”

“Now, tell me what happened.”
Hisao considers digging his heels in again, but decides against it. “I left for breakfast about ten minutes before Tsuruta,” he says. “He had a letter to his mother that he wanted to finish up. When I got there, Nishizawa-kun insisted on waiting for Tsuruta before making the tea, because he said Tsuruta had never tried it before.”

“In Tsuruta-kun’s letter, he said that you were going to save him a place at the breakfast table. Did you?”

Tsuruta really does write about the most banal details in his letters. Hisao almost feels sorry for his parents, having to read them, and then stops when he realises that those same parents have just had their only son poisoned. They’d probably take all the poorly written letters in the world for their son unharmed.

“Yes,” Hisao says. He gathers himself together. “There was still dirty stuff in the place next to me, though, so I had to get one of the serving girls to clear it away and put new stuff down for Tsuruta. She was very rude, though.”

“How so?”

Hisao almost can’t believe they’re talking about serving girls at a time like this.

“Asking things that were none of her business,” he replies. “Like why I wanted fresh stuff put down. As if it would be too much to ask her to do her job without unnecessary commentary.”

There’s a flitter of something across the kunoichi’s face that might be a frown. “Did you tell her it was for Tsuruta?”

“No,” says Hisao, then stops. “Wait, you can’t mean to think she did this? She was incompetent, not a killer.”

“Incompetent how?”

“She forgot to put down a cup for Tsuruta to have tea,” Hisao says. “Only remembered it when she saw Nishizawa-kun making the tea.”

The kunoichi turns around, looking for the first time at the other ninja. They seem to share a silent conversation before she turns back to Hisao. “You said that Nishizawa-kun wanted to wait for Tsuruta-kun.”

“Tsuruta had arrived by then,” Hisao says.

The kunoichi turns around again. The other ninja nods, presses his fingers together in an odd fashion, and then vanishes from the room.

Hisao stares at the both of them.

“Thank you,” says the kunoichi. “You’ve been a great help.”

Hardly, Hisao thinks, but he’s not about to argue with someone complimenting him. “Can I see Tsuruta now?”

The kunoichi shakes her head. “Not yet.”

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Tabito finds Miyabi on guard duty outside the door to the infirmary and shuffles over to her,
rubbing sleep out of his eyes. He’d just come off his guard duty shift when they got the alert that Minato had been poisoned; right now, all he wants is to be in bed.

“Hey there,” he says when he reaches her. “How’s the rookie doing?”

Miyabi smiles, but it falls a little flat. “Sleeping it off,” she says. “He’s really fucking lucky that Fusa was on shift when it all went down. She was able to identify and neutralise the poison before things turned fatal. How’re things on your end?”

“Good, I guess,” says Tabito. He rolls his shoulder. “We’ve got a solid lead – we think a serving girl laced his cup with poison. Azusa thinks we might be able to follow the money trail. She and Moriya are interrogating her as we speak.”

“There’s a money trail?”

“There’s always a money trail.” He sighs, peering through the glass of the infirmary door. He doesn’t see Fusa anywhere, but that doesn’t mean she doesn’t see him. The Byakugan’s freaky like that. He frowns, catching sight of two figures that are decidedly not part of their team. “Who’s that in there with him?”

Miyabi rolls her eyes. “You mean to tell me you don’t recognise them?” she asks. “How you’ve survived so long as a ninja as face-blind as you are, I have no clue. They’re Tsuruta Kei’s parents. Our esteemed clients. In case your line of inquiry doesn’t pan out, Azusa wants the rookie’s cover preserved.”

Tabito feels his eyebrows inch into his hairline. “She’d make her student continue with his infiltration after getting poisoned? Fuck, captain’s a bitch.”

“Of course they look guilty,” he says. “The rookie’s a baby genin. You know how civilian types get around them.”


“You think they know something?”

“Still, don’t the assassination attempts feel personal to you?” she asks. “The tenacity, if nothing else, implies this goes beyond business. This many attempts cannot be cost effective.”

That’s… actually a very good point. Tabito hums consideringly. “And this doesn’t really have the markings of there being a contract, does it?” he muses. “I don’t think our villain is using an intermediary – the attempts have been too sloppy for them to be the work of a professional, really.”

His earpiece flaring to life interrupts him. He pauses, listening to Moriya rattle off details on the other end, and then nods. “Yes,” he says into the communicator. “Got it. Be there in ten.”

Miyabi raises an eyebrow at him.

He smiles tiredly. “Well, it seems that we’ll soon know if you’re right. Azusa has managed to wring a confession out of the serving girl, along with the identity of whoever paid her off.”

Miyabi’s face twists to show just how unimpressed she is by that. “Sloppy indeed.”
Tabito shrugs. “The downside of being a shinobi: always thinking of how you could have done a much better job of killing the client.”

She sighs. “And at times wishing you could carry it out.”

“Too true,” Tabito agrees. “I’ll see you in a bit. If all goes well, we should have this wrapped by nightfall. Give the rookie my best wishes.”

Miyabi looks back through the glass. “Will do,” she says.

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His fingers are cold, almost frozen stiff as they clutch to the sides of the teacup. Steam rises up, swirling past his face, and filling his nose with the faintest scent of peppermint.

He looks down at the tea. He can see his own face reflected in the liquid’s surface. He’s frowning.

“Well,” says a voice, “what are you waiting for? Drink up.”

He doesn’t feel so much like a person as an idea, something scattered and ill-defined. His skin won’t be enough to hold him together soon, he thinks, and the thought isn’t nearly as terrifying as it should be.

It’s so damn cold.

How long has it been since he was told to drink the tea?

He looks down again and this time, there is no steam rising up. Instead, ice is spreading out from the sides of the china, slowly crystallising over the surface. He can’t see his face anymore.

“Drink,” the voice says.

I can’t, he wants to say, but his throat chokes on the words.

He drags his eyes down to his hands, fingers blue around the teacup, and they won’t move. He’s just so cold.

Oh, the thought hits him slowly, sluggishly. This isn’t cold.

This is rigor mortis.

“Drink,” the voice says again, and then rough hands are snatching the teacup out of his rigid fingers and forcing his mouth open. Cold, miserable tea starts to dribble down his throat, slowly at first, then all at once.

He chokes.

It’s everywhere. Tea splashing across his front, gurgling in his throat, filling up his lungs.

Stop, he thinks desperately. Stop, stop, stop, stop, stop.

But it isn’t tea anymore.

Minato jolts awake, his breath catching his throat as his eyes snap open. He’s lying on a bed in a darkened room, arms like lead by his side. He feels exhausted and his throat burns, but he can’t make his arms cooperate to lever himself up and out of bed.
“Ah. I see you’re awake.”

Minato turns his head at the sound of the familiar voice. Hyūga Fusa, the team’s medic, drags her white eyes over him, veins bulging to show that her Byakugan is active. Whatever she sees must satisfy her, because she nods, and the veins melt back into the skin of her face.

“Where am I?” Minato asks. It’s probably not the question that he should be starting with, but his head feels fuzzy and right now, he can’t figure out what that question should be.


Minato watches her tap a finger to her communications unit and mutter something that sounds like he’s awake. She smiles placidly at Minato, nods to herself, and goes to open the door to the infirmary.

Azusa, blond hair scraped back into a tight braid, walks in. Her face is as impassive as ever and Minato feels something within himself relax at her appearance of calm. Fusa nods once at her, then leaves.

Azusa drags her eyes over him. “Don’t lie to me,” she says. “How are you?”

Minato considers all the possible responses to that question and settles on the simplest. “Tired,” he says.

Azusa nods. “I need you to tell me right now if you aren’t capable of continuing with the mission,” she says. “If there’s a chance that you might blow your cover, that you might let something slip, I need to know.”

In that moment, Minato is unspeakably grateful for his sensei’s cool, understated compassion. He’s not okay. God, he is the furthest thing from okay right now. He was poisoned and he couldn’t breathe; he can still remember how it felt to be helpless against his body’s reactions, dropping his chopsticks because he couldn’t control his fingers.

But he can breathe now.

“I think I’m okay,” Minato says.

Azusa knows better than to push on the qualifier in that statement. “Good,” she says. “Tell me who you are.”


“Good,” says Azusa.

“What’s going on?” Minato asks.

Azusa sighs. “A serving girl laced your cup with poison. She initially told us she could identify whoever paid her off, but she couldn’t produce the money and kept giving contradictory descriptions. Eventually, Moriya concluded that she was under the influence of a rudimentary genjutsu – powerful, but with all the markers of someone who doesn’t know what they’re doing. We’re talking someone with no formal training, not even Academy-level, which…”

“Pretty much eliminates the entire shinobi world,” Minato finishes.
Azusa nods. “It does clarify things somewhat,” she says. “We’re working off the hypothesis now that whoever’s behind the attempts isn’t actually paying for them, but instead either using illusions to make them think that they’ve been paid, or to manipulate them into doing it without payment.”

“That’s vaguely terrifying,” Minato says.

“Could be worse,” Azusa replies and, well, he’s not about to argue with that.

He shifts in bed and tries to ignore the amount of energy required to do so. “What do you need from me?”

“Sit in bed and look pretty,” she says. “We’ve slowly been leaking news of your survival, but we think your vulnerability right now is the best shot we have at bait so far. The poisoning spooked us, but I think we can probably continue with the same guarding formation as before.”

Minato nods, remembering Azusa’s first explanation of the tactics used on the mission to him. It feels like a decade ago, that the two of them were sneaking into the capital under the cover of mother and son. One visible guard, she’d said, leaving obvious holes in the defence, and one less visible one covering them.

“All your classmates have been trying to force their way in to see you,” Azusa continues. “Now that I’m satisfied you’re not going to deliriously tell them all about your secret life as a ninja, I’m prepared to let them in. Are you okay with that?”


Suddenly, there is a familiar weight on his shoulder. He follows the hand up its arm to Azusa.

“Minato, I—” she says, and then hesitates. “You’re a good student. I don’t consider you a burden.”

He doesn’t know what to do with that. He stays silent.

Eventually, Azusa removes her hand and reaches into one of the pockets on her flak vest. She withdraws something and puts it on his bedside.

Minato twists his head to look at what it is. A pair of knitting needles and some deep green wool stare back at him.

Oh. He looks up at Azusa.

“I can assure you,” she says, tone pitched to dry, “the one thing more boring than taking watch is being on bedrest.”

He opens his mouth. Closes it.

Azusa gives him a small smile. “Get some rest, Minato.”

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Knitting, as it turns out, is more of an exercise in frustration than anything else. The dull, heavy feeling to his limbs will apparently fade given time – a side effect of the poison and the antidote, or so Fusa says – but until then, his fingers refuse to cooperate with the rhythmic stitching required for knitting.

He scowls at his botched attempt at a scarf and drops the needles and wool onto his lap.
Earlier in the morning, Minato was woken up by Nishizawa Kenshirō, who gave him an impassioned apology, insistent that he was not responsible for Minato’s poisoning. He’d stared at Nishizawa, more than a little confused, because he can’t think of one logical reason why anyone would assume that Nishizawa would poison anyone.

Nishizawa eventually left, his last words being a vaguely amused comment that Minato could call him by his given name, really. Minato didn’t tell him that it wasn’t anything personal, just Azusa’s philosophy infecting his own: civilians are addressed with their family names; ninja with their given names.

Minato looks back down at his knitting project and decides to unravel it. He’s just pulling his needles free of the mess when the door to the infirmary opens.

Arms full of clean sheets, a nurse walks into the room. He smiles politely at her, but receives no response as she strides towards him and stops in the gap between his bed and the next. She puts the sheets down on the bed next to him and turns.

Minato only has time to catch the barest of glances of something metal in her hand before she’s bringing it down in a sweeping arc.

*Move!* Minato screams at his limbs. He tumbles off the bed, just dodging the attack, and scrambles away from another swipe from the nurse. His legs tangle in his blankets, burning in response to the sudden movement.

*Stand,* he tells himself as he rolls to dodge another wild stab. *You have to stand up.*

“Stay still!” the nurse screeches at him.

Minato finally manages to force his legs free of the blankets and pushes his protesting legs beneath him to pull himself up and into something that vaguely resembles a taijutsu stance. Where the hell is everyone else?

He counters the nurse’s next lunge and casts his eyes over to the door. Through the glass window in the wood, he can see Miyabi, but she’s just—standing there. Why the fuck is she just standing there?

*Under the influence of a rudimentary genjutsu,* Azusa said.

Is that what’s wrong with Miyabi? But she’s a genjutsu specialist; it’s why Azusa picked her for this guard rotation. And that doesn’t explain why Tabito hasn’t done his job and covered Miyabi’s mistakes.

He’s alone. He’s fucking alone with a woman with a knife and he can barely move.

Minato feels panic bubble up within him. He stumbles, legs not cooperating as he tries to move them through a dodge too quickly, and he feels himself beginning to fall.

Suddenly, he can see how this fight is going to end. He’ll fall and the nurse will stand over him. She’ll be smiling, lips twisted and eyes triumphant, and she will raise her knife above her head. She’ll bring it down. The wound won’t kill him immediately; knife wounds rarely do. Instead, he’ll bleed out, choking on his own blood for the second time in memory, and it will be a violent, painful death to end a violent, painful life.

Minato’s back hits the ground, breath exiting his lungs in a raw burst. She moves to stand over him and she raises her knife. He is jittery with adrenaline; he cannot look away from the blade. *Move,*
he tries to tell his arms, his legs, but they refuse. Move!

She’s smirking at him.

God, he doesn’t want this to be the last thing he sees.

Her arms tense, ready to bring the knife down, and—

Something barrels into her side.

Minato reacts to the advantage before he processes it. His muscles scream as he casts his arm out, fingers grasping onto the first thing he can reach. When the nurse throws off the—boy, that ran into her, she turns back to Minato, smirk turned vicious, and his fingers tighten on his unlikely weapon.

He strikes forward with the knitting needle clutched in his hand and drives it directly into her right eye.

Everything seems to slow down. He feels every millimetre of resistance that the knitting needle encounters. He watches her expression twist. He pushes forward and forward and forward and—Away.

He breathes.

This is how every fight ends. One of you gets up. The other doesn’t.

Minato stands up. He aches, wrung out and exhausted, but he’s standing. The nurse—isn’t.

Minato picks his way across the floor to where she’s down on the floor and kicks away her knife, ignoring the way she clutches at her eye, gurgling in pain. He lets his eyes wander a bit further, coming to a stop on—Inagaki.

Inagaki Hisao, Tsuruta Kei’s roommate. Inagaki Hisao, who is staring at Minato like he’s never seen him before. Inagaki Hisao, who saved his life.

He opens his mouth to ask a question. Maybe, when did you get here? Maybe, why did you do that? Maybe, what do you want from me?

Minato discards all of them. Instead, he says, “Make sure she stays down.” He tries to muster up a reassuring smile.

Inagaki recoils.

“Keep her down,” Minato repeats.

Inagaki visibly gathers himself together and looks at the nurse. His face is pale. “I don’t think she’s going anywhere.”

Well. That’s true enough, Minato supposes.

With one last glance at Inagaki, who appears to be holding himself back from a breakdown on sheer willpower alone, Minato drags himself over to the door. He pulls it open and shuffles up to Miyabi.

She doesn’t so much as flinch at his proximity. She just stands there, staring dead ahead with
glazed eyes.

*Genjutsu is some scary, scary shit,* Minato muses. He reaches around her unmoving body and un hooks her communications unit from her ear. He activates it with the customary chakra flare.

“Azusa,” he says into it, “something’s happened.”

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Hisao can’t stop looking at Tsuruta. He knows that his gaze is making the other boy uncomfortable, but that was—not normal. This is not normal. The woman with a *knitting needle* stuck out of her eye is not normal. Tsuruta being this calm after straight-up murdering someone is not normal.

He feels vaguely ill.

“If you’re going to throw up,” Tsuruta says, sounding tired, “it’s probably best to get it over and done with before they arrive.”

Hisao’s not going to throw up. He just feels like he will.

He shivers slightly, casting a baleful glance at the open window. Tsuruta levered it open a few minutes ago, just after he returned to the room, but Hisao wishes he had left it closed. November in the capital is never warm, even if he doesn’t remember it being this cold.

Hisao jumps when the first of the ninja drops in through the window. It’s the blond kunoichi from earlier, the one who interrogated him about Tsuruta getting poisoned. She’s followed by her blond accomplice and another kunoichi, this one unfamiliar.

With brown hair and milky-white eyes, the other kunoichi looks out of place among Tsuruta and her comrades, and she immediately peels off from the group to kneel down next to the woman. Hisao guesses she must be a medic.

The blond kunoichi takes in the scene in front of her. Then, she turns to Tsuruta. “What the hell is it with you and eyes?”

And—Hisao can’t take this anymore. This is his roommate. Tsuruta Kei likes long showers in the mornings and is completely oblivious to friendly overtures and he—he can’t be the same person who just took down a woman twice his size.

But Tsuruta Kei is standing there and he looks—apathetic.

Hisao starts to laugh.

It’s all so ridiculous. There’s a woman *dying* on the floor and apparently all there is to be said is *what is it with you and eyes?*

“Is he going into shock?” Tsuruta asks.

Hisao gasps for air. “*I slept* with you,” he says.

“Bit young for that, aren’t you?” the medic says mildly.

Hisao just giggles.

“Yeah,” says the blond man. “I’d say it’s pretty safe to say he’s going into shock.”
“Inagaki,” says Tsuruta, “you need to calm down. There are going to be people here soon and you need to—”

“No worries,” Hisao cuts in, “you can just stab their eyes out.” His laughter chokes off with a sob.

He can’t do this. He’s crying, and he hates crying, but he can’t do this. This is all too much.

A hesitant hand comes down on his shoulder. “It’s going to be okay,” says Tsuruta.

He sounds so uncomfortable. And—well, it makes a certain amount of perverse sense that useless, useless Tsuruta would be more at ease with killing people than talking to them.

“Tsuruta, you—” Hisao breaks off. He’s still crying; he sounds awful.

Tsuruta hesitates, then pulls Hisao closer. “My name isn’t really Tsuruta Kei,” he says, quietly, like he’s sharing a secret.

“No shit,” Hisao chokes out.

Tsuruta is just so fucking useless.

Chapter End Notes

I could talk about a lot of things this chapter, but the first thing I want to do is to give you all the names of the OCs so that you can all keep a bit better track of them. I had to make a spreadsheet this chapter, just so I wouldn't forget anyone, or spend an entire draft mis-spelling their names (like I did with Sawaka, who is not, in fact, called Sawako). Included in here are some names we haven't met yet, but might crop up next chapter. (My plan kind of went out the window with this one.)

Minato and Azusa's Team for the Mission
Furukawa Tabito, chūnin, a general ninja.
Hori Miyabi, chūnin, a genjutsu specialist.
Hyūga Fusa, tokubetsu-jōnin, a med-nin.
Yamanaka Moriya, chūnin, an interrogations specialist.

People at the Institute
Inagaki Hisao, 8, son of an advisor to the daimyō.
Kurota Iori, 9, friends with Kenshirō.
Nishizawa Kenshiro, 9, in the advanced class for maths with Minato, nephew of the Tea daimyō.

Other People in the Capital
Tsuruta Tomoki, a cloth merchant, Kei’s father and the mission’s client.
Tsuruta Kazu, a cloth merchant, Kei’s mother and Tomoki’s business partner.
Inagaki Tatsuhi, an advisor to the daimyō, Hisao’s father.
Ishida Sōmei, a scholar, knew Minato’s mother when she was younger.

Okay, onto other things. All of the mission team apart from Azusa refer to Minato as "the rookie" or just "rookie" and occasionally refer to Azusa as "captain". The former is a term of endearment, but the both of them serve as ways of creating distance. I'm
sure you've noticed by now that Azusa doesn't really do nicknames -- either for herself, or for others. This is why they don't use "captain" as often as they do "rookie".

I think I gave some of you the impression last chapter that I don't like Hisao? At least that was the impression I got from the comments. To clarify: Minato dislikes Hisao, because he thinks Hisao is annoying. I actually quite like Hisao. He serves as a pretty good foil to both Minato and Mikoto, and his relationship with Minato contrasts nicely with Mikoto's. But Minato's comparison to Draco Malfoy doesn't really hold up: as seen this chapter, Hisao is brave. He charged a woman with a knife without hesitation when he saw her stood over Minato. Next chapter, both Minato and Hisao will have to revise their opinions of each other.

Speaking of Minato: I know, I know, that dream was fucked up. I don't really want to get into it now, though, but it's a blend of all of Minato's least favourite things: how he died in his previous life, his memories of getting poisoned, and being trapped and not having a choice. Someone really needs to give him a hug. Once we leave the capital, I promise that there will be a light chapter around Minato's birthday. The kid really needs a break.

I was actually supposed to wrap this mission this chapter? Next: Hisao and Minato have a much needed conversation, Azusa is actually a pretty good sensei, and Minato does a bit of investigating of his own. (No-one dies/gets maimed next chapter, I promise.)
Hisao hugs his knees, chest hollow and mouth dry. If he relaxes his muscles even slightly, he knows his hands will start to shake, so he grips them tight and forces his breaths into an even pattern of inhale and exhale. He refuses to let himself fall apart again, not now.

Across the room from him, propped up on his own bed, Tsuruta looks nearly as drained as Hisao feels. There’s a blood spatter on his pyjama top, but Tsuruta doesn’t seem to have noticed it – either that or he just doesn’t care. Hisao wouldn’t be surprised; he’s quickly learning that Tsuruta’s apathy knows no bounds.

He turns his gaze onto the final person in their dorm room. The medic. Fusa, as she insisted she be called, smiling gently at him with her vacant eyes. She’s perched on the end of Tsuruta’s bed, frowning at a tube of blood.

It all feels so surreal. Less than two hours ago, Hisao tackled a woman with a knife and then watched his roommate stab her through the eye.

With a knitting needle.

Hisao swallows past the impulse to throw up. He turns to Tsuruta. “What’s she doing?”

Tsuruta follows Hisao’s line of sight to the medic, then shrugs. “Probably testing for the presence of chakra-interactive alleles.”

Hisao barely knows what any of those words mean individually, let alone together.

The medic looks up. “I didn’t think Azusa knew all that much about medical ninjutsu,” she says.

Tsuruta shrugs. “She doesn’t,” he replies. “Mito-san likes to brag about her granddaughter’s accomplishments and Mikoto just likes to brag.”

“The Uchiha heiress?”

“Mito-san is her sponsor for the Academy.”

There’s a pause. “Clan bullshit?” the medic asks.

Tsuruta nods. “Clan bullshit.”

Hisao’s fists clench. When he was younger, his father used to talk about politics with him in the
room, uncaring of everything that Hisao could overhear. It wasn’t about trust back then – Hisao
was barely five – but because his father didn’t think it mattered. Hisao wouldn’t understand
anyway, so why ask him to leave?

Hisao matters. He matters.

He inhales. “You’re a ninja,” he says.

If Tsuruta is surprised by the interruption, he doesn’t show it. He just nods.

The medic snorts, turning back to the blood. “Only just.”

Tsuruta shrugs, ever nonchalant.

“What does that mean?” Hisao asks.

“I’m a genin,” Tsuruta sighs. “It’s the lowest rank a Konoha shinobi can hold.”

The medic snorts again, but doesn’t say anything. Hisao resists the urge to demand to know what
she finds so funny; he has a feeling her only response to that would be to laugh at him.

“Why are you here?” Hisao asks, instead.

Tsuruta neither shrugs nor answers. He flicks his eyes to the medic, a questioning glance, and she
waves a hand through the air dismissively.

“Azusa cleared you to break cover,” she says. “Tell him what’s prudent. No village secrets,
obviously.”

“Do I even know any of those?”

“You tell me, rookie.”

Hisao grits his teeth, but waits for them to finish their conversation. He wants answers. He can be
patient if it gets him them.

Tsuruta makes a considering face. “I’m here on a mission,” he says, as if that wasn’t already
patently obvious. “You’re not the focus of it, so don’t worry on that front. It was pure coincidence
that we were assigned to be roommates.”

Not good enough. Hisao sneers. “And your mission involves the murder of medical personnel?”

“I sure hope not,” the medic murmurs under her breath. Hisao ignores her.

“No,” Tsuruta answers. “Not as its primary objective, at least. And I didn’t kill the nurse. I just…”

“Maimed her,” the medic supplies. Hisao ignores her again.

“What you saw,” Tsuruta goes on, “that was self-defence. She attacked me first. I didn’t have a
choice. And she didn’t die. The eye-socket isn’t always a guaranteed kill-spot, especially if
medical attention is readily available, and the wound isn’t too deep. Fusa was able to save her life.
Right now, our mission leader and our information extraction specialist are carrying out a field
interrogation.”

It’s probably the very most that Hisao has ever heard Tsuruta say all in one go, and it’s an analysis
of attempted murder. Hisao isn’t sure how to feel about that.
The last sentence catches up to Hisao. “You’re going to torture her?”

Tsuruta blinks. “What? No. There’s no need for that.”

“Because you stabbed her in the eye,” Hisao says, voice rising in pitch. He can feel the frequency of his breaths increasing, and he works to push it back down. Answers first.

“Because torture gives notoriously unreliable information,” Tsuruta corrects. “Torture is really only good at getting people to say exactly what it is they think you want to hear. Ninja have better ways of getting people to talk than using pain as a motivator.”

Hisao clears his mind of all thoughts of torture and of the nurse. It’s not his concern anymore, anyway. What does he care if they torture her? She was going to kill Tsuruta.

Suddenly, Hisao feels lost. “Was it all a lie?” He can’t keep the tremor out of his voice; the moment the words are out of his mouth, he wishes he could snatch them back.

The apathy crumbles. Tsuruta bites his lip, gaze skittering anywhere but towards Hisao’s face.

“I don’t know what you want me to say,” Tsuruta admits eventually. “Parts of it were a lie. That’s how it had to be. Parts of it weren’t. I really am terrible at literature and kendo is not one of my strengths. But I could probably sleep through your mathematics lessons and still pass. And I’m not seven years old; I’m eight.”

“And your name isn’t really Tsuruta Kei.”

“No. It’s not.”

“What is it, then?”

The question seems to take Tsuruta off-guard, which strikes Hisao as particularly silly. It’s the logical follow-up to everything he asked previously.

Then, Tsuruta smiles. It doesn’t look quite right on his face. “Namikaze Minato.”

Namikaze Minato. A fisherman’s name. It would figure that it would be something disastrously common.

Hisao exhales deeply. He can handle this.

“Damn.” The expletive comes from the medic. “Damn, damn, damn, damn.”

Namikaze tenses. “What is it?”

The medic flicks her eyes at Hisao – and now she is concerned about him overhearing something important? – and then looks back to Namikaze, grimacing. She holds up the tube of blood, which is… glowing?

“I’ve found our allele,” she says. “You ever heard of the Kurama Clan, rookie?”

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Minato didn’t question Azusa when she told him that he would be accompanying her to report to the clients for the final time and, following her through the Tsuruta Estate, he muses that it’s a bit too late to start now.
The Tsuruta family are the kind of rich that are loud about it. Everything about their home is crafted from pointed extravagance; their wealth is practically painted across the walls. Perhaps, Minato thinks, even literally. The render certainly looks expensive enough.

He and Azusa are led to a small meeting room towards the centre of the estate and left alone when one of the household staff leaves to fetch their clients. Minato looks up at her, half hoping for some last minute guidance, but she isn’t looking at him.

The door slides open.

This is, Minato realises, his first time seeing Tsuruta Tomoki in person. He met Kazu, his wife, earlier in the infiltration, when she visited him at the Academy to pass him a note detailing how he was meant to make his reports. At the time, he’d been struck by how little she smiled and had wondered if her husband was anything like her.

Tomoki, much like his wife, is closer to shrewd than he is good-looking. He has the same platinum blond hair and the same dress-sense, but his face is more open. When he sees Minato, his eyes widen slightly, but then he focuses back on Azusa.

“You have news?” he asks.

Azusa nods. “Yesterday, there was another attempt,” she says, all business. “A woman infiltrated the Taikiyō Institute’s infirmary disguised as a nurse. As you can see,” she gestures vaguely at Minato, “the attempt was unsuccessful, and we were able to capture and interrogate her. Her name was Hagiwara Kikumi, a former employee of yours. We were able to ascertain that she was directly responsible for each of the attempts made on your son’s life.”

Tomoki exhales. “You got her?”

“Kazu,” Tomoki murmurs.

“A woman infiltrated the Taikiyō Institute’s infirmary disguised as a nurse. As you can see,” she gestures vaguely at Minato, “the attempt was unsuccessful, and we were able to capture and interrogate her. Her name was Hagiwara Kikumi, a former employee of yours. We were able to ascertain that she was directly responsible for each of the attempts made on your son’s life.”

Tomoki exhales. “You got her?”

“We got her,” Azusa confirms.

Kazu narrows her eyes. “The name isn’t familiar.”

“I very much doubted it would be,” Azusa replies. “Hagiwara never held a high position in your business. She was a seamstress – one of those who were trapped in the warehouse collapse last year. The stress of the event wasn’t good for her; she survived, but she lost the child she was carrying. Her focus on your son stemmed from that.”

“We were cleared of any wrongdoing in that event,” Kazu replies sharply.

The smile Azusa offers is placating in nature. “Grief,” she says, “does not have a habit of making people react in a rational manner.”

Minato sees the precise moment that Kazu figures it out. Her brows pinch and her already severe expression yet harsher. “You said ‘was’,” she says. “Her name was Hagiwara. What happened to her?”

Azusa’s facial muscles don’t so much as twitch. “Unfortunately,” she says, “Hagiwara succumbed her wounds in the early hours of this morning. Our medic did all she could to preserve Hagiwara’s life so that you could make the decision as to her ultimate fate, but it was in vain.”

“What wounds?” Kazu asks.

“Kazu,” Tomoki murmurs.
“What wounds?”

Azusa slants her eyes to Minato, a subtle prompt. He steps forward.

“When she attacked me,” he says, “I stabbed her in the eye. It was a messy wound, because I didn’t have access to any proper weapons, and it eventually proved fatal.”

Tomoki looks a little green, but the smile that Kazu offers in response is feral. “Good,” she says.

The open bloodthirst displayed in her features feels alien to Minato. He thinks part of him understands it – an all-consuming desire to protect that which is precious to you – but he cannot imagine himself ever finding delight in it. He tries to avoid contemplating his attitudes towards killing too often, because he’s not sure he’ll like the answers his mind will turn up, but he can’t figure out if Tsuruta Kazu’s happiness at the prospect of revenge is any better than his own ambivalence.

“There should be no further attempts on your son’s life,” Azusa is saying, “at least not from Hagiwara, but I would keep up with the bodyguards a little longer, just in case she had anything else set up before she died. It should be safe enough to bring him back home now, though.”

“We greatly appreciate your team’s professionalism and dedication during this mission, Azusa-san,” Tomoki says. The words sounds a little rehearsed.

“Thank you.”

“Before you leave, though,” he continues, “my wife and I were wondering if we could talk to Minato-kun for a few minutes.”

Minato manages to stop his eyes widening in surprise. He didn’t even know that the clients knew his name; he has no idea what they want with him. He looks to Azusa for an explanation, but she is already wearing one of her plastic, client-facing smiles.

This, most likely, is why he was brought along in the first place.

“That’s fine,” she says. “I can wait in another room if you would prefer some privacy.”

Minato watches her leave and tries to stifle the panic that rises within him. It’s not a rational response to being left alone in a room with two unarmed civilians, but there’s not a shred of Minato that feels prepared for this. What do they want from him? A play-by-play of what it felt like to stab Hagiwara in the eye?

It is Tomoki who speaks first. He looks awkward. “When we asked for a body double for Kei,” he says, “we thought that it would be someone older using one of those—illusions that I’ve heard ninja can do. We didn’t expect someone so young.”

Minato feels like they’re expecting some kind of response from him, so he gives one. “The option was discussed,” he says, “but it was eventually decided that it would be better to use someone with more physical similarities to your son. I was selected because I matched many of the key details that someone might use to describe your son.”

“But you’re—” Tomoki breaks off with a half-hearted exhale that might have been a laugh. “You’re very young.”

Ah, Minato realises. “I’m not your son,” he says.
“I never said you were,” Tomoki replies.

“No, but it’s what you’re thinking,” Minato says and the words are sharper than he intended. “I’m not your son. He and I are nothing alike; for starters, I’d wager that I’ve killed many more people than he has. This is my job. It’s what I do. I’m good at it. And, if any part of your respects that, respects what I have done on this mission, you won’t try and save me from it.”

Tomoki stares at him.

Well, shit. That probably wasn’t what Azusa meant when she told him that professionalism was key.

Minato musters up a smile from somewhere deep within him. “Was that all?”

--

“You knew that was going to happen.”

“I did.”

“You didn’t tell me.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Why?”

Azusa looks down at Minato, then looks away. “I wanted to see how you would handle it,” she says. “That sort of reaction from civilians isn’t uncommon and you’re going to be facing it for at least another five years. People have a nasty habit of projecting; they look at you and they see their own children. Indignation wasn’t precisely what I was expecting from you in that circumstance, but it works just fine.”

Minato stares at her.

He’s mostly used to Azusa’s teaching methods. She likes to make him think, likes to test and challenge him – and he doesn’t mind that. But there’s something about this that makes him feel uncomfortable. *I wanted to see how you would handle it.* It sounds—cold.

“Minato,” Azusa says, drawing his attention. “You did well.”

He nods.

There’s a lull in the conversation. Minato bites his lip, before he says, “At least they didn’t ask to see the body.”

Azusa snorts and the tension dissipates.

They walk the rest of the way back in silence.

--

Miyabi flares her chakra for the fifth time in as many minutes, well aware that it’s a waste of energy. The very first thing Fusa did once she stabilised Hagiwara was to seal up her tenketsu and, if the glares their prisoner keeps directing Miyabi’s way are any indication, it worked.

Miyabi exhales, resisting the urge to glare back.
This is run of the mill, so far as civilian prisoners go. At the start, they’re all bravado and I’d rather die, and then they realise their situation and fall into sullen compliance. For the most part, they’re easy to ignore and easier still to manage; Miyabi’s issue is that she can’t look at Hagiwara’s face without remembering the genjutsu-induced trance and a hot flush of shame creeping up within her.

They should have just killed Hagiwara when they had the chance. It would have been absolutely no effort to let her bleed out on the floor of that infirmary, and minimal effort only to slit her throat when the interrogation was finished.

Job done, client happy, loose ends well and truly tied up.

Fuck politics. No, seriously. Fuck politics with something really uncomfortable. And maybe while they’re at it, fuck whoever in the Kurama Clan decided to sow their oats outside of the village walls. Fuck them especially.

Blood unfortunately counts for a lot in Konoha and the current international climate doesn’t exactly help matters. The Second War might be more than two years behind them, but that doesn’t change the fact that Ame is still a mess, and that people aren’t so much dedicated to maintaining the peace as they are to looking for an advantage in the next war.

Well. Except the daimyō. It’s just their luck that Fire Country’s leader is a coward of epic proportions.

All of this boils down to Konoha’s current precarious situation on the world stage. Sooner or later, Fusa’s been saying, they’re going to have to perform some big show of strength, if they want the illusion of peace to stretch a few more years. Fusa has a nasty habit of being right about these things.

So Hagiwara gets to remain out of their clients’ grasps, for no other reason than she’s too dangerous to let fall into Kumo’s – or, hell, even Kiri’s at a stretch – likely welcoming hands.

And Miyabi gets stuck watching over her, disrupting her chakra rhythm almost obsessively, and wishing that Azusa had just decided to kill her and get it over with.

Through the thin walls separating Miyabi and Hagiwara from the rest of the apartment, Miyabi hears the front door open. She tunes in absentmindedly as voices surface.

“—much simpler solution just to kill her.”

Miyabi frowns. That’s the rookie’s voice; no-one else on the team sounds nearly that prepubescent. His tone is the even, self-assured one that she has come to associate with him feeling at ease – and it’s pretty fucked up that he seems most relaxed whenever Azusa is grilling him for information.

“So why didn’t I just kill her?” Azusa’s voice echoes through the near-silent apartment. The only other person present is Tabito, who sleeps like the dead, as both Fusa and Moriya are out buying supplies for the trip back. “Don’t you think she deserves to die?”

Across from Miyabi, Hagiwara freezes. Miyabi grimaces; this is definitely not the sort of thing they want their prisoner listening in on. She hesitates for only a second before throwing up an audio-blocking genjutsu, just in time to cover the next words out of the rookie’s mouth.

“I don’t think anyone deserves to die.”

“That’s a very evasive answer, Minato.”
“It’s a true one.”

“That was a compliment.”

Miyabi isn’t alone among her team in being utterly baffled by Azusa and Minato’s relationship. They don’t really seem like student and teacher, but that might be because the both of them only seem to be able to function by repressing their emotions to a ridiculous extent.

Moriya, the Yamanaka weirdo, thinks it’s hilarious. Miyabi would probably say it’s closer to sad.

“So?” prompts Azusa.

There’s a pause, and Miyabi can almost picture the look of deep thought on the rookie’s face. When he next speaks, it’s hesitant.

“It’s… not really what we do, though, is it? We’re not supposed to be judge, jury, and executioner, are we?” Miyabi has no idea what that means, but the rookie just adds, “I mean, as ninja, we decide who needs to die, not who deserves it.”

“So what do we do?” Azusa asks, but there’s a barely-there hint of approval in her voice. Miyabi wonders if Minato is even able to pick up on it. “We can’t just stay here, stuck in limbo, forever.”

“Make it someone else’s problem. Let the Kurama Clan deal with their own mess.”

“Good.”

And that’s it. Miyabi strains her ears, hoping to hear more, but neither of them say anything else, and Miyabi tries to tell herself that she shouldn’t be surprised. The rookie only seems to have two modes: verbose and positively silent, one of which is much more common than the other. Azusa is just constantly curt.

Miyabi fiddles with a loose thread on her flak jacket. She never thought about it before the mission – what it would be like to work with a baby genin who had somehow managed to make enough of an impression to get sent on a B-rank. She’s sort of glad for that now, because at least this way, she didn’t have any expectations to be either fulfilled or disrupted.

Minato hasn’t been hard to work with, but he’s—unnerving. It feels mean to think that, because he’s perfectly polite, but it’s the truth. Part of Miyabi can’t wait until the mission is over.

Miyabi looks at Hagiwara and dismisses the genjutsu. She gets a look of pure malice for her efforts, but this time around it just makes satisfaction coil in her gut.

_Not so much fun on the receiving end, is it?_ Miyabi smirks.

Hagiwara can probably sense her thoughts, because the intensity of the glare increases tenfold.

--

On the surface, Namikaze Minato looks like a much less rich version of Tsuruta Kei. Namikaze’s dress sense is more modest than Tsuruta’s – muted, dark tones, capped with a forehead protector engraved with a stylistic leaf – but the similarities are all too apparent. There’s the same blond hair, the same blue eyes, the same slight frame.

Hisao feels unnerved by it all – or he would, if he hadn’t decided that he couldn’t possibly allow himself to be unnerved by anyone even _remotely_ like Tsuruta.
“You’re leaving,” Hisao says.

“Yes,” says Namikaze.

Hisao inhales, then thrusts the piece of paper he has been holding onto into Namikaze’s hands. “Here,” he says.

Namikaze stares at it. “What?”

“It’s my address.”

“I can see that. I meant—why?”

It is just Hisao’s luck that Namikaze is the same degree of useless as Tsuruta. Hisao closes his eyes and exhales. “So that you can write to me,” he says. “You’re utterly clueless. Someone needs to bear the responsibility of educating you.”

Namikaze looks a little bemused. “I do just fine, really.”

“You only say that because you’re so clueless,” Hisao retorts. “Trust me, watching you is painful.”

“So…” Namikaze looks down at the address and then back up at Hisao. “You want to be friends?”

Useless. “No,” Hisao says. “I want to make sure you’re aware of all the ways that you appeared pathetically common during your time here so that you don’t get killed on your next infiltration mission.”

Namikaze opens his mouth to say something, then shuts it. Then, he says, “I don’t tend to take infiltration missions. And this wasn’t really a typical infiltration—”

“Take the address.”

Namikaze hesitates again, but Hisao is resolute. Only one of them will win this argument, and only one of them has a father who argues for a living.

“Okay,” Namikaze eventually says. He goes to put the address away in one of those ridiculous pouches he’s wearing, but then he pauses. “Do you know of an Ishida Sōmei?”

What does he want to know that for?

“The scholar?” Hisao asks, just to be sure.

Namikaze nods.

“Of course,” Hisao says. “He’s been over for dinner a few times.” With Hisao’s father, and Hisao spent the entire evening in his room, but Namikaze doesn’t have to know that.

“Do you know where he lives?”

Hisao thinks it over. “No,” he says, reaching for a piece of paper and a pencil, “but if you ask someone at the Grand Library, they should be able to tell you.” He finishes off his drawing and hands it over to Namikaze. “That’s a map. Follow the arrows.”

Namikaze holds the drawing delicately. He looks like he doesn’t know what to do with it. Then, he looks up, and the hesitance is gone from his expression. “Hisao, thank you.”
“It’s just a map,” Hisao says.


Hisao’s mouth drops open. He wants to say something back, but words fail him. Namikaze ducks out of the room, and he’s gone.

Then, what Namikaze said replays in Hisao’s mind. First lesson, he thinks. The appropriate use of given names.

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Ishida Sōmei lives in a small house in one of the nicer areas of the city. Minato stands in front of it, staring the well-kept front up and down, and closes his eyes. There’s something awful and underhanded about what he’s about to do; it’s more than clear to him that his mother has tried to keep all this from him, and he’s deliberately circumventing her efforts.

Minato walks up to the front door and knocks.

It swings open almost immediately.

Ishida Sōmei looks about the same as he did that day in the market, if slightly less out of breath. Minato immediately catalogues the man’s clothes of being of the same make as those that he wore as Tsuruta Kei, if a little better coordinated.


Minato takes a deep breath, tells himself that it’s too late to back out, and says, “I lied before.”

Ishida raises an eyebrow.

“I’m—Namikaze Masako is my mother’s name.”

A second eyebrow joins the first. “I suppose you ought to come in, then.”

The inside of the house is exactly what Minato would have expected from the outside. It’s closer to homely than it is to stylish, but it’s tidy in a way that suggests that Ishida himself isn’t solely responsible for keeping it clean.

Ishida leads Minato through a corridor and through to a large room. Sat at a small desk in the centre of the room is a small girl. It takes Minato a few moments to place her face and when he does he has to suppress a frown. She’s the girl from the market, but she’s been dressed in some proper clothes and given a bath.

The girl looks up. “Did he steal your wallet, too?”

“Naturally,” Ishida says. “It is, of course, my preferred method of making friends.”

“We’re not friends.”

“I heard you the first ten times,” Ishida replies. “Complete your exercises; I have a guest. And watch your fingers. I know they have a habit of picking up things you don’t mean to.”

The girl makes a face at Ishida, then turns back to the worksheet in front of her.

Ishida turns to Minato. “I don’t suppose you remember Naoko?” he asks, as he leads them through
to another room. This one appears to be a study. “She was there when we met the first time.”

“I remember,” Minato says neutrally.

“I’m teaching her how to read and write,” Ishida says. “It’s what Masako’s mother did for me when I was in a similar situation.”

Oh. It never occurred to Minato that he might have relatives alive on his mother’s side as well. “Is she…”

Ishida smiles in a decidedly sad manner. “Sahoko-san passed away just over ten years ago, now,” he says, then frowns. “Don’t you talk about this sort of thing with Masako? Unless—”

“No,” Minato says, cutting Ishida off before he can complete the thought. “Mum’s alive. She’s fine. A librarian.”

Ishida sighs. “That would suit Masako. She always did like books.” He sounds wistful. “And it’s just struck me that we’ve gotten this far into our conversation and I still don’t know your name.”

“It’s—Minato. Namikaze Minato.”

Ishida nods. “So, what brings you to the capital, Minato-kun? I can’t imagine that Masako has finally decided to return; she was quite resolute about leaving.”

“I—” Minato hesitates. “I had a mission.”

“A mission?” Ishida seems taken aback. “You’re a shinobi?” His eyes focus on Minato’s forehead, as if noticing his hitai-ate for the first time.

“Yes.”

“Goodness. How old are you?”

“Eight.”

“Goodness,” Ishida says again. He pauses. “I presume you came to find me for a reason, then.”

Minato breathes in. “Yes,” he says. “I was wondering what you could tell me about my father.”

Here is the entire sordid tale as Minato has it: Namikaze Masako fell for a married man, got pregnant, and ran away from everyone she knew. It’s an old cliché, marked by all the most predictable developments.

His mother and father were only together for a month, Ishida tells him, and it took Masako another six weeks before she knew she was pregnant. After that, Ishida had offered to help her raise the baby – even to marry her if she wanted – but Masako said no. She went to Minato’s father, demanded money to support the child, and then left after receiving it.

Ishida hasn’t seen her since.

Minato leaves Ishida Sōmei’s house with a head full of information and another address in his pocket. He walks just far enough that he can’t see the scholar’s house, and then pulls it out.

This is where his father lives. Sugita Takuto.
It’s in the same district as Hisao, Minato notes. Then he scrunches the paper into a ball and jams it into his pocket.

Time to go home.

Chapter End Notes

It's weird. There are a bunch of characters who I introduced this mission that I didn't expect to like as much as I do. Hisao, naturally, is one, but Ishida and Naoko are definitely another two.

Next chapter: Minato's birthday, dinner with Azusa, and a relationship that doesn't get off to a good start.
If you follow my tumblr, you're probably aware that there are a variety of reasons why this chapter is so late. Some of them are relatively good reasons; others... I played a lot of *Mass Effect*. And *Mystic Messenger*. Thank you for bearing with me.

This chapter probably would have been out about a week earlier if not for the fact that I started university. I'm studying engineering, so please bear in mind that my course is basically death by contact hours. I'll try to get stuff done when I have free time, but it could be Christmas before we finish this arc.

There is an additional content warning for this chapter. Dysphoria and pronoun-switching are featured in relation to Minato's reincarnation situation. If you need more details, do not hesitate to ask me, either here, or at my tumblr ask box. I am daswarschonkaputt on tumblr. I have anon turned on.

Last, but by no means least, many, many thanks to Chargefire, who beta'd this chapter.

Inamura flips through the file of medical notes at his desk. It’s thicker than it should be, really, given that his current patient is not yet nine years old. He sighs.

“Is there any reason why you’ve left it so late to get examined after your last mission?”

Minato shrugs as he pulls his shirt back on over his head. “My sensei made me take the full amount of leave, so there wasn’t much point until now.”

Inamura sighs again, shifting in his seat to make his leg more comfortable. Konoha’s policy on leave is often regarded as excessive at best and, accordingly, is rarely invoked by its shinobi, and even more rarely by its genin, who only have D-ranks and the occasional C-rank to deal with.

That a jōnin-sensei would insist on their student taking as much time off as possible is not encouraging, to say the least.

“Being cleared for active duty isn’t the only reason to attend medical appointments,” Inamura says. “Poison isn’t something that you should take lightly, Minato-kun.”

There’s another shrug. “The medic-nin who treated me told me that I would be fine so long as I didn’t experience any further symptoms.”

“Well,” Inamura says, “she was right about that much at least. You’re lucky that you weren’t born ten years earlier. Konoha’s competency at treating poisons is a rather recent development.”

“I’d figured,” Minato says dryly.
Inamura ignores him. “Your heartrate and blood pressure are fine,” he says. “You’re still not where I’d ideally like you to be weight-wise, but I’ve mostly resigned myself to the fact that you’re always going to be on the skinny side of things. You still have a Yin-Yang imbalance, but other than that, your chakra levels are pretty typical.”

“So I’m cleared?”

“So you’re cleared,” Inamura says. “At the very least try to take care of yourself, Minato.”

Minato just shrugs at that.

Inamura sighs again.

--

Enforced downtime is boring. Five weeks of it is nearly enough to drive Minato to distraction.

He understands Azusa’s motivations – as much as he ever understands her motivations – in this regard, at the very least. The mission in the capital was—demanding. He’ll admit that much. But Hisao and poison and Tsuruta Kei do not change the fact that Minato spent the first week reeling because he did not know what to do with himself.

He’s spent a lot of time with his mother, unable to really meet her eye. The piece of paper with his father’s address on it is sat at the bottom of his desk drawer, underneath three of his old maths workbooks. His mother’s unlikely to find it any time, but it still feels like a dirty secret.

Just—what is he supposed to say? Hey, Mum, I went behind your back and learned all about your sordid affair with a married man. Want to talk about it? No matter what Hisao says, Minato has the social awareness to tell that that would be a spectacularly bad idea.

Minato lets out a long exhale. Hisao.

There have been letters. Three from each of them, even if Hisao’s first response included three pages of passive aggressive lecturing that all boiled down to call me by my family name, ninja peasant. It could have been a reminder of all the reasons that Minato initially disliked Hisao, but mostly Minato found himself amused by it all.

Maybe juvenile entitlement is easier to deal with when it’s not sleeping in a bed less than two metres away from you each night.

A knock at his bedroom door pulls Minato out of his thoughts. He looks up from his knitting project – a pair of bright red gloves that are too small for him to give to anyone but Mikoto – in time to see his mother open the door.

She’s dressed like she’s just got back from work, long hair still pinned up even though she prefers to wear it down. Her smile is tired.

“How was the doctor’s?” she asks.

Minato puts aside his knitting needles and wool. “Fine,” he says. “Got the all clear.”

“That’s good,” Masako says. She tugs absentmindedly at the pins keeping her hair up. “Have you given any more thought as to what you want to do tomorrow?”

“I figured we’d just have a quiet evening in with Mikoto, if that’s okay.”
The pins come loose. Her hair tumbles down. “It’s your birthday, Minato. We can do whatever you want.”

Minato manages a smile of his own at that, before he breaks eye contact with his mother to glance at the clock on his bedside table. 18:23. “I should go.”

Masako’s lips purse. “Oh, your dinner with your sensei,” she says. Then, she frowns. “She’s not going to let you drink, is she? I’ve heard things about what you young ninja get up to.”

“Nah,” Minato says, grabbing his hoodie from his wardrobe. “Azusa and I save the drinking for missions. Really makes night watches go by quicker.”

Masako laughs and ruffles his hair as he walks past her. “Go have fun with your sensei.”

--

Azusa has cut her hair.

It’s the first thing that Minato notices when he spots her waiting at a table in the restaurant and, in a lifetime gone by, it would have been the first thing he commented on when he sat down.

Instead, he says, “Inamura-sensei cleared me for duty.”

Azusa looks up at that, but Minato isn’t stupid enough to believe that she didn’t already know he was there. “That’s good,” she says. “I have a C-rank planned for later this week.”

Minato nods, taking his seat opposite her, and reaches for the menu.

“I’ve already ordered for us,” Azusa says.

He withdraws his hand.

Azusa watches him closely for a few more moments – just a few months ago, he would have squirmed under the scrutiny – before she slides a sheet of paper across the table to him. “Here.”

It’s some kind of form; Minato can already see Azusa’s fluid handwriting filling out his name, ID number, and date of birth. His eyes skate down and then jerk back up. “You want me to enter the chūnin exams?”

“Yes.”

His fingers curl around the edges of the table. “When?”

“Konoha holds them each year in June.”

Minato forces his hands to release the table, forces himself to wipe the panic from his face, forces his mind away from his twitchy heartbeat. “I’m not—do you really think I’m ready for this?”

“You’ll be more ready than a lot of others entered into the exams.”

“That’s not an answer.”

Azusa shrugs. “It’s difficult to say.”

Even in his state of almost-anxiety, Minato can read between the lines. “You mean because I’m in an apprenticeship as opposed to on a team.”
“And your age,” Azusa says. He can feel her eyes on him. “What do you know about chakra reserves and their growth?”

“It occurs primarily during puberty,” Minato answers. “About a year in, if we’re being specific, but it varies from person to person. That’s why the peacetime graduation age is twelve – and why ninja have to start training so young.” He pauses. “Oh.”

Azusa nods. “You’re a long way off twelve, Minato,” she says. “If you decided to enter, you would be facing opponents both older and with more chakra than you.”

Minato does not bother to hide his grimace. “Are you going to provide the slingshot, or do I have to bring my own?”

She quirks an eyebrow. “If you want a slingshot, then by all means, I am sure I could stretch to cover one,” she says.

“It was—” He shakes his head. “Never mind.”

“Slingshot or no,” Azusa continues, picking up her drink and bringing it to her lips, “we haven’t spent the past nine months with our feet up sipping shōchū. I have confidence that this would be a valuable experience for you, whether or not you get promoted at the end of it.”

Minato looks away from her, biting his lip. “I’ll think about it,” he says.

She nods. “I’ll need an answer by mid-February. Take some time.”

He looks down at the form, hesitates, and then takes it.

She opens her eyes to a tree canopy. The sunlight filtering through the leaves is enough to make her wince, her head throbbing in protest as her vision swims. Through the blur, she can just make out—

“Sam?”

She tries to sit up, but her body rebels. Her vision greys and her stomach roils. She clenches her mouth shut. She will not throw up. She will not throw up.

The nausea sinks down again.

“Jesus,” she groans. “Sam, what the hell happened? I feel like someone dropped a mountain on me.”

She can hear Sam’s laughter. “Not quite,” he says. “You hit your head.”

“On what? A falling anvil?”

“The ground,” comes the answer, tinged with amusement. “You fell out of a tree.”

The fuck was she doing up a tree? And, more importantly, why the hell didn’t Sam talk her out of it?

She drops her face into her hands and then freezes. “Sam…”

“Yeah?”
“What happened to my hands?”

“Nothing happened to your hands.”

“They’re—Sam, my hands are too small.” She watches as she clenches them into tiny fists. “Don’t bullshit me. Something’s happened. I don’t—” remember. I don’t remember. “What day is it?”

“How hard did you hit your head?”

“Sam, this isn’t funny. Please tell me what’s going on.” Her heartrate’s rising. She drops a hand to her chest, half-scared that she won’t feel anything, and then jerks in shock. It’s completely flat. Her chest is completely flat. “Sam—”

This is wrong.

This is all wrong.

“What’s wrong?”

But that’s not Sam. It can’t be Sam, because—

“You’re speaking Japanese,” she rasps. They’re both speaking Japanese.

But she’s never—

Did she?

He did.

He? But that’s—she’s not—Minato.

My name is Namikaze Minato.

(Is that enough? It has to be.)

Minato slams his hands together – too small, too scarred, all wrong – and flares his chakra with all his might. The genjutsu shatters around him.

In an instant, the nausea and photosensitivity evaporate. His head doesn’t throb like it did in the genjutsu; the only remnant left is a tinging in his sinuses. But still his skin crawls, and his hands feel too small, and his heart thunders on.

Jesus fuck, what the hell was that?

“—still with me, Minato?”

Minato fists his hands in his shorts, breathing deeply. He swallows. “I’m okay.”

A shadow passes over him as Azusa moves to offer him a water bottle. He takes it gladly and tries to pretend that his hands aren’t shaking when he brings it up to his mouth.

Azusa crouches down on the ground in front of him. “Do you know when and where you are?”

“That’s good,” says Azusa. “That genjutsu can be a little rough. It’s primarily used in interrogations.”

Minato had figured. He sips on the water and wishes he could curl up into nothing.

Azusa watches him closely. Her lips turn down into a small frown. “Once you’re finished drinking, you’re done for the day.”

That makes Minato look up. “What?”

“Take some time, think things over, and come back tomorrow prepared to analyse what happened today,” Azusa says. “There’ll be times in the field when you have to keep going through worse than that, but we’re not in the field today. Go home, enjoy your birthday, and we’ll look over this with fresh eyes tomorrow.”

Minato opens his mouth to say something, but closes it again when he sees the immovable expression on his sensei’s face. He breathes in, and then out, and tries to settle back into his skin. “Okay,” he says.

Azusa nods once – stern as ever – and then takes the water bottle back.

As he moves to leave the training ground on shaky legs, Minato bites his lip. Something’s wrong, he thinks. And just like that, he knows where he’s going next.

--

The Academy is just as Minato remembers it – the awful mix of disturbing and comforting that was his constant companion throughout his years as a student. The students are still as bright-eyed and naively enthusiastic as ever, and classes still let out at precisely 4pm each day. Minato settles against a wall to wait for Mikoto.

She’s one of the last out – something that has changed since Minato’s time – but she spots Minato immediately. Her face breaks out into a grin and she waves.

He waves back.

Then, she turns to answer a question from someone behind her, and Minato’s blood freezes.

No-one in Konoha has hair that colour of red. No-one, except—

Uzumaki Kushina’s face twists in disgust at whatever Mikoto says and she pushes past her, sandals stomping on the ground as she marches across the yard. It takes Minato barely three seconds to realise that she’s heading towards him.

His heart rate spikes.

*Oh God, oh God, oh God, oh God, oh God—*

And then a tiny fist smashes into his cheek.

“You arsehole!”

“Kushina-chan!”
Minato blinks, panic grinding to an abrupt halt only to be replaced with astonishment. He raises his fingertips to his cheek and stares at Kushina. Did she just hit him?

“Kushina-chan!” Mikoto pushes through the crowd. “Did you seriously just punch my best friend? Minato, are you okay?”

He nods dumbly.

Kushina crosses her arms, unrepentant. “He made you cry.”

“I made you cry?”

“No,” Mikoto says shortly, then turns back to Kushina. “Kushina-chan, this is—you can’t just beat up everyone you think has wronged you.”


“Kushina-chan!”

“And the record would say otherwise.”

“Kushina-chan, Minato’s a genin,” Mikoto says. “You could be formally reprimanded.”

Kushina snorts. “Some genin. He didn’t even dodge.”

“Probably because he wasn’t expecting some random civilian to punch him in the face!”

“You take that back!”

“Why? Too civilian to handle the truth?”

“Academy students aren’t civilians!”

“Well, Kushina-chan, the record would say otherwise.”

This is… mildly horrifying to witness. They’re friends? Last Minato knew, Mikoto despised her—a sentiment that was enthusiastically returned. He’s still struggling with how to process this when Mikoto and Kushina’s bickering subsides and Mikoto’s full attention turns back to him.

“She has… impulse control issues,” she says.

Minato inhales and touches his cheek with his fingertips. The skin is slightly inflamed, but apart from that it doesn’t feel like it will bruise. It seems he instinctively moved to absorb some of the impact.

“I didn’t think you two got on,” he says, instead of any other comment he could make.

Mikoto scrunches up her face. “It was whilst you were away on a mission.”

“Ah,” Minato says.

“I would have thought you had training today, though,” Mikoto says, falling into step beside him. “I wasn’t expecting to see you before five at least.”

“We ended early today,” he replies.

“A birthday treat?”
“I don’t think Azusa is the type of person to give out birthday treats, really.” Minato watches Mikoto closely, and spots all too easily the way her expression blanks at that comment. “What’s going on?”

“Minato…”

“She was acting kind of weird today, Mikoto,” he presses. “I don’t—what’s happening?”

“I can’t talk about it, Minato. I really can’t talk about it.”

Minato feels his shoulders sag.

“But…” Mikoto glances around them, then drags Minato off to the side of the street. “You should know that the Clan is very protective of our bloodline. It’s not clan policy to let people with the Sharingan to remain free agents. So, hypothetically, if there were a child produced from an extra-marital affair who developed the bloodline, they would probably be under a lot of pressure to join the Clan.

“And in that hypothetical situation, the start of a new year might have brought with it increased pressure to join.” She takes a deep breath. “But I really should not be talking about any of this, Minato.”

Something akin to guilt turns in Minato’s stomach. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I shouldn’t have asked.”

Mikoto huffs. “You were well within your rights to ask,” she says. “Father dragged you into this mess when he asked you all that stuff at dinner and I just—you deserved to know.” Her lips are pursed and her brows drawn together and Minato feels another pang of guilt.

“Thank you,” he says quietly.

“Don’t mention it.”

“Seriously, Mikoto. Thank you.”

She turns away and forces her expression to change. “So, what are we doing for you birthday, then?”

“Just dinner with Mum,” Minato answers. “Though it will definitely be less formal than your birthday dinner.”

“Let’s hope it will be less—other things than my birthday dinner, too.” She smiles. “I have the best present for you, by the way. I expect the proper amount of awe and gratitude when you open it.”

“Good job that Azusa’s been teaching me how to lie.”

“Hey!”

Minato lets himself smile as Mikoto leads him back to his house.

—

This is… He doesn’t know how to put what this means into words. The book of front of him is still half-covered in wrapping paper, but he can read the title and the author’s name, and it’s enough to draw him up short.

“What?” Mikoto asks, hovering beside him. “You don’t like it?”
“I…” He can’t complete the sentence. There is so much he wants to ask, but he bites down on the questions bubbling up inside him.

“Mito-san said that if you liked maths this would be a really good way to incorporate it into—”

He has to say something. “Mikoto,” he starts, cutting her off. “This is… brilliant. It’s brilliant.”

He touches the handwritten title on the cover. Fūinjutsu: A Primer, by Uzumaki Mito.

Chapter End Notes

I have a sort of fondness for this chapter, because I really think it highlights one of the key aspects of Minato's personality: his tendency towards avoidance. He doesn't go to see Inamura until the last minute. He doesn't talk to his mother about Ishida and his father. He doesn't make a decision about the Chuunin Exams. He immediately finds something other than his experience in the genjutsu to focus on. You've probably picked up on the fact that he has a consistent pattern in how he deals with things: he panics, freaks out, and then he just... shelves the issue for later. For the most part, it's useful. He's very good at it. But it's slowly becoming less and less feasible.

This chapter represents Kushina's first in-person appearance in the fic. Honestly, I'm really looking forward to writing more of her and Minato's interactions, because she's basically the epitome of the phrase "fight me" and Minato is really... not. How did Mikoto and Kushina become friends? Why was Mikoto crying? Did she cry? Who knows.

Minato is now nine years old and Mikoto is officially labelled "best present giver". The best thing about that book is that Mikoto isn't aware of even half the meaning behind it. To her it was just "he likes maths, this is a maths thing, fūinjutsu stuff is rare", but to Minato it's "is this a sign that I haven't fucked things up beyond all repair?"

There are some aspects of Mikoto's personality that I struggle to write, and in this chapter that cropped up as her divided loyalties. In spite of her dissatisfaction with them, she is still very loyal to her clan; it's part of her identity. But Minato is also very, very important to her and she always tries to stay true to that.

Oh and before I go, that comment Minato makes about a slingshot? That's a biblical reference, which is why Azusa didn't get it. On that note, though, please be aware that Minato is not religious. He's an atheist, and due to the reincarnation mess, his feelings on divinity and religion are understandably complicated.

Next chapter: shit goes down. Anything more would be way too spoilerific.
Chapter Summary

Shit goes down.

Chapter Notes

Unbeta'd. Mistakes are my own.

Please check the tags for updated warnings and, uh, in my defence, you had to see this coming. Or not. I'm sorry.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Pulse Storm

The thing about being a shinobi is that it can feel an awful lot like living on borrowed time. What finally kills you could be something as horrific as decapitation, or it could be something as mild as catching a bug in a foreign country that your immune system can’t handle. Azusa’s never put that much thought into how she’s going to die and she doesn’t see the point in starting now. It’s not like deep consideration is going to change anything in the end.

That said, there’s a marked difference between death by nukenin and death by alcohol poisoning.

Azusa groans into the cushion beneath her face and then forces herself to turn over.

Ayumi’s sofa hasn’t gotten any more comfortable in all the years that Azusa has been sleeping on it. That feels like a specific kind of injustice, because Azusa is certain that she has paid for it to be re-stuffed at least once.

She stares at her best friend’s ceiling, ignoring the throbbing behind her eyes, and sighs when she realises that she’s going to have to get up. Mission day, she thinks, couldn’t have come at a worse time.

She rolls off the sofa. A glance through the bedroom door confirms that Ayumi is still asleep, happily curled up in her bed, but she likely won’t be for much longer. Ayumi has always been an early riser.

Shutting herself in the bathroom, Azusa leans down against the sink and rests her forehead against the mirror. When she looks up, she meets the bloodshot eyes of her reflection.

In the early days of her work for ANBU, her handler told her that she had a face made for infiltration work – a compliment, certainly, but not in the typical sense. She’s pretty, but ultimately forgettable. With her hair dyed brown, or black, even more so. Her eyes are big and her face is heart-shaped; she looks much younger than she is. 19, most would say, as opposed to the truthful
She was all but made to tell lies and kill quietly, so it is just as well she ended up getting paid for it.

All this taken into account, it is easy to see the underlying truth to the obvious assumptions people make about Minato being her apprentice. He is much the same as she was as a child – intelligent, but asocial, and just this side of androgynous. And blond.

Given time, Azusa could quite easily shape Minato into the perfect infiltrations agent. She could teach him assassination and information gathering and – in time – flirtation. He’d be good at it because he doesn’t know how to be bad at things, and he would be a valuable asset to Konoha.

And, knowing what Azusa knows of him, he would probably self-destruct for years before taking a mission one step too dangerous. Say what you want about Minato’s precarious mental state; he’s far too passive for outright suicide.

Azusa never wanted to be a sensei. She never wanted to be saddled with an apprentice, with the responsibility for some bright young thing’s future. She never even wanted Minato’s value as political leverage, for all the use it has been to her.

Yet, here she is. Plus one clan, minus a great deal of freedom, and suddenly faced with considering what she’s going to do with her precocious apprentice.

“Azusa, you still in there?”

Azusa closes her eyes and leans her forehead against the mirror. Ayumi is another matter altogether. Out of every person she grew up with at Tsuchida Orphanage, Ayumi still remains the only one that Azusa can stand for any consistent period of time.

And Ayumi is in love with her.

Civilians can be weird about things like that, though, so Azusa still doesn’t know if Ayumi herself has realised it. Either way, it doesn’t change anything about how Azusa will treat her; no matter how much she wishes otherwise, the extent of her feelings for Ayumi has never progressed past friendship.

“Azusa?” Ayumi calls through the door. “I know you’re hungover, but I need to use the shower.”

Azusa straightens. “I’ll be out in a minute!”

ANBU taught Azusa a lot of things, but the most important of all was how to be okay when you are really, really not.

_Uchiha Azusa_, she thinks bitterly. _Well, at least it has a nice ring to it._

--

Azusa has had the same pre-mission routine for the past fifteen years. She packs her bag the night before – something she thankfully had the good sense to do before she decided to down her weight in alcohol – takes a scalding hot shower with scent-neutralising soaps, and then stops by the administrative office to get her paperwork in order. Generally, this means making the necessary updates to her will and nominating someone to pull the plug on her life support machine if it comes down to it, but today it means—

Arguing. Borderline shouting, too. Azusa regrets every drink she took last night.
Well. Every drink past the first five.

“I have submitted the same form every mission the past five years,” Azusa says.

“And I’m telling you that it’s wrong,” replies the administrative chūnin, arms folded over his chest. “Whether or not you’ve been doing it wrong for over five years has no bearing on that.”

Azusa closes her eyes. There are really only two types of ninja that end up working in admin: peaceful, family-oriented types, who have taken drastic pay-cuts in exchange for more time in-village with their children and spouses; and burn-outs, too bitter to let go of what they cannot achieve. It’s just her luck that she has to wrangle the latter whilst resisting the urge to wince each time he raises his voice.

“What you need,” the chūnin goes on, pulling out another form, “is one of these. Didn’t your husband tell you this before you got married?”

Wait, what?

“My husband?” Azusa asks.

“Wife, spouse, whatever.” He makes a dismissive gesture in the air.

“What makes you think I’m married?”

He holds up the form that she gave him earlier. “Uchiha Azusa? You’re blonde. Of course you married in.” He sighs and pulls out a pen and a clipboard from under the desk. “I’ve just given you the correct form for your clan. It’s different because different clans have different rules about inheritance, in case your spouse didn’t explain that either.”

Azusa looks down at the form in her hands. She has forty minutes before she has to meet Minato and…

Azusa lets the hostility bleed out of her posture. “No, they didn’t,” she says. “I’m sorry—I just have a mission soon, with my apprentice, and I know it’s not your fault, but…” She runs a hand through her bobbed hair, momentarily irritated that she cut it off; she always looked that much sweeter with it long. “You wouldn’t mind filling me in on what I have to do, would you?”

…She can use this.

--

When she first left ANBU – was forced to leave ANBU, really – Azusa was angry. She was pissed at her squad, because they didn’t fight for her when she would have fought for them. She was especially pissed at her second-in-command, because she knew it was him that sold her out to his clan. She was pissed at the Uchiha, because it all came back to them, and she was pissed at the Hokage, because he clearly didn’t give a fuck about her. She was even pissed at Minato, because a cute, brilliant genin-student felt like a consolation prize, and she couldn’t look at him without being reminded of how much she hated to lose.

Most of all, though, Azusa was pissed at herself, because she gave them something to use against her.

She can still remember the split-second before her mask came loose, when she knew what was going to happen, but had to choose between her life and her identity. She chose life, bared her face to an enemy on a classified mission, and then drove a kunai into his heart.
Rookie error.

She wants to say that with time, that anger has dimmed. It hasn’t. She just has more important things to do than to stew on her own mistakes.

That’s the thing you pick up most quickly in ANBU: there is always another mission, another distraction to take you away from the mess in your own head. It’s not healthy in the long-term, but it gets you through each day as they come. Who knows if you’ll live long enough to have a breakdown, anyway?

Truthfully, none of it has been fair to Minato in the slightest. Azusa had picked out his tics and triggers within a day of knowing him, and dancing over them to manipulate him into doing what she wants is far too easy. She talked him into a C-rank almost two months before genin teams are advised to take them, and talked him into a B-rank shortly after that. He was ready – she has no doubt about that – but there was a part of it that was Azusa thinking, I just want this over with already.

That had been the plan: teach Minato, get him promoted, deal with the Uchiha, return to ANBU.

It’s still the plan, but Azusa has slowed down the timescale somewhat.

Because Namikaze Minato was a trap that Azusa really should have seen coming. A consolation prize only works when there’s something desirable about it, and, fuck everything—the potential Minato has. Nothing about his paper file truly does justice to the extent of what he could be. He picks up taijutsu as easy as breathing, his natural speed could make some tokujō green in envy, and he’s so very, very sharp. Namikaze Minato comes down to a simple binary: he will either become a legend, or he will fail in the most fatal way possible.

That’s a hard thing to walk away from.

It’s a hard thing to stick with, too.

Minato is reading when Azusa arrives at their meeting point. She catches a glimpse of the title—which includes the word primer because that’s the sort of thing he reads in his spare time—before he notices her and snaps the book shut.

“Good morning, Minato,” she says.

“Good morning, Azusa.”

“Good book?”

He shrugs. “I guess.”

Azusa… struggles with Minato. She’s self-aware enough to admit that. At times, she feels like he needs more from her than she is able – or willing – to give; it’s hard to tell if she helps, or if she’s just adding to his already extensive list of issues. Teaching him to be a passably competent shinobi is one thing, but she is not the mother figure that she thinks he might have been looking for in her.

Azusa isn’t fit to be anyone’s mother figure.

“Ready to go?”

“Yes, Azusa.”
“Let’s head off, then.”

He nods, pushes the book into a pouch on his missions pack, and follows.

--

Jōnin-sensei and genin alike complain about the banality of D-ranks – usually out of sight of each other. Azusa certainly did when she was a genin, but she did it in a quiet, stewing way, as opposed to the open dissatisfaction that her teammates showed. In ANBU, she quickly learned that any mission ranked below B was going to feel like more of a milk-run than anything else, long distance or not.

Minato, for his part, seems mostly ambivalent to both C-ranks and D-ranks. Admittedly, this may be because he has trouble forming original opinions on things unless he is given permission first.

Azusa glances across the camp, where Minato has already pulled out his knitting project, a pair of red gloves, and sighs. For the most part, she’s glad that this is just another low-pay, low-effort mission. She needs the time to figure out what she’s going to do now. 

*Not drinking yourself into oblivion again might have been a good start,* she thinks. *Not signing those adoption papers would have been an even better one.*

But that’s—irrelevant. Maybe she should send a congratulatory bouquet to the Uchiha; it took them nearly a year, but they finally found her ultimate weakness.

“Azusa?”

Azusa brings her head up and meets Minato’s gaze. He has a look on his face that says he’s self-censoring, trying to box himself into some facsimile of *appropriate.*

“You have first watch,” she says, and then turns away.

--

Tawashina is a small farming community that sits just over a day’s travel away from Konoha. Azusa has only ever passed through it before, and even that was a long time ago, but it hasn’t changed much at all from what she remembers. She and Minato make good time, arriving to meet the headman at around noon. He gives them a walking tour of the village, and Azusa contents herself with stepping back and letting Minato squirrel out all the necessary details.

“It’s boar,” the headman says to Minato. “We found the tracks just under a week ago, and food has been disappearing from our stores for longer than that. The traps aren’t working and, well, we don’t really have the resources to deal with the problem ourselves, so we sent a runner to Konoha.”

“Sounds like things have been tense here,” Minato says. His tone falls a little short of commiserating, but Azusa figures he deserves points for effort.

The headman, for his part, does not seem to notice. “That’s a small understatement. We’re all a little on edge. Shinobu-san, especially.”

“Shinobu-san…” Minato’s lips twist into a small frown. “She was the woman who greeted us, wasn’t she? It must be hard to be pregnant at a time like this.”

“It’s not so much the child on the way that’s giving Shinobu-san trouble,” the headman says. “Little Tatsumi-chan likes to explore. It’s harmless most of the time, but…”
Azusa decides that now would be a good time to intercede. “We’ll keep an eye out for her whilst we’re in the woods,” she says. “Just in case.”

The headman nods. “That would be a great help.”

“My student and I are going to break for lunch now,” Azusa says, “and then we’ll get onto scouting the area. We should have some sort of news for you by the end of today. Hopefully we won’t have to intrude on your hospitality too much.”

The headman nods again and then excuses himself. Azusa watches him walk off, before she turns to Minato. “We’ll talk whilst we eat,” she says. “Come on.”

Minato frowns at her, but he doesn’t say anything.

---

Infiltration and assassination missions don’t often require the sorts of field skills that most jōnin swear by. The last time Azusa found herself on a tracking mission was years before ANBU – probably when she was a genin – but the only thing she had truly forgotten about them was the tedium.

Especially when the wild boars she’s trying to locate are turning out to be somehow better at masking a trail than most chūnin.

She sighs, looking around the clearing she’s reached for any obvious signs. As with the last five clearings, there are none. At this point, she’s beginning to doubt the existence of any wild boar terrorising Tawashina, but small farming communities don’t just hire ninja on a whim.

Lunch with Minato was just three hours ago, but time tends to drag on missions like this. They split up shortly afterwards, dividing a map of the forest up into segments; wild boar may be dangerous to civilians, but even a competent Academy student could take one down. Well. Maybe a team of Academy students.

Azusa gives the clearing one last check, and moves on.

She’s trying not to be dissatisfied with her life now. In the eyes of many shinobi, a mission like this is akin to a holiday. Tawashina is quaint and almost idyllic, and its location suits Fire Country’s climate well. There’s a breeze running through the tree cover and the sky visible through the gaps between the leaves is a milky blue.

Azusa freezes at the sound of movement a short distance away. It’s a frantic sound, like something running through pelt through the undergrowth. Her frown deepens when she realises it’s coming towards her.

She draws a kunai.

Something bursts out of the treeline and—it’s not a boar.


Tatsumi’s eyes go wide when she spots Azusa. Azusa has barely a second’s warning before her arms are full of sobbing child.

“Hey now,” Azusa says, pitching her voice to gentle. “It’s okay.” She pats Tatsumi gently on the back of her dirt-stained frock. “We’ll get you back to the village now, okay?”
“No!” The volume of Tatsumi’s shout surprises Azusa and she loosens her grip long enough for Tatsumi to scramble away. “You can’t take me back to the village! You gotta help!”

Azusa feels her blood go cold. “Help who?” she asks. Please no, not—

“The boy!”

Not Minato.

---

It wasn’t wild boar.

Azusa is running at a flat sprint through the forest in the direction that Tatsumi had pointed. It’s easy enough to follow the trail that the girl had left in her panic, but all Azusa can think is, I won’t get there in time.

Genin are not trained to take down missing-nin. They’re trained to survive long enough to run away, on the hope they’ll never be put in a position where retreat isn’t an option. But Minato won’t run, not when he knows that he’s the only thing standing between his opponent and a civilian child. The full context of events is ill-defined to Azusa. She didn’t stick with Tatsumi long enough to hear the whole story. What she knows is that Minato’s fighting a ninja with a slashed Kumo hitai-ate, and that Tatsumi had been originally taken hostage. She doesn’t know which stupid move her apprentice pulled to get the girl free and she doesn’t know if he’s even going to be alive by the time she gets there. She doesn’t know if she’s going to be going back to Konoha alone.

Think, she tells herself as she runs. What do I know? What can I infer?

She sees a clearing up ahead. The tree cover parts and she can see a figure – a tall, blocky man, with a wicked blade in his hand. And, on the ground, crumpled at his feet is—

Minato.

Azusa reacts with a desperate burst of protective instinct. The kunai she throws has the momentum of her entire arm behind it, and it cuts through the air bare fractions of a millimetre away from the man’s face. He reels back, and Azusa presses the advantage, putting herself bodily in front of Minato and raising another kunai immediately to block his counterstrike.

A snarl is on her lips, but she says nothing. Out of the corner of her eye, she can see Minato’s chest rise and fall. He’s alive. Unconscious, but breathing. Alive.

Her opponent notices her gaze and cracks a sneering smirk at her.

Azusa is not in the mood for this today.

She launches himself at him.

Azusa is ANBU at heart, and it shows in everything she does. She prefers to fight her battles in the shadows, to take opponents off-guard and punish them for it. There isn’t a single situation that she can’t lie her way into, and lie her back out of again. But that’s not all she can do.

Fuck this mission. Fuck the Hokage. Fuck the Uchiha Clan. Fuck anyone who thinks they can lay a hand on her apprentice without finding themselves dead.

Azusa is a storm of taijutsu and precisely controlled fury. She’s never been the type to burn hot and
fleeting; her anger is cold and calculating and lasting. She feels something burning around her eyes, but she doesn’t think about that.

He will die. He will die. He will—

Azusa sees an opening and goes for it. Kunai to the eye. Minato would be proud.

He drops and Azusa exhales.

The clearing around her is at once too focused and too hazy. The burning is gone from Azusa’s eyes, replaced by something closer to a throbbing ache. Shit, Azusa thinks. I activated it again.

She cuts the chakra to her eyes, and the world at once loses its sharpness. Her ears are ringing and everything is too loud; the fabric of her clothes at once feels abrasive and rough. She ignores it, remembering what her second-in-command had told her, the first time. Sensory overload. It goes away.

He’d been kind, back then. Then again, he thought he was talking to a new family member, not someone who would fight clan membership every step of the way.

He probably didn’t tell the Uchiha to be cruel. It’s how it ended up, though.

Azusa approaches Minato and kneels down beside him. His pulse is steady, but the fact that he’s still unconscious is worrying. He probably has a concussion of some sort.

She doesn’t hear the movement behind her until it’s too late.

The blade hits her spine.

The thing about being a shinobi is that it feels an awful lot like living on borrowed time. Blood loss, blunt force trauma, poison: the ways that you can die are many and varied. Azusa never considered the specifics, because they never seemed to matter.

What matters, she has always thought, isn’t so much the how as the for.

Civilians like to talk about not putting a value on human life. Ninja do it daily. What would it take for me to kill this person? What would it take for me to save them?

And, at the base of it all, what would I die for?

Azusa can’t move, can barely feel, but her chakra remains with her. Everything is still too loud, and her clothes are still too rough, but the blade through her abdomen doesn’t hurt as much as it should. Minato, though—Minato’s still alive, a flickering beacon of chakra circulating just out of her reach.

How fucking cliché. The teacher dying for the student. Azusa would be pissed if she had the energy.

Minato… He’ll be okay, won’t he?

Ha. Not fucking likely. This is going to really screw him up.

She’s sorry for that.

She’s sorry for a lot.
Azusa thinks, *Is it over yet?*

She closes her eyes. *I just want it to be—*

(—over.)

Chapter End Notes

I knew from the moment I created Azusa that she was going to die before Minato got promoted to chuunin, and that Minato was not going to handle it well. Is that a spoiler? Minato doesn't handle any of this well.

I guess it's not a spoiler to reveal that this arc's title is "Arc Two: Uchiha Azusa" anymore?

Next chapter: Minato grieves, and gains an unlikely benefactor.
Freezing Fog

Chapter Summary

Minato grieves.

Chapter Notes

Additional warnings for a little bit of gore (what can I say, Minato is a disturbed individual) and, basically a whole lot of grief.

Unbeta'd. Mistakes are my own.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Azusa is dead.

“It’s been a rough few days for you, huh?”

Azusa is dead.

“I know you were cleared by medical for this, but if it all gets too much, let me know and we can stop. It’s just a few questions on your mission report, though. Think you’re up for it?”

Azusa is dead.

“Like I said, it’s nothing big. There are a couple of details that need clarifying, is all.”

Dead. Dead. Dead. Dead. Dead. Azusa is dead.

“Are you alright with that, Minato-kun?”

Minato stares blankly at the person opposite him. Moriya. From the infiltration mission. A friendly face, or whatever, probably supposed to put him at ease. As if the sparse interrogation room he’s been marooned in isn’t a flashing neon sign that he’s in trouble.

He doesn’t really care. Azusa is dead.

“Minato-kun?” There’s a frown audible in Moriya’s voice that does a convincing impression of concern. “Is your head bothering you?”

No. Maybe. Nothing feels quite right, but there isn’t any pain. He’s just… adrift. Like someone has picked him up and put him back down a few centimetres to the left of where he’s supposed to be. Like a pumpkin with its insides scraped out by hand, nails scratching at the sides to try and dislodge those last few seeds and bite into the pulp, but never quite managing.

“I can get you some water if that would help,” Moriya offers.
Minato should say something. Words, preferably, but even a noise of some kind would work. The thought of hearing his voice seems so far away, though – the thought of speaking some unreachable goal.

He’s just—tired.

And Azusa is dead.

“Minato-kun?”

_Say something._

“Minato-kun?”

_Say anything._

“I can go and fetch a medic—”

“Don’t.” A start, but not an encouraging one. “I’m fine.”

Moriya frowns at him. Minato realises distantly that this is what kindness is meant to look like.

He drags a breath in, and tries to ground himself. “This isn’t about my report.”

Moriya’s face doesn’t give much away. Minato closes his eyes before he’s reminded of Azusa.

“There have already been three mission debriefings,” Minato says. Every inch of him feels drained, but the words are falling from his mouth easier now, as if some invisible barrier has been broken down. _Static friction is greater than dynamic friction_, he tells himself. _Keep talking._

“I acted exactly as I was supposed to during my mission,” he says. “I followed orders. I completed the objective to the best of my ability. I—”

_They’re just words._

“I protected the secrets of the Uchiha Clan.”

He remembers the flames, and he remembers the smell. It’s hard to start a fire hot enough to burn bones, and a wood fire misses the mark by about three hundred degrees. He sat there, watching the flames rise, tense with fear.

If Azusa’s killer returned, Minato did not know if he would be able to kill him.

He knew he would have to try.

Moriya sighs. “Minato-kun, you’ve got to work with me on this one,” he says. “Your recent actions have not won you many fans.”

And Minato hears those words, and they penetrate the haze surrounding his head. And his fists tighten, and he feels the phantom of a hand on his shoulder, and the full force of his emotions slams right back into him.

He looks up at Moriya. “Good.”
Fusa watches as Miyabi chokes on her mouthful of sake, wheezing and slamming her hand down on the table. She forces a swallow, and then looks up at Fusa with watering eyes.

“He gave them his teacher’s severed head?”

Out of the corner of her eye, Fusa catches Moriya pouring himself another cup of alcohol and politely pretends not to see. She refocuses on Miyabi.

“I’m surprised you hadn’t heard about it,” she says. “It’s got a lot of people up in arms.”

“Well, I’m not exactly tuned into clan gossip,” Miyabi replies. “And for the most part, I’m happier for the lack of political bullshit in my life, but—fuck, you’re serious?”

Fusa nods. “He walked straight into the Uchiha Compound after his mission and threw it at the feet of the clan elders. It was very dramatic, or so I’m told.”

“Well, shit,” Miyabi says with an exhale. “He likely to get suspended for that?”

“Who can say,” Fusa says with a shrug. She quietly moves the sake bottle away from Moriya before he decides to do away with decency and down the whole thing. “He acted, if not in the spirit of the law, then to the letter of it. It’s not even entirely clear if he was aware of the full implications of what it means to deliver someone a severed head.”

Fusa has her own suspicions, though. It’s hard to pin down prodigies like Namikaze Minato, but Fusa has more experience with the kid than most. There are two key tenets to Namikaze Minato: he’s deeply, deeply messed up, but Azusa-san taught him to think coldly and analytically in spite of that. He knew what he was doing. He knew what he was saying. He did it anyway.

What a scary kid.

Moriya sighs, running a hand through his ragged blond hair. “He won’t be suspended,” he says.

Fusa blinks at him. It’s the first thing Moriya has said since they met up today, except a weary what are we drinking when he arrived.

“There’s not much point,” Moriya explains. “Or rather, it’s not worth the fuss. The kid lost his sensei, so there’s a minimum rest period anyway before he can return to active duty. Beyond that, a formal suspension would look like the Uchiha Clan were throwing around their weight to go after a grieving child. Besides, half the point of suspension is that there’s a financial penalty to not being able to take missions, but Azusa-san had the kid running two-man C-ranks with her, so he’s likely sitting on quite the nest-egg.”

“Oh, right,” Miyabi says. “I remember – she was weirdly insistent that Minato get an equal split of the earnings from the B-rank, even though he’s only a genin.”

Fusa remembers too. If he’s valuable to the mission, pay him like he is, Azusa-san had said. And if he isn’t valuable, why the hell are you taking him along? It’s not hard to imagine an attitude like that carrying over to other missions, too.

“Most likely,” Moriya says, “they’ll give him a largely performative slap on the wrist, then quietly
sabotage his career through negligence. He’ll spend the next five years or so as a floater genin, with no formal instruction and no permanent team, and then they’ll start murmuring about him really being quite old for a genin, and it’s really meant to be a transitory rank, anyway, and then he’ll either wash out or end up in admin.”

“The long game,” Fusa says dryly.

Miyabi looks faintly horrified.

“It’s what the Uchiha Clan plays best,” Moriya says with a sigh.

Fusa takes pity on him and pushes the sake bottle back over his way.

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The thing about tragedy is that it loses its definition over time.

Minato used to welcome that. He liked the idea that the everyday horrors of his new life would one day fade into background noise. Feeling angry, and trapped, and disturbed, and sick – it exhausted him.

He just wanted to be used to it.

Those desires feel alien to him now. Being used to it, being empty of those violent, awful emotions – he can’t even imagine what it feels like. It’s like someone has ripped that part of him – that pragmatic and desperate part – straight out of his chest

Eventually, he will get used to it.

He doesn’t really give a shit, though.

Azusa was—she wasn’t Jiraiya. She wasn’t a lot of things. But she—she helped him wash the blood from his clothes, and she took him at his word, and she—she cared, didn’t she? And those things, they mattered a lot.

And now she’s gone.

It’s just—stuck in his head, like a disk that’s been scratched straight across, the same five seconds repeating again and again and again, on and on, for infinity. Azusa dead. Opening his eyes. Azusa dead. Tacky, half-dried blood soaked through his T-shirt. Azusa dead. Movement in the trees. Azusa dead. Gripping a kunai, on high alert, for almost half an hour before he realises it was just a bird. Azusa dead.

There’s a knock at his door.

It—jars, a little, like being jolted back into his skin, and he takes a moment to realise where he is. The hard wood of his bedroom floor is settled uncomfortably against his knees, and his eyes are dry from staring at nothing at all. He forces a swallow. His throat is dry.

Minato stands up, legs shaky after so long sat still.

There’s another knock. “Minato?” he hears his mother call through the door. “You awake, sweetheart?”

Minato nods, before remembering that there’s a door separating them. He considers calling out a reply, but he doesn’t really feel like talking. Instead, he shuffles bare-footed across the floor and
pulls the door open.

“Hey there, sweetheart,” Masako says. “You have a visitor, if you’re feeling up to it.”

Minato looks away. There’s something about his mother’s careful kindness, this soft handling, that itches at him in a way he knows it’s not fair to mention. She’s trying to help, but it’s like a slap in the face each time.

Because it’s—it’s a pretty kind of support. It looks good from the outside. Minato’s entire life has been ugly ever since he graduated the Academy, and all facing his mother does is outline all the ways she will never, ever understand.

“You don’t have to talk to them,” Masako goes on, in that same, gentle voice, “but they said they were your sensei’s cousin, so I thought—”

Minato feels every muscle in his body go taut. He pushes past his mother without comment – rude, a voice in his head says – and thuds down the stairs. He rounds the bottom step and comes face to face with a teenage Uchiha.

A teenage Uchiha Fugaku.

Minato feels his mother put a hand on his shoulder. He flinches, and she moves back.

“Well,” she says, looking between the two of them. “I suppose I’ll just leave you two boys to talk.” She shoots Minato a reassuring smile as she walks to the kitchen. He doesn’t react.

Uchiha Fugaku is in his living room. Mikoto’s future husband. Minato’s never even met him before, has only had him pointed out to him by Mikoto – usually with a snide comment attached. She’s not fond of him.

Minato isn’t particularly inclined to be either, but he still doesn’t have any idea what Fugaku’s doing here.

A rough swallow. “What do you want?” Minato asks. His voice is hoarse.

“To talk,” Fugaku says. He has his arms crossed, like he’s trying to be stern. The effect’s ruined a little by the fact that his voice is in the process of breaking.

Minato doesn’t move from his position by the stairs. “So talk.”

“Impatient, aren’t you?” Fugaku says. “How’s sympathy leave suiting you? Mutilated any other corpses whilst off-duty?”

Minato’s eyes flick over to the door to the kitchen, fingers twitching towards the hem of his shirt.

“Oh, right,” Fugaku says. “I forgot. Wouldn’t want to scandalise the civilian.”

Minato stares at him. He doesn’t say anything.

Fugaku stares back. He looks away first. “You’re such a freak,” he says. “I don’t have a clue what Mikoto-chan sees in you.” He flicks the catch on his shuriken pouch. “But she does see it, whatever the fuck it is, which is why I’m here.”

“Leave Mikoto out of this.”

Fugaku looks up from his shuriken pouch. “Ha,” he says. “That’s rich. You’re the one who got her
involved, when you decided to throw a decapitated head at the feet of her Clan Elders. Do you have even have any idea what kind of a statement a that sends when you’re a ninja?”

Minato knows. It’s proof of kill. It’s what you hand in to collect a bounty. It’s what you hand over to say, Here, you asked for this person dead.

Here, you as good as killed them yourself.

Here, this is your fucking fault.

Fugaku sneers. “Yeah,” he says. “I thought so. Everyone is talking about your civilian background, saying that you couldn’t have possibly known, but Mikoto-chan had this look on her face, just like that, and I knew. You knew and you did it anyway.

“And the worst thing is – you know it’s not that simple,” Fugaku goes on. “Deep down, within you, you know the truth, that if your sensei had just caved earlier, had accepted the adoption for the gesture of kindness it was, none of this would have happened. She’d have had the most powerful bloodline in the Elemental Nations at her disposal, and she would have lived. She died because she was proud, and that was her own fault.”

Minato pictures it, for a second. Dragging his kunai across Fugaku’s neck the same way he did Azusa’s. Cutting deeper. Crying and crying and crying, like a fucking child.

He digs his fingernails into his palm, the pain like a signal flare through his subconscious.

“Not going to say anything?” Fugaku asks. “Maybe you’re smarter than I thought.”

Minato wants him gone. He doesn’t want this. He doesn’t fucking want any of this.

“In that case,” Fugaku says, “here’s some free advice: skip the funeral. For Mikoto-chan’s sake if not yours.”

And then he leaves.

Minato watches him go, and then he turns around and walks back upstairs to his room. He slams the door behind him.

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In the end, Minato doesn’t go to the funeral.

Something deep within him twists, accusing, like it’s cowardice, like he’s letting Azusa down, but he just doesn’t give a shit about any of that anymore. Azusa’s gone. And what the fuck does he know about what she would have wanted, anyway. What does it even matter? It doesn’t.

His mother goes back to work. He didn’t tell her about the funeral, and he didn’t tell her any of the ugly truths of the situation. She wouldn’t have understood, anyway, or maybe she would, and that might have been worse.

So he just breathes, and exists, and waits for it all to stop.

Until—

“Well, at least you haven’t stopped bathing.”

Minato, hair still damp from a shower he barely remembers taking, much less deciding to take,
fal ters in the doorway to his room. Mikoto is sat on the edge of his bed, cheeks a little red from the cold, and there’s a slight chill in the air that tells him she definitely came in through the window.

Minato inhales. “Mikoto, I—”

Mikoto interrupts him, “You didn’t go to her funeral. I haven’t seen you in a week and a half.”

Minato can’t—he feels caught off-guard, guilt and shame curling in his stomach as he realises that the very last thing he wanted was for Mikoto to see him being this—this pathetic.

“I’m sorry,” Minato says. It’s all he can say.

Mikoto ignores the apology. “Put some clothes on. Real clothes,” she qualifies. “I looked through your laundry basket. You haven’t worn anything but pyjamas for the last three days, and it’s February. You’ll be cold.”

When Minato doesn’t move, Mikoto heaves a very put-upon sigh and pulls a pair of trousers and a shirt out of one of his drawers. She throws them at him.

“Come on,” she says. “We only have until the shift change at half eleven, and it’s already past ten.”

Minato looks down at the clothes in his arms, and then back up at Mikoto. Then, mechanically, he turns around, and walks to the bathroom to change. When he gets back to his room a few minutes later, Mikoto opens his window and pulls him out of it.

It is cold outside, but more crisp than freezing, and Minato doesn’t really feel the chill. Mikoto leads them through a familiar network of streets, her hand slotted calmly around his. They curve near the Uchiha Compound, and then away, and through a well-kept path, until it hits Minato, suddenly, where they’re going.

“Mikoto,” he tries, “I can’t—”

“Trust me,” Mikoto says. Her hand around his never falters, and she tugs him gently over towards the entrance to the Uchiha Clan burial plot.

In the dark, it doesn’t look like much. Faintly visible through the gaps in the fence are rows of grave markers, surrounded by neatly kept grass, the occasional set of flowers dotted around them. But—this is where the Uchiha Clan held Azusa’s funeral, where they chose to put her name in stone in remembrance.

Where they keep the ashes of her—

Minato’s fingers slacken in Mikoto’s grip. Her only response is to tighten her hand, squeezing it in silent support.

When they reach the entrance, Mikoto nods solemnly at the guard on duty, and Minato is able to make out Shigeru’s face in the dark. He nods back, lips a little tight, but he doesn’t stop Minato from entering, and he doesn’t say anything.

“He lost his first sensei when he was a year or so older than us,” Mikoto says, whisper-quiet. “He wouldn’t deny you this. He wouldn’t deny anyone this.”

Azusa’s grave marker is a small thing, right at the back of the plot, and when they get close to it Mikoto lets Minato’s hand drop. He misses the warmth of the contact almost immediately, which is a stupid way to feel, and he curls his hand in on itself to chase away the sensation.
This is Azusa’s grave.

It’s—it’s so fucking stupid, because he’s been living with the cold reality of her death for days and days and days, but standing here, looking at a hunk of stone marked with a name, Minato can’t stop feeling like it’s not real. It can’t be real. Azusa, a cutting, quick woman, a brilliant ninja, his teacher, and this is—this is all that is left of her in the world.

Suddenly there’s a hand on his forearm, and Mikoto is pulling him down to sit in front of the grave.

He goes.

For a while, there is silence. Then, she speaks.

“It was the reading of the will today,” Mikoto says. “That’s why I—I was going to let you have some time to yourself, but Minato—you’re not doing well.”

Minato can feel her gaze on the side of his face, but he doesn’t meet her eye.

Mikoto inhales, and then exhales, and then curls into his side. “You probably don’t know this,” she says, “but the Uchiha Clan has strict rules about inheritance. There’s a big emphasis on keeping wealth inside the Clan. You can only leave a little bit of money to outsiders, about 10,000 ryō. The rest of your money has to be either left to someone specific within the Clan, or to the Clan Trust.

“Azusa-san had some 200,000 ryō in savings. A portion of that – as much as she could legally leave someone outside the Clan – was to be given to a woman named Tsuchida Ayumi. They grew up in the same orphanage, apparently.”

Mikoto pauses. “The rest, she left to me.”


“It wasn’t—I don’t think it was wholly sentimental,” Mikoto says. “People in the Clan, they don’t like that I’m trying to become a shinobi, and Azusa left the money to me on two conditions. The first is that I use it to further my career as a shinobi.”

She pauses again. “The second is that I use a small part of it to buy you your first chūnin vest, when you’re eventually promoted.”

Minato feels like he has a knife inside his gut, like it doesn’t hurt, but he’s staring down at his abdomen as he leaks red over his clothes and hands. He grasps for words and finds them out of his reach.

“Minato,” Mikoto goes on, “once I graduate, I’m legally an adult. The only influence my clan will have over me will be through malicious gossip and my financial situation. I’ve never cared much for what other people think of me, and I could live off the money Azusa left me for a year or more if I was smart about it.

“Minato,” she says, a little urgently, “there is absolutely nothing that the Uchiha Clan can do to me to stop me from being your friend, and your sensei ensured that. This is her trying to take care of you.”

Minato’s cheeks are wet. He’s unmoored, floating away, and all he can think is, she cared.

“It’s okay to cry,” Mikoto says, in that same even, calm tone she’s been using all night. “Minato, it’s okay.”
“I know,” Minato gasps, “I just—” but the rest of the sentence fades away into a choked sob, and then he can’t stop himself, face contorting, words sputtering away from him in pathetic, wet sounds.

Mikoto pulls him into her arms and she holds him tight. He feels like he might be shaken out of his skin, but her arms stay around him, and she doesn’t move an inch.

And behind her, a dull inscription, Minato can make out the blurry words on the grave marker: *Uchiha Azusa*.

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*[End Arc Two: Uchiha Azusa]*

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Orochimaru is a quiet, stewing shadow in the corner of Hiruzen’s eye, staunchly silent and all the bitterer for it. Hiruzen will not invite him to speak; he knows well enough his student’s opinion on this matter.

Tsuchida – Uchiha, now, he supposes – Azusa. He knew her well enough from her time within ANBU, and he supposes that that’s where Orochimaru met her, too. It was no small surprise to see him at her funeral, a stiff presence at her graveside, but Orochimaru has always treated his friendships with a vicious, secretive jealousy.

“You failed her,” Orochimaru says, suddenly.

Hiruzen says nothing.

“Before she was an Uchiha, before she was a political tool, she was your shinobi,” he says, voice its usual uncompromising rasp. “You had a duty to her as her Hokage, and you did not honour that.”

Before the war, Hiruzen would have said that he understood his three students better than maybe even they themselves did. Tsunade held strong to her compassion, Jiraiya to his honour, and Orochimaru to his duty. The horrors of the slow, bloody struggle through Ame and Suna changed that, a disillusioning force that Hiruzen still wishes he may have spared them.

Now, Tsunade is lost to self-pity, seeking only distraction from her sorrows, whilst Jiraiya chases the spectre of redemption wherever it leads him. Only Orochimaru remains in Konoha, and it is that old ideal, duty, that keeps him there.

But still, there are some measures of disrespect that a Hokage is not expected to endure.

“That’s enough,” Hiruzen says.

It is, it turns out, the wrong thing to say.

“It’s not enough,” Orochimaru spits. He’s moved himself into Hiruzen’s line of sight, and there’s a tension to his shoulders, and an animation to his face that Hiruzen has not seen in a long time. “It’s never enough, because all you ever want to concern yourself with is keeping the peace, no matter the cost. Even now, you’re readying yourself to throw her student under the cart, simply to satisfy the Uchiha over an imagined slight – and you know it is not the right thing to do, not by her, and not by the boy, but you will do it anyway, because gods forbid you ever decide to fight for your principles.”
“I said, *that’s enough*, Orochimaru. I will not repeat myself again.”

Orochimaru bristles at the reprimand, but visibly reins himself in. “If you do not take care of him, of the boy,” he says quieter, slower, “I will step in. And no-one will like the ninja I turn that boy into.”

Hiruzen does not doubt that in the slightest. Orochimaru’s anger has always been a slow and calculated thing – more dangerous, and longer lasting than Jiraiya’s prideful outbursts or even Tsunade’s fiery rage.

If left alone, Orochimaru could very easily craft Namikaze Minato into a surgeon’s scalpel, designed for the sole purpose of cutting the Uchiha Clan to pieces.

However—

“In order to do that, Orochimaru,” Hiruzen says calmly, “you would have to leave ANBU.”

The expression that crosses Orochimaru’s face is not quite a scowl, but it is close, and means approximately the same thing.

*That’s what I thought*, Hiruzen thinks. “I have a new mission for you,” he says. “Stop back in once you’ve calmed down enough for a briefing.”

Orochimaru has served long enough to recognise a dismissal when he hears one. He nods sharply, bows maybe not as deeply as is prudent, and turns to leave. He pauses by the door. “If you think I cannot do both,” he says, “then you are in for a rough surprise.”

Hiruzen allows himself a tired smile. “Orochimaru, if I couldn’t handle surprises, I would have never survived being your teacher,” he says. “Jiraiya sent in his latest report, by the way. Do you want to read it?”

Orochimaru’s face does not give anything away. “No,” he says, and then he is gone, the door shut quietly behind him.

Chapter End Notes

There are a few things to talk about this chapter, I think.

First of all: oh, Minato. I think it’s important to note that this is pretty much the first time he’s cried since he settled into the Academy. The problem with Minato’s avoid-avoid routine is that he can only compartmentalize so much, and Azusa’s death was -- well, not the straw that broke the camel’s back so much as the log that did so. And now he’s just left being bewildered by the force of his emotions, with nothing to do than to sort of... shut down. His mother’s at a bit of a loss as to how to deal with him, as well, because in some ways he’s a mini adult, and in others he’s really... not. Things get better for him from now on, though! I promise! (Jiraiya to the rescue! Sort of.)

And then, that after-credits scene. Let’s just say that Minato would be exceedingly disturbed to find out that his staunchest supporter and advocate is none other than the man who carries out fatal experiments on like 60 babies in canon. *Exceedingly.* (The
fact that I find this hilarious is probably about 50% of the reason this scene is in there.)

And lastly, the next arc should be a bit more cheerful in its ending. It's called "Arc Three: Team Seven" if that makes any of you feel better. (Jiraiya! Sakumo! Missions! Time skip! Mikoto graduates!)

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